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The Comfort of Round Things. Stories.

With illustrations

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Kvaløya

As everyone knows, it's not easy to travel with an Or. Starting at Frankfurt Airport and later at the one in Oslo, all sorts of things attracted its attention, and I had some trouble keeping it by my side. In front of the large flight information display, it stopped and stared upward, tilting its head slightly. The loudspeaker announcements accompanied by a jingle made it wince. For a while I was able to keep the Or occupied with the strap looped around my suitcase. I explained to it that the strap served to facilitate identification when the suitcase circled on the luggage conveyor belt.

On the airplane I tried to read. The Or was asleep, and I put my book down on its forehead to save space. The flight attendant offered me headphones once again. I noticed a coin that seemed stuck to the outside of the cabin window, but a careful touch revealed it to be on the inside. It was a midday flight. Gradually, as we flew farther north, twilight fell. Looking

out the window, you could see at an angle behind us a curtain of darkness falling shut, and below it, on the horizon, the last glow of daylight. On the airplane a bottle of water cost 25 kroner, but tea or coffee was free, the flight attendant explained. I held my hand up, and she understood the gesture. The Or growled softly in its sleep. After about half an hour, strange nocturnal tracts of land appeared below, small island-like shapes, their edges glittering like gold dust. Were they small settlements? Or streets leading in circles? I looked at my watch and made calculations about the remaining flight time. My hand lay on the Or.

At Tromsø Airport it took us a long time to get a taxi. I was freezing and searched in my suitcase for my gloves. The Or stood next to me, stiff as a board and alert. A gray-haired man with large nostrils was leaning against a column and unwrapping a bread roll from its paper. I couldn't help explaining to the Or—at first in a whisper, then, since presumably no one here spoke German, at a normal volume—what the roll thing was all about. The old man bit into it, and the Or clutched my coat pocket in fright.

Extensive systems of tunnels brought you from the airport down into the city. The streets in the tunnel seemed covered with ice. A folk song I'd never heard before was playing on the radio. *Sixties*, I thought. The Or listened and began to ask a question, but immediately broke off when we stopped at a barrier. The driver leaned far out the window to insert the ticket in a machine. The barrier rose. The Or imitated the movement with its fingers.

At the hotel I had to fill out several forms. As I wrote in the blanks with the pen on a chain, the Or roamed around near the lobby piano. The piano lid was closed, and a clay vase stood on it, its handles akimbo. The lady at the reception desk had to call over a colleague, because the presence of the Or had confronted her with an unmanageable problem. Unless I was mistaken, she spoke with a Swedish accent. Her colleague listened to what she had to say and then fetched the forms; for him there was nothing about the whole situation that couldn't be resolved.

Our room was bright and warm. A buzzing sound could be heard. I put the suitcase on the bed. The Or got tangled in the curtains. Then it understood and pulled them back and forth. In a fruit bowl next to the television was a bunch of spotlessly luminous bananas.

The first walk on the harbor proved difficult, since it had begun to snow and I had to wrap the Or in a scarf. It resisted and pleaded. You could see the yellow in its eyes. Pointing south across the water, I showed it the Arctic Cathedral, which was easy to make out even in the darkness of the polar night. Like a billowing sail, it rose among the houses. After a while, the Or, which had actually seemed to be viewing the cathedral closely, suddenly turned away and focused its attention on the snow on the street.

A woman with a dog stopped next to us. The animal kept its mouth closed, not panting as dogs usually do. The dog was also wearing a jacket. The woman was listening to someone speaking from her cell phone.

We continued slowly on our way, delayed by many trifles, until we reached a peculiar quarter, which was incapable of forming any real system of streets. The houses stood here

as if they still had to discuss how they wished to some day be connected. Some had even given up and turned away from the others to face the water. A sign pointed us in the direction of the Polar Museum.

The Or's eyes followed a gull that took off from a bench on a tiny traffic island and landed on a stoplight. The gull opened its bill, but there was no sound to be heard. I began to explain, but the Or seemed sad, so I left it alone and simply put my arm around its form.

The Polar Museum had closed. On the pier, old harpoons were mounted. The Or scrutinized them. I noticed a Christmas tree beside which someone had placed a ship's anchor. The combination had an oddly moving effect, and I took a photo of it. Then again, I thought, perhaps the anchor had been there first. The Or had meanwhile become motionless and apathetic, and I pulled it away from the harpoons. The harbor was very quiet. Only the boats cleared their throats along the quay wall.

Many restaurants in this area announced their fish selection on large blackboards. I explained nothing, nor did the Or inquire. Finally we found a table in a small restaurant where an old-fashioned gramophone was hanging from the ceiling on a rope. Apart from us there was no one here but an old man apparently prepared for warmer months in his lightweight coat, which had turned dark brown over many years on this earth; while we were sitting at the next table, he never looked up or turned around, but—with a care that somewhat lightened my shoulders, which had grown tired from all the walking—concerned himself with his shoelaces. He pulled at them, retied the double loop, untied it again, shifted his weight, started from the beginning; watching him massaged my scalp. With each

change of position in his chair, he made, like a slide projector, a soft sound of confirmation. The Or shuffled the utensils around on the table.

A waiter appeared, and I ordered a drink. I asked him in English how far it was from here to the next island on foot. He didn't understand. I tried it in German. He answered in a sort of crystalline Dutch, which, due to the late hour and my great exhaustion, I understood word for word as in a dream, and I thanked him.

After eating and resuming our walk, we became preoccupied with a glove lying on a hump of ice on a curb. The Or was agitated, and I offered it different options, but it wanted nothing to do with any of them. A crack ran across a wall next to us. The building itself housed a macrobiotic store. On an advertising poster bearded men rejoiced.

Opposite our hotel was a lit-up fitness studio. A vague sense of happiness set in as I watched the people running in place, isolated and framed in their bright display windows, surrounded by polar night. Like hamsters in a space capsule. On the second floor *trening med sol* was offered, exercise under a large UV lamp, which stood in for the sun. To the Or I suggested taking a closer look at the lamp, but a large vending machine was buzzing in the entry area of the fitness studio, and so we returned to the cold street.

I had not yet lost my sense of time. I knew it was approaching eight o'clock in the evening. The sky was deep black, but not cloudy. I started to say something about the northern lights, which could undoubtedly be observed often up here, but the Or interrupted me, it had to pee. So we went back down to the harbor and found a spot behind a building where we were certain no one could see us, except maybe a person on the other side of the water looking through binoculars. While the Or struggled and moved shakily back and

forth until it had relieved itself, I stood there and, caught in a sort of endless loop, adjusted my hood again and again.

We decided to go to bed early. In the room it was now somewhat cooler than when we arrived. I briefly toyed in my head with the possibility that the overwhelmed lady at the reception desk had pulled a little lever, switching off our heating. Her strangely childlike Renaissance face came to my mind.

When I got out of the shower, I saw that wipe marks had appeared on the steamed-up mirror. They reminded me of the streaks a sponge leaves on a blackboard, which make a three-dimensional impression that has something deeply satisfying about it. I dried myself off, while outside the door, as I could tell by a patch of warmth on the bathroom floor, the Or was sitting and waiting. It didn't like to be alone.

That night I slept badly and woke up often. The Or was lying on the armchair next to the window, a blanket covering its head.

The next morning an unpleasant scene occurred. When I stepped into the breakfast room, a hotel employee asked me for my key card. From a distance the hostess behind her stand had looked like a musician about to start singing. She typed something into a touch screen and swiped the card through a reader. But then, after we sat down at one of the tables, no waiter spoke to us for a long time, even though I signaled to them several times. The Or imitated the gesture.

Finally I stood up and fetched us two glasses of mineral water, some snacks and a banana. I let the Or peel it. Yet midway it suddenly stopped and put the banana aside.

The reason was a man standing next to me.

“Yes?”

The man asked me whether I’d prefer coffee or tea.

“Coffee please,” I said. “For both of us.”

He could have been the brother of the overwhelmed Swedish woman at the reception desk. The same face.

“Of course, madam,” he said. “But I just have to check in the kitchen to see if we’re prepared to...Just one moment please.”

He left.

To cheer me up, the Or held out the half-peeled banana to me. I took it and said “Thank you.”

Several people appeared, one of them apologized to me and said everything had been sorted out, a misunderstanding, but then the waiter from before began to speak, saying something in Norwegian without looking his superior, or whoever it was, in the eye. He fiddled with his wristwatch.

“Nei, nei, nei,” replied the superior. He was holding, I now noticed, a little saltshaker in his hand.

Then the hostess joined the group and also had something to contribute. The superior listened to everything and grew quieter. He took his phone out of his pocket and tapped around on it. Apparently they were vacillating, and finally I stood up and simply walked out, the Or following me. Fortunately, I told myself, it hadn’t understood that it itself was the cause of the confusion.

Shortly thereafter a menu card was brought to our room, together with a letter of apology and a gift voucher for two hundred kroner.

In the next room I heard the vacuum cleaner. I sat on the bed and stared at a curved lamp. The Or noticed my gaze and moved the lamp from the bed by slightly turning its own neck. At first I laughed, but then, as the lamp became more severely contorted, I had to discourage the Or from continuing. Shortly thereafter someone knocked on the door. I opened it, and a hotel employee held out a bottle of water.

“Complimentary,” he said.

While still at home I had read up a little on Kvaløya, the “Whale Island.” It was located in the northwest and was far from as densely populated as Tromsø, which struck me as a very inviting quality. I had the impression that the Or agreed. We spent the early afternoon continuing to explore the city and making some purchases for the journey. I needed new gloves, thicker and warmer than those I’d brought along. I also wanted to buy a second scarf for the Or. The first one it had already assimilated in several places.

In a winter sports shop I saw a paper kite in the display and paused briefly. A knot in my chest loosened, and I felt I could breathe a little more freely in front of the smiling figure. The mannequins were clad in thick hooded jackets; on the dummies everything sat firmly and securely in place. Only a cap—presumably due to the tension of an especially tight elastic band around the forehead—had shifted upward, where it formed something like a limp cloth crown, enchanting.

Before I could stop it, the Or had run into the shop.

At the automatic entrance door, hot air was blown into my collar from above. The Or was trotting toward a particular point. Some people with shopping bags had to dodge me, I apologized in English. Finally I caught it in the ski section. It seemed amused, rocking back and forth. An Asian couple stared at us.

Later in the day we visited the tiny Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum. Admission was free. On the top floor hung paintings from the nineteenth century. In one of them a polar bear was attacking people on a raft. The polar bear was acting like a wild dragon, you almost expected flames to shoot out of its nostrils. Right next to it was a painting of a young woman with her hair sternly combed back and her eyes lowered. The Or was leaning against a doorframe. A humidifier in a corner hissed every few minutes, and the Or hissed back. A very serious gentleman, who in the dim light of the exhibition rooms somehow appeared wavy and seabird-like, walked up and down at some distance in front of a large group portrait. The painting depicted pilgrims. Someone was reading from the Bible, and the congregation, kneeling in a hollow in the head-high snow, was listening. When we left the museum, the Or was shivering. I wrapped the new scarf around its shoulders and neck.

The bus to Kvaløya came on time. The driver smiled when he saw the Or, and even waved to it. In my gratitude I very nearly grasped his hand and pressed it against me. Carefully, but with a certain elegance, the driver turned the bus, and it went across a long bridge directly into a tunnel and then for some time past settlements and dark forests. I noticed that I was sitting, of all places, on a seat over one of the tires. Under me the floor bulged,

and my boots kept sliding off the gentle mound. I pointed this out to the Or, who gave me an odd look. Then it presented me the palm of its hand. I touched it and found it ice-cold.

To allay its fear, I gave it several gleaming silver pieces of foil, old chewing gum wrappers, from my coat pocket. These distracted it, and I found time to listen to a few tracks on my iPod. Outside the stars must have been visible. Contrary to my expectations, the music I had brought from home seemed not the least bit foreign to me.

After about an hour we fell asleep. I woke up only once briefly when the bus made a stop and a few passengers right next to us left their seats. The cadences of the Norwegian language had already seeped into my brain's voice, and in my half-sleep I heard myself forming sentences with matching intonations. In a dream I saw mountains where charters were drifting around like flocks of doves. Men with flashlights were moving on a flat slope, rain was falling outside a small urn window, and in a trench under a house lay a large metal ball, which I knew was Sunday.

When I awoke, we were stuck in traffic in another tunnel. The Or was awake too and seemed uneasy. Outside, a man was walking along the vehicles and operating a strange spray machine, the contents of which spread in quickly evaporating clouds over the tires of the cars. *Very courteous of him*, I thought, but at the same time a disquieting memory came to me, televised images of vehicles being cleaned after nuclear accidents. The man in the tunnel, however, wasn't wearing a protective suit, only comically oversized headphones.

Next to me the Or was weeping.

Little is known about the states of such beings. Everything I'd been able to learn from books I could recall instantly, but even after long and diligent study I have to admit that we know nothing about the inner parameters of these little companions, which perhaps explains why I just sat there indecisively for several minutes and did nothing to console the Or. Besides, a song I knew was playing on the radio, something very old by Fleetwood Mac. A woman sitting two rows in front of us turned around and took off her glasses. From there she might not even have been able to hear the Or's sobbing, but she was definitely looking at us. I imagined jumbled thoughts whirling wildly through her head. Finally she stood up and approached us.

Speaking English, she asked what was wrong. Only at that moment did I lay a hand on the Or's head and stroke it a little. "I don't know," I replied, "maybe it's fatigue. We've been traveling for a long time." The woman didn't seem quite satisfied with this. She asked whether we were on vacation here. "Yes, on vacation," I said; it was the simplest answer. She offered the Or a grape she had apparently been holding in her hand the whole time. The gesture confused me. The Or didn't accept the grape. I understood this well, but the woman seemed disappointed. She returned to her seat.

When we emerged from the tunnel, I expected daylight and caught myself preemptively blinking. The Or had calmed down and was showing me invisible things on the palm of its hand. Then, as the bus rounded a curve, it bent forward and hissed, but nothing further happened. In a sudden inspiration, I bared my teeth, and the Or enthusiastically grimaced back; blessed moments when your own intuition comes to your aid.

Getting off the bus, I noticed a child who was clearly afraid of the Or. He clung to his parents. For a brief moment I had a fantasy of leading the Or to him and forcing the child to touch its back. Life doesn't last forever, after all. Eventually it's over, and you calculate the sum of adventures you've had. What a story this child would have to tell, even years later. There was a crazy foreign woman on a street corner on Kvaløya, right next to the bus stop, and this woman had wanted to do something incomprehensible to him. The Or again devoted its attention to the snow.

As many times before, I had to resign myself to the futility of inducing the Or to look up at the sky. Still, I spoke a little about the stars and about the fact that the moon was almost full. The Or kept itself pressed close against me.

We found an inn and entered.

Strong smell of wood. On the walls hung large-scale pictures of snowy mountains and reindeer. A wolverine stood stuffed in a corner.

I wondered whether we should stay here longer, perhaps there was still a room available, but then we sat down at a table and ordered something to drink. I told myself there was still time, that I didn't have to make every decision immediately. Each sip I took of the hot tea intensified the smell of wood.

I couldn't help thinking of a story from home. I had been little at the time. One day one of our neighbors had disappeared. Later he was found dead in a room at an inn. He was naked, a makeup bag over his head, zipped up tight around his neck. He had died of heart failure.

The Or was staring at me. I smiled and repeated, though somewhat more slowly and gently than before, the teeth-showing game. The Or grimaced back this time too. I saw some tiny black spots between its teeth, which seemed to be moving like ants. But it was getting late, and it had been forty-eight hours since I'd seen the sun. When I blinked rapidly in the darkness, I saw a reddish spot before my eyes.

A man spoke to me in Norwegian. I let him finish talking and then shook my head and said: "Sorry, I'm not from here."

His English was nearly accent-free, as is often the case among Norwegians and Swedes. He asked whether he could join me at the table. I nodded. He gestured to the pictures of the snow-covered mountains. There were really reindeer everywhere here, he explained, members of the Saami community looked after them—though not literally here, but several kilometers to the west. Then he talked about where things stood with the legal status of this minority. I didn't understand everything. As he spoke about Saami rights, he looked with striking frequency at the Or, who returned his glances. Once it gave him a thumbs-up, which made us both laugh. The Or laughed too.

"So you have one of them," he observed.

He said it appreciatively, however. He was an exceptionally handsome man, with those oppressively cute, Scandinavian features, which immediately lent every suspicious glance something cartoonish. The Or was interested in him.

The man leaned across the table and asked it its name. The Or answered.

Satisfied, he nodded and then showed us his wristwatch. There were several hands on it, the three traditional ones and a further two with the proximal time. He gestured to the Or and to the two hardly comprehensible hands.

“Just like home, hm?” he said to the Or.

From my and his point of view, of course, the hands remained eternally at a standstill, but the Or seemed to understand and gave some reply.

Only now did we shake hands.

“Is it easy getting around?” he asked, and I didn’t understand what he meant. So I nodded and said it was all a question of adjustment. I mentioned the incident in the hotel, but it didn’t seem to surprise him. He asked where we were from. Austria. And where exactly? From the south.

“Ah, I was there once. In the winter. Yes, last winter.”

“Did you like it?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, sure.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Nils,” he said, though it sounded more like Nilyas.

I told him my name. Nodding, he repeated it, then he asked whether the Or was settling in well with time? Yes, I said, the Or was much more alert than in the beginning. The first days after its arrival had been really terrible, one long game of hide and seek.

“Well, yes, nobody knows, I guess,” said Nils.

“No, nobody.”

“I think it must be extremely odd.”

As if it had only been waiting for this cue, the Or poured the hot tea over its chest. It yelped and several guests looked around. Nils immediately came to its aid, and I tried to soak up the liquid with a handkerchief, but this apparently brought no relief. Gasping for breath and trembling, the Or sat there, and finally I had no choice but to leave the establishment with it.

Outside, the temperature seemed to have fallen drastically. After a while Nils came after us and said he had paid for us. In all the excitement I had forgotten about it. I thanked him several times. With a wave of his hand, he said it was all right. Did I want to go somewhere else with him? The Or was stroking its scalded chest. At the same moment a man next to us closed an umbrella, even though it was neither raining nor had it stopped raining. The Or followed the path of the umbrella's movement.

No, I said to Nils, it was getting late or at least we were exhausted, so we'd rather head back.

He had a car, he could give us a ride.

"No, thank you," I said.

"All right," he said. "You two take care."

I watched him leave. When the Or tugged at my hand, I yanked it away. It turned around and immediately occupied itself with something else. I gazed at it, its simple, round form, its arms, its torso...

It's completely alone, I thought. I'm all it has. A decision I made months ago, an application, a waiting period of three weeks, then the assessment. And further applications. Finally its arrival. But what does it all mean now? It means it won't go to its death without

support. I will always be close by. But what is it doing here? What does it see? What does it think of me? It is crouching outside a building north of the Arctic Circle in the snow and to relieve its pain is putting one handful after another of the divinely cool substance on its chest.

“We’re going home tomorrow,” I told it.

It didn’t react.

I whistled.

It ducked as if I had struck at it.

But shortly thereafter, when I roughly seized it and carried it away, it laughed and stuck out its belly. I punched it once, then I apologized and let go of it. It fell in the snow, struggled to its feet and limped a few paces away, gasping for air. I saw a low-flying airplane in the sky, its wing lights for a brief time actually making it look like a crucifix coming over the mountains. Ridiculous. I would have given a great deal to be able to hold a PEZ dispenser in my hand right then.

At the bus stop I searched the sky for signs of the northern lights. But I had no idea when they appeared, it must have been only later, in the middle of the night, when all was asleep. The Or moved close to my leg and clasped my knee. I tried to break free and kicked at it, but it kept holding on. I gave it a light push, which did no good.

After a while the Or itself decided it was enough, and detached itself from me. It scurried away. In the light of a streetlamp, it stopped and spun in circles. Then it suddenly leaned its head back. It seemed to be looking up at the sky. Stunned, I went to it. But it had closed its eyes.

“Tomorrow this will be behind us,” I said.

Three days. No record, but not bad either. Soon we’ll last a whole week. The world is large. Even Europe is large. And I have seen only a tiny fraction of it. So many places that are unknown to me.

The bus back to the main island came after half an hour. It was almost empty and smelled like cafeteria food. Perhaps there had been workers on it, I thought. I imagined a factory, in which something obvious was made, like ski boots or bicycles, you worked there long and hard every day, together with others. A clock on the wall determined when you had to be where. I couldn’t help thinking of the two proximal hands on the man’s wristwatch. How many women had he been able to impress so far with this little gimmick? Flaunting his knowledge. And yet we know nothing at all about it. We know nothing and bring you to us anyway, I thought, looking at the Or. It nodded, applauded me briefly, then leaned against the bus window again, staring out at the traffic signs and lights whirling past as the city gradually grew denser and denser around us.