

I'M

TRAVELING

ALONE

A THRILLER

SAMUEL

BJØRK

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

Samuel Bjørk

**I'M
TRAVELING
ALONE**

Translated from the Norwegian
by Charlotte Barslund

VIKING

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Version_1

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On August 28, 2006, a girl was born in the maternity unit of Ringerike Hospital in Hønefoss. The baby's mother, a twenty-five-year-old nursery-school teacher named Katarina Olsen, was a hemophiliac and died during the birth. The midwife and some of the nurses who had been present later described the little girl as exceptionally beautiful. She was quiet and remarkably alert, with a gaze that caused everyone who worked in the ward to develop a very special bond with her. On her admission to the hospital, Katarina Olsen had registered the father as "Unknown." In the days that followed, the management of Ringerike Hospital, working in collaboration with Ringerike Social Services, tried to track down the child's maternal grandmother, who lived in Bergen. Unaware that her daughter had been pregnant, she arrived at the hospital only to discover that the newborn baby had disappeared from the maternity ward. Ringerike Police Department immediately initiated a major hunt for the child, but without result. Two months later a Swedish nurse named Joachim Wicklund was found dead in his studio apartment in the center of Hønefoss. He had hanged himself. A typed note was found on the floor below Wicklund's body, reading only "I'm sorry."

The baby girl was never found.

*Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home.
Your house is on fire and your children are gone.*

Walter Henriksen took a seat at the kitchen table and made a desperate attempt to force down a little of the breakfast his wife had prepared for him. Bacon and eggs. Herring, salami, and freshly baked bread. A cup of tea brewed with herbs from their very own garden, the one she had always dreamed of having and which was the reason they had bought this house so far from the center of Oslo, with a forest as their nearest neighbor. Here they could pursue healthy interests. Go for walks in the woods. Grow their own vegetables. Pick wild berries and mushrooms and, not least, offer more freedom to their dog, a cocker spaniel that Walter Henriksen could not stand the sight of, but he loved his wife, which explained why he had agreed to all of the above.

He swallowed a bit of bread with herring and fought to keep the food down. He took a large swig of orange juice and tried to look happy, even though his head was throbbing as if someone had clobbered him with a hammer. Last night's office party had not gone according to plan; yet again he had failed to stay off the booze.

The news droned along in the background while Walter tried to read his wife's face. Her mood. If she had secretly been awake when he'd collapsed into bed in the early hours. What time that was he did not know, but it had been late, far too late; he did remember taking off his clothes, a vague memory of his wife being asleep—*Thank Christ*, he'd thought before he passed out on the too-hard mattress she had insisted they buy because she'd started having back problems.

Walter coughed lightly, wiped his mouth with the napkin, and patted his stomach to pretend he had enjoyed the meal and was now full.

"I thought I might take Lady for a walk," he said with what he hoped resembled a smile.

"Oh, all right, then." His wife nodded, somewhat surprised at his offer, because although they rarely discussed it, she was perfectly aware that he cared little for the three-year-old bitch. "Perhaps you could go a bit farther than just walk her around the house this time?"

He searched for the subtly passive-aggressive tone she often adopted when she was displeased with him. But she seemed content, unaware that anything was amiss. Phew, he'd gotten away with it again. And he promised himself that it was the last time. Healthy living for him from now on. No more office parties.

"I was thinking of taking her up to Maridalen, perhaps follow the path down to Lake Dau."

"That sounds perfect," his wife agreed.

She stroked the dog's head, kissed its forehead, and scratched it behind the ear.

"You and your daddy are going to have a lovely time, yes you are, aren't you, Lady, my lovely little doggy."

• • •

On the walk up to Maridalen, he followed his usual route on the rare occasion he took the dog out. Walter Henriksen had never liked dogs, knew nothing about dogs; had it been up to him, the world could do without them. He sensed a growing irritation toward the stupid bitch that was straining on the leash, wanting him to walk more quickly. Or stop. Or go in any other direction than the one Walter

wanted to.

At last he reached the path that took them down to Lake Dau, where he could finally let the dog off the leash. He squatted on his haunches and attempted to pat the dog's head, show it some kindness as he undid the leash.

"There, have yourself a bit of a run."

The dog stared at him with dumb eyes and stuck out its tongue. Walter lit a cigarette and briefly felt something almost resembling love toward the little bitch. After all, it wasn't the dog's fault. She was all right. His headache was starting to lift; the fresh air did him good. He was going to like the dog from now on. Nice doggy. And strolling around the forest . . . well, life could be worse. They were almost friends, he and the dog, and would you just look how well behaved she was now, good doggy. She was no longer on the leash and yet she walked nicely by his side.

And it was at that very moment that the cocker spaniel decided to take off, abandon the path, and run wild through the forest. Damn!

"Lady!"

Walter Henriksen stayed on the path and spent some time calling the dog, but to no avail. Then, muttering curses under his breath, he threw down his cigarette and started scrambling up the hill. So he stopped in his tracks. The dog was lying very calmly in a small clearing. And that was when he saw the little girl hanging from the tree. Dangling above the ground. With a satchel on her back. And a note around her neck:

I'm traveling alone.

Walter Henriksen fell to his knees and did something he had wanted to do since the moment he first woke up.

He threw up all over himself and burst into tears.

The screeching seagulls woke Mia Krüger.

By now she really should have grown used to them; after all, it had been four months since she'd bought this house near the mouth of the fjord, but Oslo refused to release its hold on her. Back in her apartment in Vogtsgate, there had always been noise, buses, trams, police sirens, ambulances, and none of them had ever disturbed her—if anything, they had calmed her down—but she was unable to ignore this cacophony of seagulls. Perhaps it was because everything else around here was so quiet.

She reached out for the alarm clock on the bedside table but could not read the time. The hands appeared to be missing; lost in a fog somewhere, a quarter past two or twenty-five minutes to nothing. The pills she had taken last night were still working. Calming, sedating, sensory-depriving. “*Do not take with alcohol*”—yeah, right. After all, she was going to be dead in twelve days. She had ticked off the days on the calendar in the kitchen, twelve blank squares left.

Twelve days. April 18.

She sat up in bed, pulled on her Icelandic sweater, and shuffled downstairs to the living room.

A colleague had prescribed her the pills. A mandatory “friend,” someone whose job it was to help her forget, process events, move on. A police psychologist, or was he a psychiatrist? She guessed he had to be the latter, so he could issue prescriptions. Whatever, she had access to anything she wanted. Even in this far-flung corner of the world and even though it required considerable effort. She had to get dressed. Start the outboard motor on the boat. Freeze for the fifteen minutes it took her to sail to Hitra, the main island. Start the car. Stay on the road for forty minutes until she reached Fillan, the nearest town around here—not that it was much of a town, but there the pharmacy could be found, and then a visit to the liquor store. The prescriptions would be ready and waiting for her, as they had been telephoned through from Oslo. Xanax, Valium, Lamictal, Celexa. Some from the psychiatrist along with some from her GP. They were all so helpful, so kind—*Now, don't take too many, please be careful*—but Mia Krüger had absolutely no intention of being careful. She had not moved out here to get better. She had come here to seek oblivion.

Twelve days left. April 18.

Mia Krüger took a bottle of mineral water from the fridge, got dressed, and walked down to the sea. She sat on a rock, pulled her jacket more tightly around her, and got ready to take the first of today's pills. She shoved a hand into her pants pocket. A spectrum of colors. Her head still felt groggy, and she could not remember which ones she was supposed to be taking today, but it didn't matter. She washed them down with a gulp from the bottle and dangled her feet over the water. She stared at her boots. It made no sense; it was as if they were not her feet but someone else's, and they seemed far, far away. She shifted her gaze to the sea instead. That made no sense either, but she forced herself to stick with it and looked across the sea, toward the distant horizon, at the small island out there, a place whose name she did not know.

She had chosen this location at random. Hitra. A little island in Trøndelag, off the west-central coast of Norway. It could have been anywhere as long as she was left alone. She had let the real-estate agent decide. *Sell my apartment and find me something else.* He had looked at her and cocked his head as if she were a lunatic or simpleminded, but he wanted his commission, so what did he care? The

friendly white smile that had said yes, of course he could, did she want a quick sale? Did she have something specific in mind? Professional courtesy, but she had seen his true nature. She felt nauseous just thinking about it. Fake, revolting eyes. She had always been able to see straight through anyone she came near. On that occasion it had been the agent, a slippery eel in a suit and tie, and she had not liked what she saw.

You have to use this talent you have been given. Don't you see? You need to use it for something. And this is what you're meant to use it for.

No, she bloody wouldn't. Not anymore. Never again. The thought made her feel strangely calm.

Mia Krüger got up from the rock and followed the path back to the house. It was time for the first drink of the day. She did not know what time it was, but it was definitely due now. She had bought expensive alcohol, ordered it especially. It was possibly a contradiction in terms, but why not enjoy something luxurious, given how little time she had left? Why this? Why that? She had stopped sweating the small stuff long ago. She opened a bottle of Armagnac Domaine de Pantagnan 1965 Labeyrie and filled the teacup, which was sitting unwashed on the kitchen counter, three-quarters full. An eight-hundred-kroner Armagnac in a filthy teacup. *Look how little it bothers me. Do you think I care?* She smiled faintly to herself, found some more pills in her pocket, and walked back down to the rocks.

If she had to live somewhere, it might as well be here. Fresh air, a sea view, the tranquillity beneath the white clouds. She had no links to Trøndelag, but she had liked this island from the moment she first saw it. They had deer here. Countless herds of them, and it had intrigued her—deer belonged elsewhere, in Alaska, in the movies. These beautiful animals that people insisted on hunting. Mia Krüger had learned to shoot at the police academy, but she had never liked guns. Guns were not for fun; guns were something you used only when you had no other choice, and not even then. The deer season on Hitra lasted from September to November. One day on her way to the pharmacy, she had passed a group of young people busy tying a dead deer to the bed of their truck. It had been February, outside the hunting season, and for a moment she had contemplated pulling over, taking down their names, and reporting them to ensure they got their well-deserved punishment, but she'd choked it back and let it go.

Once a police officer, always a police officer?

Not anymore. No way.

Twelve days to go. April 18.

She drank the last of her Armagnac, rested her head against the rock, and closed her eyes.

Holger Munch was sweating as he waited in the arrivals terminal at Værnes Airport to pick up a rental car. As usual, the plane had been late due to fog at Gardermoen Airport, and once again Holger was reminded of Jan Fredrik Wiborg, the civil engineer who had supposedly killed himself in Copenhagen after criticizing the expansion plans for Oslo's main airport, citing unfavorable weather conditions. Even now, eighteen years later, Munch was unable to forget that the body of a fully grown man had been found beneath a hotel-room window too small for him to have gotten through, just before the Airport Bill was due to be debated in Stortinget, the Norwegian parliament. And why had the Danish and the Norwegian police been reluctant to investigate his death properly?

Holger Munch abandoned his train of thought as a blond girl behind the Europcar counter cleared her throat to let him know it was his turn to be served.

"Munch," he said curtly. "I believe a car has been booked for me."

"Right, so you're the guy who is getting a new museum in Oslo?" The girl in the green uniform winked at him.

Munch did not get the joke immediately.

"Or maybe you're *not* the artist?" The girl smiled as she cheerfully bashed the keyboard in front of her.

"Eh? No, not the artist, no," Munch said drily. "Not even related."

Or I wouldn't be standing here, not if I had that inheritance, Munch thought as the girl handed him a form to sign.

Holger Munch hated flying, which explained his bad mood. Not because he feared that the plane might crash. Holger Munch was an amateur mathematician and knew that the risk of a crash was less than that of being struck by lightning twice in the same day. No, Holger Munch hated planes because he could barely fit into the seat.

"There you are." The girl in the green uniform smiled kindly and handed him the keys. "A nice big Volvo V70, all paid for, open-ended rental period and mileage. You can return it when and where you like. Have a nice trip."

Big? Was this another one of her jokes, or was she merely trying to reassure him? Here's a nice big car for you, because you have grown so fat that you can barely see your own feet?

On his way to the garage, Holger Munch caught a glimpse of his reflection in the large windows outside the arrivals terminal. Perhaps it was about time. Start exercising. Eat a slightly healthier diet. Lose a bit of weight. Lately he had begun to think along those lines. He no longer had to run down the streets chasing criminals—he had people working for him who could do that, so that was not the reason. No, in the last few weeks, Holger Munch had become rather vain.

Wow, Holger, new sweater? Wow, Holger, new jacket? Wow, Holger, have you trimmed your beard?

He unlocked the Volvo, placed his cell phone in the cradle, and turned it on. He fastened his seat belt and was heading toward the center of Trondheim when his messages began coming through. He heaved a sigh. One hour with his phone turned off and now it was starting again. No respite from the world. It was not entirely fair to say that it was the flight alone that had put him in a bad mood.

There'd been a lot happening recently, both at work and at home. Holger swiped his finger across the smartphone screen, a model they'd told him to buy—it was all about high-tech these days, the twenty-first-century police force, even in Hønefoss, where he had worked for the last eighteen months for Ringerike Police. This was where he'd started his career, and now he'd come back. Because of the Tryvann incident.

Seven calls from Oslo Police Headquarters at Grønland. Two from his ex-wife. One from his daughter. Two from the nursing home. Plus countless text messages.

Holger Munch decided to ignore the world for a little longer and turned on the radio. He found the classical station, opened the window, and lit a cigarette. Cigarettes were his only vice—apart from food, obviously, but they were in a different league in terms of attraction. Holger Munch had no intention of ever quitting smoking no matter how many laws the politicians came up with and how many No Smoking signs they put up all over Norway, including on the dashboard of his rental car.

He could not think without a cigarette, and there was nothing Holger Munch loved more than thinking. Using his brain. Never mind about the body as long as his brain worked. They were playing Handel's *Messiah* on the radio, not Munch's favorite, but he was okay with it. He was more of a Bach man himself. He liked the mathematics of the music, not all those emotional composers: Wagner's bellicose tempo, Ravel's impressionistic emotional landscape. Munch listened to classical music precisely to escape these human feelings. If people were mathematical equations, life would be much simpler. He quickly touched his wedding ring and thought about Marianne, his ex-wife. It had been ten years now, and still he could not make himself take it off. She had phoned him. Perhaps she was . . .

No. It would be about the wedding, obviously. She wanted to talk about the wedding. They had a daughter together, Miriam, who was getting married shortly. There were practicalities to discuss. That was all. Holger Munch flicked the cigarette out the window and lit another one.

I don't drink coffee, I don't touch alcohol. Surely I'm allowed a stupid cigarette.

Holger Munch had been drunk only once, at the age of fourteen on his father's cherry brandy at their vacation cottage, and he had never touched a drop of alcohol since.

The desire was just not there. He didn't want it. It would never cross his mind to do anything that might impair his brain cells. Not in a million years. Now, smoking, on the other hand, and the occasional burger—that was something else again.

He pulled over at a Shell station and ordered a bacon-burger meal deal, which he ate sitting on a bench overlooking Trondheim Fjord. If his colleagues had been asked to describe Holger Munch in three words, two of them were likely to be “nerd.” “Clever” would possibly be the third, or “too clever for his own good” if they were permitted more than a single word. But a nerd definitely. A fat, amiable nerd who never touched alcohol, loved mathematics, classical music, crossword puzzles, and chess. A little dull perhaps, but an extremely talented investigator. And a fair boss. So what if he never joined his colleagues for a beer after work or had not been on a date since his wife left him for a teacher with eight weeks of annual vacation who never had to get up in the middle of the night without telling her where he was going? There was no one whose clear-up rate was as high as Holger Munch's everyone knew that. Everyone liked Holger Munch. And even so he had ended up back in Hønefoss.

I'm not demoting you, I'm reassigning you. The way I see it, you should count yourself lucky that you still have a job.

He had almost quit on the spot that day outside Mikkelson's office, but he'd bitten his tongue. What else would he do? Work as a security guard?

Holger Munch got back into the car and took the E6 toward Trondheim. He lit a fresh cigarette and followed the ring road around the city, heading south. The rental car was equipped with GPS, but he

did not turn it on. He knew where he was going.

Mia Krüger.

He thought warmly about his former colleague just as his cell phone rang again.

“Munch speaking.”

“Where the hell are you?”

It was an agitated Mikkelson, on the verge of a heart attack as usual; how that man had survived ten years in the boss’s chair down at Grønland was a mystery.

“I’m in the car. Where the hell are *you*?” Munch snapped back.

“In the car where? Haven’t you gotten there yet?”

“No, I haven’t gotten there yet, I’ve only just landed—I thought you knew that. What do you want?”

“I wanted to check that you’re sticking with the plan.”

“I have the file here, and I intend to deliver it in person, if that’s what you mean.” Munch sighed. “Was it really necessary to send me all the way up here just for this? How about a courier? Or we could have used the local police.”

“You know exactly why you’re there,” Mikkelson replied. “And this time I want you to do as you’ve been told.”

“One,” Munch said as he flicked the cigarette butt out of the window, “I owe you nothing. Two, I owe you nothing. Three, it’s your own fault you’re no longer using my brain for its intended purpose, so I suggest you shut up. Do you want to know the cases I’m working these days? Do you, Mikkelson? Want to know what I’m working on?”

A brief silence followed at the other end. Munch chuckled contentedly to himself.

Mikkelson hated nothing more than having to ask for a favor. Munch knew that Mikkelson was fuming now, and he savored how his former boss was having to control himself rather than speak his mind.

“Just do it.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Munch grinned as he saluted in the car.

“Drop the irony, Munch, and call me when you’ve got something.”

“Will do. Oh, by the way, there was one thing . . .”

“What?” Mikkelson grunted.

“If she’s in, then so am I. No more Hønefoss for me. And I want our old offices in Mariboegate. We work away from police headquarters. And I want the same team as before.”

There was total silence before the reply came.

“That’s completely out of the question. It’s never going to happen, Munch. It’s—”

Munch smiled and pressed the red button to end the call before Mikkelson had time to say anything else. He lit another cigarette, turned the radio on again, and took the road leading to Orkanger.

Mia Krüger had been dozing on the sofa under a blanket near the fireplace. She'd been dreaming about Sigrid and had woken up feeling as if her twin sister were still there. With her. Alive. That they were together again like they always used to be. Sigrid and Mia. Mia and Sigrid. Two peas in a pod, born two minutes apart, one blond, the other dark, so different and yet so alike.

All Mia wanted to do was return to her dream, join Sigrid, but she made herself get up and go to the kitchen. Eat some breakfast. To keep the alcohol down. If she carried on like this, she would die prematurely, and that was completely out of the question.

April 18.

Ten days left.

She had to hold out, last another ten days. Mia forced down two pieces of crispbread and considered drinking a glass of milk but opted for water instead. Two glasses of water and two pills. From her pants pocket. Didn't matter which ones. One white and one pale blue today.

Sigrid Krüger

Sister, friend, and daughter

Born November 11, 1979. Died April 18, 2002.

Much loved. Deeply missed.

Mia Krüger returned to the sofa and stayed there until she felt the pills starting to kick in. Numb her. Form a membrane between her and the world. She needed one now. It was almost three weeks since she had last looked at herself, and she could put it off no longer. Time for a shower. The bathroom was on the first floor. She had avoided it for as long as possible, didn't want to look at herself in the large mirror that the previous owner had put up right inside the door. She'd been meaning to find a screwdriver. Remove the damn thing. She felt bad enough as it was and did not need it confirmed, but she hadn't had the energy. No energy for anything. Just for the pills. And the alcohol. Liquid Valium in her veins, little smiles in her bloodstream, lovely protection against all the barbs that had been swimming around inside her for so long. She steeled herself and walked up the stairs. She opened the door to the bathroom and almost had a shock when she saw the figure in the mirror. It was not her. It was someone else. Mia Krüger had always been slim, but now she looked emaciated. She had always been healthy. Always strong. Now there was practically nothing left of her. She pulled off her sweater and her jeans and stood in only her underwear in front of the mirror. Her underpants were sagging. The flesh on her stomach and hips was all gone. Carefully she ran a hand over her protruding ribs—she could feel them clearly, count them all. She made herself walk right up close to the mirror, caught a glimpse of her own eyes in the rusty silver surface. People had always remarked on her blue eyes. *No one has eyes as Norwegian as yours, Mia*, someone had said to her once, and she still remembered how proud she'd been, *Norwegian eyes*. It had sounded so fine. At a time when she wanted to fit in, not be different. Sigrid had always been the prettier one. Perhaps that explained why it had felt so good? Sparkling blue eyes. Not much of that left now. They looked dead already.

My little Indian, her grandmother used to call her. And she could have been—apart from the blue

eyes. An American Indian. Kiowa or Sioux or Apache. Mia had always been fascinated by Indians when she was a child; there had never been any doubt whose side she was on. The cowboys were the bad guys. The Indians the good guys. *How are you today, Mia Moonbeam?* Mia touched her face in the mirror and remembered her grandmother with love. She looked at her long hair. Raven black hair flowing down her delicate shoulders. She had not had hair as long as this for ages. She'd started to wear it short when she started at the police academy. She hadn't gone to a hairdresser's but cut it herself at home, just grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped it off. To show that she didn't care about looking pretty. About showing off. She didn't wear makeup either. *You're naturally beautiful, my little Indian*, her grandmother had said one evening when she braided Mia's hair in front of the fireplace back home in Åsgårdstrand.

Sigrid had always been the favorite. Sigrid with her long blond hair. Who was good at school. Who played the flute, who played handball and was everyone's friend. Mia had not resented the attention Sigrid got. Sigrid was never one to exploit it to her advantage, never said a bad word about anyone. Sigrid was quite simply fantastic, but whenever their grandmother had pulled Mia to one side and told her that she was special, she'd felt great.

You're very special, did you know that? The other children are fine, but you know things, Mia, don't you? You see the things that other people tend to overlook.

A grandmother who had taken notice of her, seen who she was, told her she was special.

Fly like the ladybird, Mia, never forget that.

Her grandmother's last words on her deathbed, spoken with a wink to her very special friend.

Ten days left.

April 18.

She was not particularly interested in what it would be like. Her final moment. If it would hurt. If it would be difficult to let go. She did not believe the stories about how your life flashed in front of your eyes as you died. Or perhaps it was true? It didn't really matter. The story of Mia Krüger's life was imprinted on her body. She could see her life in the mirror. An Indian with Norwegian eyes. Long black hair that she used to cut short but was now cascading down her thin white shoulders. She tugged her hair behind one ear and studied the scar near her left eye. An inch-long cut, a scar that would never fade away completely. She'd been interrogating a murder suspect after a young girl from Latvia had been found floating in the river Aker. Mia had failed to pay attention, hadn't seen the knife; luckily, she'd managed to swerve so that it did not blind her. She'd worn a patch over her eye for several months afterward; thanks to the doctors, she still had sight in both eyes. She held up her left hand in front of the mirror and looked at the missing fingertip. Another suspect, a farm outside Moss, *mind the dog*. The rottweiler had gone for her throat, but she raised her hand just in time. She could still feel its teeth around her fingers, how the panic had spread inside her in the few seconds it took before she got the pistol out of her holster and blew the head off the manic dog. She shifted her eyes down to the small butterfly she'd had tattooed on her hip. She had been a nineteen-year-old girl in Prague, thinking herself a woman of the world. She met a Spanish guy, a summer fling, they'd drunk far too much Becherovka and both woken up with a tattoo. Hers was a small purple, yellow, and green butterfly. Mia was tempted to smile. She had considered having it removed several times, embarrassed by the idiocy of her youth, but had never gotten around to it, and now it no longer mattered. She stroked the slender silver bracelet on her right wrist. They'd been given one each as confirmation presents, Sigrid and she. A charm bracelet with a heart and an anchor and an initial. An *M* on hers. An *S* on Sigrid's. That night, when the party was over and the guests had gone home, they'd sat in their shared bedroom at home in Åsgårdstrand when Sigrid had suddenly suggested they swap.

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