



## Everything Like Before

**Kjell Askildsen**

**Seán Kinsella, Translator**

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Norwegian author Kjell Askildsen's story collection *Everything Like Before* delves into tales of marital unhappiness, conflicts between parents and children, and the struggles of the elderly.

In the collection's thirty-six stories, Askildsen evokes many forms of everyday despair. Married couples spar over bottles of wine while on vacation. Sons' visits to their fathers end in bitterness and accusations. Adults mull over painful stories from their childhood, and elderly men face lives of increasing isolation and loneliness.

The stories fit firmly in the realistic tradition, focusing on the details of daily life. Kitchens, decks, doorways, sidewalks, restaurants, and bars are charged with significance as spaces where characters negotiate relationships and appraise their lives. Mundane objects that carry emotional weight—raincoats, hair ribbons, cups of coffee—bring the stories alive. Askildsen uses first and third person, sometimes switching between the two within the same story, to capture his characters' emotional states from interior and exterior vantage points.

A few stories contain dramatic action; in one, a boy watches his house burn down and afterward challenges the existence of God. In another, a man is accused of a violent crime and begins to behave erratically in misguided attempts to prove his innocence. Most stories are quieter, their drama emerging from changes in the characters' self-perceptions and emotional states. Askildsen frequently uses dialogue to capture the characters' feelings, communicating frustration, irritation, and mistrust through short but evocative exchanges.

At two to three pages long each, the shortest pieces are best understood as vignettes that capture static moments in time, without the depth of the book's longer stories, which better speak to the collection's interest in emotional drama within the spaces they make for meaningful description and details.

In the short stories of *Everything Like Before*, loneliness, despair, and longing are described with devastating nuance.

REBECCA HUSSEY (March / April 2021)

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