

JAN  
KJÆRSTAD THE  
CONQUEROR



'One of Scandinavia's outstanding contemporary writers' PAUL AUSTER

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Jan Kjærstad

*The Conqueror*

Translated from the Norwegian  
by Barbara J. Haveland



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## This is your life

‘I thought he was going to rape me,’ the woman said, reporting the incident later. No point beating about the bush: we might as well begin at the end, or the beginning of the end. So, before the bout of erotic vertigo in the chemist’s shop, even before the story of the stinking monster in the basement, we have to start with this man, as he sits in the back of a taxi driving through a summery Oslo night; on the surface of it a perfectly ordinary situation, a situation this man has been in thousands of times before, the rule more than the exception: he is on his way home, late at night in a taxi.

Initially the driver, a woman, an attractive woman, an English undergraduate who did the odd shift, had only caught a glimpse of the man who flagged down her cab in the city centre, not far from a bar, and muttered something about Bergen, leading her to think, to begin with, that she had picked up a fare to the west coast – what a fantastic piece of luck – until she realized that of course he meant Bergensveien, in Grorud, because at that same moment she recognized him. The person in the back seat was one of those few Norwegians who did not need to give his address: who could, if they wished, simply say: ‘Take me home.’

She was thrilled, and not a little proud of the fact that, of all the possible cabs for hire on the streets, he should have chosen hers; she sneaked a peek at him in the mirror, noted that he had not bothered to fasten his seatbelt, as if seatbelts were, in his case, unnecessary; he sat there with a happy almost beatific, smile on his face like he was on a high, had just been presented with a grand award for something. She couldn’t wait to tell her friends, her fellow taxi drivers: guess who I drove home the other night, no, honestly, it was *him*. She kept peeking in the mirror, racking her brains for something to say, something about one of his programmes, a compliment that wouldn’t sound as glib as all the other words of praise that were no doubt heaped on him every day. For, at a time when television turned everything of any importance into entertainment, when television, even Norwegian television, was dominated by mindless game shows and quiz programmes, gushing chat shows and primitive debates: confirming, in other words, every misanthrope’s assertions that all the people want is bread and circuses – he, her passenger, had restored her faith in television as an art form in its own right. She had something on the tip of her tongue, something she felt was pretty original, something about his programme on Sonja Henie, about how suggestive they were, those pirouettes and the ice flying up, how erotic, she had the urge to add, although she didn’t know if she dared. It would be like addressing His Majesty the King. Because the man in the back seat was none other than Jon Wergeland.

They drove along Trondheimsveien, across Carl Berners plass. She hoped he had noticed the paperback copy of D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* lying between the two front seats, a book which she had read when she was sitting on the rank. The scent of a restaurant filled the cab: spices, wine, cigars, but she had obviously just risen from an excellent dinner. She glanced in the mirror, could no longer make out his features, his face lay in shadow, it looked blank. She remembered with what interest and delight, yes, delight – she had watched *This Is Your Life* not that long ago, on the evening when Jon Wergeland was the star guest, the youngest ever; what a show that was, a glittering tribute for which everybody had turned out, from an unwontedly animated Minister for the Arts to the legendary writ

Axel Stranger; what a life, she had thought, what a man. As if to heighten the thrill she looked in the mirror again, but there was something about the look in his eyes, his whole expression, which did not fit with the face she knew from the television screen, from *This Is Your Life*, the face that had so often held her mesmerized, a face she had even fantasized about, dreamed of, had rude thoughts about.

And just as they are approaching the Sinsen junction, the largest intersection in Norway, it happens. At first all she, the driver, hears are some odd sounds, a kind of gurgling, then she realizes what is happening and pulls to an abrupt halt on the hard shoulder. But it is too late. Jonas Wergeland throws up, a jet of vomit shoots from his mouth, hitting her on the back of the head at the point where the headrest doesn't block the spray, and even then, even as she feels this slimy, foul-smelling substance on her own skin and sees, out of the corner of her eye, how the cover of *The Rainbow* too, has been splattered with sick, she thinks that he must have been taken ill; she has only one thought in her head: she must help him, she is full of concern, tenderness, because she is in his debt, in debt to a man who has caused her to change her views on many things, on the nature of Norway, possibly even on the nature of life itself; she pictures to herself how this dramatic turn of events will only make the story that much better. Just then she catches sight of his face again, two eyes staring at her in the mirror and she realizes that he is not ill, but drunk, as pissed out of his skull as anybody can be, and not just with alcohol but with hate.

Before she could do a thing, it happened again. Slumped in the back seat, Jonas Wergeland spewed out the contents of his stomach, the stream broken only by short pauses to gasp for breath. He didn't even seem to be aware that he was throwing up. He was like an out-of-hand fire hose, writhing and spraying in all directions. Before she could get out and open the door for him, he had filled the inside of the Mercedes with an unappetizing swill – she could already hear the dressing-down she was going to get from the owner: 'Miss Kielland, do you realize that I have just had the inside of this car thoroughly cleaned by Økern Auto Cosmetic?'

But at that moment she was more concerned about Jonas Wergeland, as he fell out of the car, mumbling and laughing to himself. 'My television programmes are just as useless as the pyramids,' he snorted. 'They stay in the desert, jackals piss at their foot and the bourgeoisie climb up on them.' Then he raised his head: 'Gustav Flaubert,' he bawled. 'I pinched that from Flaubert, so I bloody did.' As if to show that his wits weren't totally befuddled, that there was still something going on up there, he pointed to a sign hanging over the entrance to a restaurant across the street. 'Rendezvous' it said. 'I met a girl there once,' he said, even as he was racked by another violent and painful bout of retching, as if he had toadstools in his stomach and was trying to bring them up. And then, in an unfamiliar dark, rasping tone: 'To hell with all girls.'

What was he thinking? What was going on inside Jonas Wergeland's head? I know. I know everything, almost everything. It is a bright summer's night in June. There lies Jonas Wergeland, just down the road from Aker Hospital where he was born, just down the road from the Sinsen junction, Norway's largest interchange, an enormous loop of concrete and tarmac. As a child his heart had always sung when he had driven across here, this point where Oslo spread out beneath him, presenting the illusion of itself as a glittering metropolis, rich in possibilities. And now he lay sprawled on the very spot, on high and yet laid low, and felt as if he were spewing over Oslo, over the whole of Norway, in fact.

The taxi driver didn't know which way to turn. She noticed that his jacket was spattered with dark stains, bits of food. It was a slightly old-fashioned jacket and one she recognized: one that, on numerous television chat shows, had lent him the air of an English gentleman. She felt like a witness to an act of blasphemy. 'I would honestly never have thought this of you, Mr Wergeland,' she said, for

want of anything better, and with a hint of sharpness. 'I really did not expect this of you.'

In response he discharged a final volley of vomit, a solid mixture of bile and food. There was something about the illusory density of this stream of vomit that put her in mind of films about exorcism, made her think that Jonas Wergeland was acting like a man possessed. 'I've been celebrating,' he grunted, gazing curiously at the chunks of partially digested lamb and Brussels sprouts in the claret-coloured puddle on the ground. 'I've been celebrating a great deed,' he said as she struggled to haul him into a sitting position, propped up against the wheel of the cab. She looked down at herself. Her clothes were in an awful mess. She was just wondering what she was going to say to the owner of the taxi, what she was going to say to anybody, when Jonas Wergeland keeled over again, vomiting with his face in his own vomit.

It could have ended there, as a minor – still and all, just a minor – scandal, but then he started shouting, first hurling abuse at the woman who was trying to pick him up. 'Get away from me, you fucking whore,' he snarled, pulling himself to his feet unaided, as if he had suddenly sobered up. He stood facing her with a menacing look in his eyes – it was at this moment that the thought of rape crossed her mind. And as he stood there he began to hiss something that at first she could not make out, but which gradually became clearer: 'I killed a man,' he said. 'I killed a man, d'you hear? I kicked the balls off him, the bastard.'

Then his legs gave way again, he slumped against the wheel. It was a bright summer's night in June, just down the road from the Sinsen junction. A taxi driver stood looking down on Jonas Wergeland, a man who, at a time when television channels had to have a logo up in the corner of the screen so you could tell them apart, at a time when television seemed intent only on satisfying mankind's basest needs, suddenly appeared on the scene and showed her, showed everyone that television could raise their level of cultivation. A young Norwegian woman, a viewer, stood there sadly regarding a man she admired, sitting on the ground in his own vomit, cursing and swearing. 'It was as though I was suddenly looking at Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,' she said later. 'Or rather, that he was Mr Hyde, that the Dr Jekyll bit was just something he had persuaded me to believe in for a long time. She was, as I mentioned earlier, studying English, so this analogy had not been plucked entirely out of thin air.'

'I made mincemeat of the son of a bitch,' Jonas Wergeland gibbered, laughing all the while, laughing and laughing, roaring with laughter if, that is, he wasn't sobbing. 'I'm only sorry I didn't cut off his dick while I was at it!'

The woman had long since called dispatch. She crouched down beside Jonas Wergeland, who now seemed almost out for the count, and she wept. She wept because she had seen something precious, something she truly cared about, shattered. And his last words to her before help arrives, as he opens his eyes and fixes his gaze on the pale-blue, taxi company shirt are: 'By Christ, you've got great tits.'

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## The whole world in his hand

Jonas and the female breast – it's a long story altogether, that of men and breasts. In Jonas's case however, it had something to do with his brother. I've given a lot of thought as to who might have been the most important person in Jonas Wergeland's life – a question central to our undertaking and it would not surprise me to find that it was his brother Daniel, one year his senior. Daniel dedicated hypocrite that he was – was, after all, the bane of Jonas's life, so to speak. I will have ample opportunity to touch on Daniel's bizarre career later, but first I must address this issue of the breasts.

No matter how different they might have been, throughout their adolescence Daniel and Jonas had one common interest: tits. Boys have different fetishes, but for the brothers, breasts constituted the very crux of life. Scientists have propounded the theory that the female mammary glands got bigger as human beings began to walk more upright, taking over from the backside as the main focus of attraction during the mating season. Daniel and Jonas were living proof that this theory has much to recommend it. The sight of breasts, anytime, anywhere, quite simply set the hormones churning within Daniel especially; something clicked inside his head. A mere glimpse of the cleavage between two breasts was enough. Newspaper and magazine ads for bras made him positively sick with excitement. Jonas always felt that Daniel's impressive attempts to become Norway's skiing king, the self-inflicted torture of trekking hundreds of miles across the hills around Oslo winter after winter, dated from the day when he saw an old photograph from the Cortina Winter Olympics of 1956, of Hallgeir Brenden, winner of the 15-kilometre cross-country event, with his arms round Sophie Loren's tits. Daniel lived, not in Sophie's World, but in Sophia's.

Sophia, Sophia, tits as wisdom.

Every evening for years Daniel would lie in bed and read aloud to Jonas; he read from two books in particular, which he had in some mysterious way got hold of and which he kept hidden inside the wardrobe in the wall of their room, as if to symbolize that these books represented a sort of safety valve for the pressure that was playing havoc with the boys: these were Agnar Mykle's *Lasso Around the Moon* and *Song of the Red Ruby*. Daniel read certain passages so often, and with such feeling, that Jonas would never forget Mykle's song of praise to breasts of all shapes and sizes, from the modest: 'Her small breasts under the white jersey had a lovely shape, like the bowl of a champagne glass,' to the more extravagant: 'Her breasts were like explosives under her sweater, they looked as if they would blow up were anyone to touch the small, protruding detonator on each one.' These uncommon and exalted bedtime readings, all these rousing metaphors, left Jonas, early on, with a suspicion – if not a conviction – that, when all is said and done, eroticism and sexuality had to do with imagination and leap of thought.

Many a time too, Daniel would lie panting in the top bunk, speculating on which material constituted the most provocative wrapping for breasts: what would form the optimum stage curtain for this greatest of all dramas. Silk? Flannel? Soft hide? Gleaming leather? Daniel could spend a whole night enlarging upon the cinematic cliché of 'a wet shirt clinging to the skin'. Jonas suggested string vests, which would give the breasts the appearance of plump fruit in a net shopping bag. Daniel, for his part – where do they get it from? – was partial to wool. Each time he went to the lavatory, with the



characteristic glazed look in his eyes, and turned the key in the lock, Jonas knew that his big brother had seen one of the estate's well-built young mothers go jiggling past in a distractingly tight sweater.

Jonas, too, had his secrets: he daydreamed of how a breast would feel against the palm of the hand; he fantasized about its probable smoothness and warmth and wondered whether it would really be as Daniel said – a thought which prompted a dangerously warm flutter in the pit of the stomach: that breast grew firm when touched, almost coagulated, to use a word he learned later in chemistry class; and above all perhaps, inspired by Agnar Mykle, he dreamed of nipples, their possible rigidity under the fingertip, like a switch; the mere thought caused his pelvic region to swell with anticipation. So potent was this fantasy that, when the time was ripe, Jonas attempted what could be said to be a preposterous, reckless marriage by capture.

This happened after Margrete, his first great love, had – as he saw it – ‘gone to blazes’, having dumped him in the most ignominious fashion before moving abroad. You had to pick yourself up. There were other girls. Jonas lived in Grorud, in northeast Oslo, which at that time was developing into an ever more populous satellite town. He had long had his eye on Anne Beate Corneliusse, known among the boys simply as the ABC of Sex. For if Anne Beate was remarkable for anything, it was the two gravitational points under her jersey. Apples fell to the ground, and the boys' eyes fell on Anne Beate's breasts. She was, in short, the sort of girl who automatically becomes a drum majorette and marches ahead of the boys' band in a tight uniform, holding that baton – oh, mind-boggling thought – with a firm, acrobatic grip and looking as though she had full control over the entire troop of boys, imperiously decreeing when they should raise their instruments and start to play.

On ordinary days Anne Beate often wore a traditional Setesdal sweater, and maybe it was its beautiful pattern which made Jonas feel that Anne Beate's tits had an ornate look about them, that their swelling contours underneath her jersey were somehow the embodiment of the perfect breast form, just as the metre rod in Paris was the ur-prototype of a metre. Jonas was devoutly, or perhaps more accurately, hormonally convinced that the greatest joy in the world would be granted to whoever was permitted to lay hands on those breasts. Suddenly he remembered a song from Sunday School: ‘He's got the whole world in his hands’. Jonas knew that that was just how it must feel.

Ironically, two obstacles lay between Jonas and the two objects of his dreams. For one thing, Anne Beate Corneliusse, the ABC of Sex, was alarmingly fickle and unpredictable. On one occasion, when a certain bold lad plucked up the courage to make an impertinent suggestion as they were walking through the front gate of Grorud Elementary School, she calmly removed his glasses, snapped them in two, then stamped on them, leaving the hapless lad to grope his way home, more or less blind. Secondly, and possibly worse, she was sort of going out with Frank Stenersen, or Frankenstein as he was known, since children – like a lot of adults – confuse Dr Frankenstein with Frankenstein's monster. Frank was nicknamed Frankenstein because of his size and his somewhat formidable appearance, to which a barbwire-like dental brace added a particularly striking touch. In other words, Anne Beate preferred the tougher lads, the kind with Beatles boots and long hair, who smoked and swapped condoms in the bike shed.

Frank Stenersen fitted this profile perfectly, his meanness was the stuff of legend; he had a soul like a bloody beefsteak. Every other day he earned himself a visit to the headmaster, on one occasion because, in the dining room, he had gone so far as to deface the portrait of Trygve Lie, Grorud's famous son, with a stump of carrot. The most glaring example of his brutality was, however, the rumour that he had a fondness for hunting for songbirds' nests so that he could smash the eggs, those harmless little blue eggs. Who could do such a thing? To cap it all – although perhaps this really explained it all – his parents were communists. And everybody knows that to be a member of the

NKP, the Norwegian Communist Party, in the sixties was truly to be an outsider; it was tantamount to hanging a sign on your door proclaiming utter godlessness.

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How does one become a conqueror?

Jonas wanted to try to be one; he wanted to act like one of the tough guys, wanted to act big in front of Anne Beate Corneliussen, the ABC of Sex. He commenced his offensive during the autumn when they were in eighth grade, during a curious event known as 'Get in on the Act'. Jonas, who normally never performed in public, not even to play the piano, which he did rather well, had put his name down for this, and after having presented something quite different, something safe, at rehearsal, he made his move when they went live, so to speak, on the evening itself, in a stuffy gym hall so jam-packed that people were hanging from the wall-bars. Jonas did a kind of stand-up comedy act, with a routine that, in essence, involved reading out various fictitious letters to the headmaster from parents and fellow pupils. He put on a different voice for each letter, according to who had supposedly sent it, eliciting loud whoops and cheers from the audience – and from the other eighth graders in particular. The success of his turn may have been due not so much to the originality of his script, but to the lamentably low standard of the other acts. But if truth be told, Jonas had developed a certain talent for putting on different voices. This dated from the days when he had produced radio plays – a subject to which I shall return – and he won a well-merited round of applause for a lisping rendition of a letter complaining about how shocking it was, a proper disgrace to the school, that Miss Bergersen should have been seen coming out of Mr Haugen's room with her hair all mussed up during last year's class trip. That this was not so far from the truth did not make the 'letter' any the less piquant, nor did the fact that those lisping tones could so easily be traced to the staff room. The following lines were uttered through pinched nostrils, as Jonas mimicked one prim mamma: 'Dear Headmaster: Please ask Miss Rauland to stop wearing blouses made from transparent fabric – my little Gunnar is forever locking himself in the bathroom these days.' Stamping and clapping. Poor Guggen managed to slip off during the ensuing uproar. For a few seconds Jonas felt as if he had the hall, nay the whole world, in the palm of his hand.

And it worked. Jonas actually got to speak to Anne Beate. She sauntered up to him while he was at the drinking fountain during the lunch break the following day, bent her head down next to his and placed her fingers over the neighbouring holes to make the jet of water leap higher. Out of the corner of his eye Jonas saw how her Setesdal sweater bulged under her open anorak. 'Why are you so interested in your English teacher when you could be friends with me?' she said through moist lips. 'Why don't we get together after school?' And when Jonas, after two seconds' thought, suggested that they meet in the basement of his block of flats, she agreed without hesitation, and Jonas knew what she was indirectly agreeing to: he would get to feel her tits.

During the last classes of the day he wasn't really there. He was an astronaut just before lift-off. He was going to see the far side of the moon. He was going to hold Venus and Jupiter in his hands. And Frankenstein didn't know a thing. That he might ever find out was not something Jonas wanted to think about. But he couldn't back out now; this was, as a Norwegian writer once put it, the whisper of the blood and the prayer of the bones, this was his chance, at long last, to discover for himself how 'her ripe breasts shot out like lightning bolts from her body', as Daniel had read, whispered, from the top bunk, his nose buried in a book by Agnar Mykle. Jonas ran all the way home from school. And when Anne Beate had finished school an hour before him, he saw her bike parked outside the entry – ballooned tyres, everything about her was big; he opened the door and took a deep breath before descending into the underworld.

The basements. Many a tale could be told of the gloomy basements of Solhaug, the housing estate

where Jonas grew up. They had served as the burial chambers inside pyramids where Jonas and Little Eagle had hunted for treasure, equipped with intricately drawn maps, scorched at the edges. They had been dripping caves inhabited by beasts and dragons, especially dragons. Those basements had formed the setting for the most wordless mystery plays, the venue for the meetings of secret clubs, where code words were whispered over flickering candle flames and rings set with glass diamonds changed fingers. They had been bunkers, especially after the weighty bombproof doors were installed – a delayed result of the Cold War. It is, by the way, quite amazing when one thinks, today, of all those bombproof doors and bomb shelters that suddenly became mandatory. The whole of Norway prepared for a life in the catacombs. Because it has already been forgotten that, although the fifties and sixties may in many ways have seemed a time of optimism, people – or at any rate all those who kept abreast of things – really did believe that an atom bomb could be dropped at any minute; it was an unpleasant fact of life, giving rise to a constant sense of insecurity which rendered the growing prosperity somehow even more intense.

So, behind those bombproof doors, Jonas and Little Eagle had also been the sole survivors, new versions of Robinson Crusoe and Friday, consigned to living in a dark, desolate basement. But not Jonas was willingly going to let himself be bombarded. He thought of the explosion that would occur as he laid his hands on Anne Beate. ‘Her breasts were like explosives under her jersey...’

He would not, of course, switch on the light, that went without saying. He closed the door, heard the hollow echo resound down the basement passage, the sort of sound used in films to create a sense of dread, of claustrophobia. It was cold. It was pitch-dark. The air was so fraught with tension that he could hardly breathe. He bit his lip, groped his way along the walls in which wooden doors, rough and flaking, punctuated the stippled surface at regular intervals.

They had arranged to meet in the centre, on a landing that opened onto the next basement passage. His whole body was one great, pounding heart. Something was about to happen. He could hear a buzzing sound, like that from a transformer. Sensed danger. Lightning bolts shooting from breasts. High voltage. Something was about to happen. Two big tits, two hard nipples, switches that would turn his life around. He caught a whiff of something, the scent of an animal, a wild beast. Woman, he thought. A willing woman.

Something was wrong. But he could not turn round. He had to fight. He knew now what it was. He was ready to fight and not, in fact, afraid. He was all but expecting to be tackled from behind, for his legs to be knocked from under him. Nothing happened. He heard heavy breathing in the darkness. A fury. A fury that breathed. He was prepared to run into a body but was caught completely unawares by a fierce grip. A demonstration of raw power. A huge hand closes around his balls and pushes him up against the wall, a grip that holds him there, his limbs are paralysed. He knows who has him pinned up against the wall. Frank Stenersen. A communist, a real, live communist, and inside the bomb shelter. What one fears most of all. An enemy within.

Frank Stenersen. Frankenstein. There was no doubt about it. A monster on some kind of high induced by an adrenalin-coursing lust for revenge. The other’s foul breath rammed Jonas’s nostrils; he thought to himself that the stench must stem from bits of food stuck between the metal wires of his brace. Then he felt the grip on his balls tighten and a sickening pain spread throughout his body. Every boy knows what I’m talking about, every one who has been rammed in the groin by a football or a knee. ‘Please,’ Jonas gasped. ‘Try to talk your way out of this,’ Frankenstein hissed through the wiring on his teeth. ‘Stop messing about,’ Jonas groaned. ‘So you wanted to grope Anne Beate’s tits, did you?’ Frankenstein said, squeezing harder, a little bit harder all the time. Jonas thought of Frankenstein and the story about the birds’ eggs. A soft squeal of pain escaped him. The pain was s

bad that he saw stars in the darkness. Jonas felt that this entity that was him was merely a fragile illusion, that a firm grip on his balls was all it took to shatter it. 'Write a letter to the Head about this you lousy little prick!' snarled Frankenstein. He squeezed still tighter for a second, before letting go and tossed Jonas aside like a fish with a broken neck. Jonas heard footsteps, heard the heavy bombproof door open and bang shut again. He lay there in the darkness, weeping, consoling himself with the fact that there had been no one to see. I ought perhaps to add that, after this incident, Jonas would always feel a tightening of his testicles whenever he found himself in a tricky situation, not only that, but a contraction of his balls could actually warn him that trouble was brewing. Like a Geiger counter detecting uranium, his testicles signalled danger.

Jonas got up, tottered over to the door, afraid for a moment that he had been locked in; he screwed up his eyes against the light, dragged himself up the steps. It seemed to him that he climbed upwards and upwards, that he made the ascent of something more than just a flight of steps leading to an exit. He had been dead, and now he was alive again. Either that or he had undergone a transformation and emerged as another person. And already at this point, long before he would learn that Frankenstein was not the name of the monster but of its creator, Jonas divined that by shooting a bolt of lightning through his balls, as it were, Frank Stenersen had turned him into a monster, or more accurately: had made him see that he had always been a beast, that the drool-making thought of conquering two strutting breasts was, at heart, monstrous. And above all, in a flash, when the pain was its height, Jonas Wergeland had perceived how dangerous, how wonderfully fiendish and artfully treacherous and yet how indescribably delightful and desirable and, not least, mysterious, girls were.

As Jonas staggered like a cripple out into the light, he realized that Frankenstein's squeezing of his balls was not so much a punishment for chatting up Anne Beate as the penalty for having shown off on stage. For having made a boast that he could not live up to or for which he was not prepared to take the consequences. So even then, at the age of thirteen, Jonas Wergeland ought to have understood that performing in public, in the strangest, most roundabout ways, can get your balls in a squeeze.

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## Carl the Great

Is it possible to find a beginning, something that might have prepared us for the episode that shook Norway, stunned the whole of Norway? Might it lie in something as innocent as a journey abroad?

When, after four days surrounded by nothing but water, Jonas Wergeland stood on the deck and watched the green island slowly rise up out of the sea before him, truly rise up, as if it had been made for this moment, it occurred to him that this must have been how Columbus felt when he spied the first islands of the Caribbean – although he had been sailing for much longer and towards a quite different destination. Jonas had, nonetheless, the feeling that he was approaching an unknown continent. And as they slipped through the opening in the coral reef and found themselves, all at once in Apia harbour, encircled by greenery, a green as bright as the slope running up to peaks he could not see – hidden as they were behind the first range of hills – the island on which he was about to set foot seemed to him like another Eden, a fresh start.

Why did Jonas Wergeland travel?

One day, Professor, someone will write a weighty treatise on the influence of Carl Barks on generations of Europeans. That's right: Carl Barks – not Karl Marx. No one should be surprised when one day, some individual becomes, say, Secretary-General of the United Nations and, to the question as to what his or her greatest influences have been, does not, as expected, say *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis or the works of Leo Tolstoy but quite simply replies: some cartoon ducks. In other words: those incomparable stories from the pen of American chicken farmer Carl Barks.

Jonas read very, very little as a child and adolescent, but he did devour every single Donald Duck comic issued from the fifties until well into the sixties – for reasons to which I shall return – and although he knew nothing about the contributing writers and illustrators, it was Carl Barks's strips which made the biggest impact on him. So much so that certain stories were read as many as a hundred times, to the point where he knew them by heart; one might almost say they settled themselves as ballast inside him. Just as children of an earlier age had their hymns off pat, verse upon verse, Jonas knew the adventures of Donald Duck. Carl Barks opened wide the door not only onto the history of the world, including all its myths and legends, but also onto its geography. The countless expeditions Jonas undertook in the company of Barks's heroes represented a grand tour not unlike the one made by Niels Holgersson and his geese. Barks's comic strips presented a first impression of regions and countries that never faded from Jonas's mind. Considered from a certain angle, it is not an exaggeration to say that it was Carl Barks who gave Jonas the urge to travel and to travel far.

Of all Carl Barks's fantasies, there were few which Jonas liked better than those involving journeys to faraway places, to virtual Utopias no one knew existed: for example, that famed epic of the trip to Tralla La in the Himalayas, where money was unheard of, or the expedition into the forests of the pygmy Indians who talked in rhyme; or the trek into the mists of the Andes, where they stumbled upon the weird geometric universe of the square people. But Jonas also had a penchant for some of the shorter traveller's tales, especially those that took Carl Barks's trouserless ducks to the isles of the South Seas, to islands where the people sang 'Aloha oe!' and wealth was measured in coconuts. He particularly enjoyed the hair-raising trip to Tabu Yama, a volcanic island, where Uncle Scrooge had

gone to search for black pearls in the lagoon.

I think, therefore, it is safe to say that Jonas Wergeland went – albeit unwittingly – to Polynesia to look for Carl Barks or to compare Carl Barks's creations with the real thing, although I'm sure this was not the reason he would have given. On this, one of his first long trips in the seventies, his prime aim was to visit a place that was as unspoiled as possible, relatively speaking at least. And when he stood by the rail of the boat, looking towards Apia and those green hillsides, the landscape really did seem to have a virginal air about it, the air of some last remaining paradise: 'Upolu, Apia, Utopia. But not so soon had that ostensible goal been achieved than he realized that he did not, in fact, have any idea why he had come here. In a way – and this is how Jonas Wergeland regarded most of his travels – he went there to discover why he had gone there.

Samoa may seem a long way away, Professor: very far, at any rate from everyday life in Norway. But we live in an age when all countries have become a part of all other countries. So I would just like to mention here that Samoa was, of course, not as unspoiled as Jonas Wergeland had thought or hoped that Samoa has also had its part to play in the history of Norway. For it was here that a Norwegian by the name of Erik Dammann came to stay with his family for a while in the sixties, for much the same reason that Uncle Scrooge went to Tralla La, and to some extent it was here that he gained the insight which, not long afterwards, inspired him to write a book and, prompted by the overwhelming response to this book, to found a popular movement calling itself The Future In Our Hands, one of the oddest phenomena in the history of post-war Norway, a movement which, at its height at any rate, seemed to suggest that a surprisingly large number of Norwegians were receptive to the idea of another way of life and a very different global distribution of commodities. So Samoa could, in fact, be seen as the starting point for this movement; it might not be going too far, either, to say that Erik Dammann was actually trying to turn the whole of Norway into another Samoa. Jonas's brother Daniel got particularly carried away – as was his wont – by such prospects for a couple of years, a phase which more or less overlapped with his involvement with the more extreme and far more puritanical and ascetic variant of these same ideals, namely, the Marxist-Leninist movement. Daniel subscribed to the more practical aspects of Dammann's credo with a fanatical fervour; he even gave up drinking Coca-Cola, something which, considering the amount of Coke he consumed at that time, must be regarded as the doughtiest of all his doughty feats in life and indeed one of the few times when, opportunist bastard that he was, he actually made a sacrifice.

Jonas Wergeland was, however, blissfully ignorant of Erik Dammann's links with Samoa as he strolled along Beach Road, the main thoroughfare in Apia, looking for somewhere cheaper to stay than the Aggie Grey's Hotel. It was hot and humid, and a sweet scent filled the air – not from spices, but from flowers. Apia itself was not much more than a large village: the church towers and spires rising above the white, two-storey wooden houses with their corrugated iron roofs the only sign that this was, in fact, a town. Just five or ten minutes' walk from the town centre the wooden houses gave way to *fales* – open-sided huts thatched with palm branches. The only familiar thing that Jonas could see was the bamboo, which called to mind his boyhood ski poles. He walked along Beach Road, clad in a neutral one might almost say universal – tropical suit, glorying in the feeling of being a total stranger, a person whom none of the inhabitants of 'Upolu or Apia knew anything about. For all they knew, he could be a young scientist, he thought, or the rebellious son of a billionaire, or – why not? – a writer looking for romantic inspiration, an excuse to get sand between his toes.

This sense of absolute anonymity was to some extent ruined the very next morning as he was eating breakfast at the guesthouse. When a young, hippie-looking man from New Zealand who, it transpired, had a neighbour of Norwegian descent, heard that Jonas was Norwegian, he immediately started

blethering on about Ole Bull, wanting to know why in hell Ole Bull didn't establish Oleanna, his Utopian colony, on Samoa. It would have had a much better chance of success here than in America of all the stupid, bloody places. 'Can't you just hear it?' he said. 'Ole Bull's violin interwoven with those lovely Samoan harmonies.'

As a way of escaping from this conversation, later that day Jonas walked down to the market and took a bus out of town, a bus that looked more like a gaily decorated, open-sided shed on wheels. He got off at a random spot next to a banana grove, not far from a village, but these he skirted around and walked through breadfruit trees and bushes covered in exotic scarlet blooms, down to the sea, three or four hundred yards beyond the village. The beach was just as it ought to be, with palms bending over a crescent-shaped ribbon of golden sand. Jonas stopped to gaze in wonder at the lagoon, the seabirds sailing over the bands of foam where the Pacific broke against the reef. The sky was overcast. He discerned the top of a volcano beyond the hills, shrouded in mist, almost unreal.

Jonas feels a faint pinching of his testicles and turns around: a group of men are walking toward him. All are clad in *lava-lavas*, gaily-patterned sarongs, most are bare to the waist, a couple are wearing shirts. Some of them are carrying palm-leaf baskets on poles across their shoulders. Several are clutching *sapelu* knives, the kind used for splitting coconuts. Jonas's first thought is that his life is in danger, that he must have committed some dire offence against something or someone – thoughts of broken taboos flash through his mind – but he quickly realizes that the men seem happy to see him; that they aren't just happy, they look as if they can hardly believe their luck, they are all talking at once, pointing excitedly and yet respectfully, as if he were a stranded emperor. They keep up a constant stream of chatter, smiling broadly. He doesn't know what to make of it all. He says something. None of them speak English. They point to the sand, the palms, the reef offshore, nod their heads. They point to his tropical duds, laugh, point to his sunglasses, his hat. 'Matareva,' they say again and again. And then, pointing to him: 'Mr Morgan.'

Jonas introduced himself, pronouncing his name slowly, said that he was from Norway, repeated this in all the languages he knew, said that he studied the stars: this was at a little-known period in his life when Jonas Wergeland was attending classes at the Institute of Theoretical Astrophysics. He pointed to the sky, pronounced the words 'Southern Cross', and wasn't it true, he said, or tried to say that these islands were home to master navigators who sailed by the so-called 'star paths', the *kaveinga*? They merely laughed, not understanding a word, smiled, bowed, went through the motions of embracing an imaginary woman, mimicking romantic scenes. 'Mr Morgan,' they insisted. Jonas waved his hands in protest, but it made no difference; their expressions said he couldn't fool them; they knew who he was. So when Jonas heard the sound of a bus in the distance he jabbed at his watch and excused himself, then jogged off through the grove and up to the road. The men followed him beckoning, as if inviting him to come with them to the village. He mimed a polite no, but this did not stop them from staying with him until the bus drew up, and when he waved goodbye, it was clear from their gestures that they were urging him to come back soon.

Jonas put the whole incident out of his mind until his penultimate day on the island. He had hitchhiked a ride on a yacht bound for Fiji; he would have to leave earlier than planned. On impulse he grabbed something from his bag and caught the bus back to the village. He got there an hour before sundown. The littlest children spotted him straight away and led him around smoking cooking fires and through the aroma of baked taro to the headman's *fale*, to an elderly man lying on a mat with his head on a neck rest. When the formalities had been got out of the way Jonas was once more addressed by one of the young men from the beach – Jonas guessed that he must be the headman's son – and then invited to enter his *fale*. Before long more men appeared. Jonas was ushered to one of the mats inside the hut.

an open construction sitting on a coral-stone platform, with a roof made from the leaves of the coconut palm. The others sat down, smiled at him as they had done before. One of them touched him as if to check whether he was real. Beyond the uprights of the hut a bunch of kids followed the proceedings. A woman brought in a bowl of kava. As far as Jonas could make out this was not a traditional kava ceremony, they had some other reason for passing the half coconut shell to him, as sealing a contract, or celebrating something that went beyond any stretch of his imagination, but he drank, he drank and nodded, felt it behove him to do so, drank the greyish-white liquid which tasted chalky and made his whole mouth numb. The men sat cross-legged, speaking sometimes to him, sometimes to one another, Jonas made out certain words: 'Mataveva' cropped up again and again, and 'Mr Morgan'. Jonas also thought he heard Gary Cooper's name mentioned more than once. He remembered that a number of films had been shot on the island and things began to fall into place.

As darkness fell some women came in carrying freshly cooked dishes wrapped in banana leaves and woven coconut-fibre baskets of fruit. The sky was the colour of the hibiscus blossoms they wore in their hair. Soon the stars, too, appeared: unfamiliar constellations, seeming to offer endless possibilities for new ways of navigating. Jonas realized that he was a guest of honour. That this was not an ordinary act of Samoan hospitality. No, it was more than that. They mistook him for someone else. He did not know who or what. Nor whether there was any risk attached to this case of mistaken identity. The men chattered incessantly, eyed him closely, nodded, smiled. He was an empty shell. They piled things into him. They turned him into someone else, a great man perhaps. All he did was to put up no resistance, make no protest.

Someone lit a paraffin lamp that hung from the ceiling. An array of dishes was set before him. He recognized fish in leaves, possibly octopus too, together with some indeterminate creamy paste. He spotted baked breadfruit, slices of taro in coconut milk, papaya and whole pineapples – he had no idea what the other things were. One person kept wafting the flies away from the food. Another brought him a dented cup containing some sort of cocoa.

The men cast curious glances at Jonas as he ate. On one of them he could see the edge of a bare tattoo, the rest was concealed by his *lava-lava*. Maybe it was the glimpse of this strange design, either that or the night sky – that brought home to him something he had, without knowing it, learned from Carl Barks's traveller's tales: that we will always have the wrong idea about other cultures. We can never really understand them. We think we have understood something, but in fact we understand nothing.

The talk flew back and forth around him, the word 'Hollywood' cropped up at regular intervals, and by putting two and two together Jonas suddenly grasped that, despite his youth, they thought he was a director, a film director searching for a location for a film. They thought he meant to choose the beach. He felt laughter well up inside him. Or was it fear? How amazing. They took him for a film director. Or so he thought. And in that instant Jonas Wergeland knew why he had come here: he had come here to be part of this very experience, to sit on a mat in a *fale* under a mind-reeling, star-studded sky and be treated like a great man, a film director. And suddenly all his embarrassment was gone and instead he found himself seeing this entire, grandiose misapprehension as an edifying experience, as something important, something from which he had to learn. This experience might prove to be every bit as valuable as a black pearl, he thought.

Jonas sat listening to a distant song, not knowing how to thank his hosts for their hospitality. But he did as he always did on such visits, a gesture which also accorded well with what was expected of Samoa. He gave them a present. The same present as always. When Jonas Wergeland went on his travels he invariably took with him a G-MAN saw, a frame and a blade, a product for which he



family, or at any rate his mother, was, in a manner of speaking, responsible. So now he presented a ~~C~~  
~~MAN~~ saw from the Grorud Ironmongers to these natives on an island in Samoa, in the South Pacific.

When Jonas stood at the rail of the yacht the next day, having spent the night in a palm-thatched hut before taking the bus back to town; when Jonas stood there and watched Apia and the rest of the island dwindling to nothing – tropical green sinking into blue – he felt relieved, happy. The previous evening he had lain awake, gazing out between the wooden uprights of the hut, and he carried away with him the memory of that vast, glittering night sky, which also represented an acknowledgment of the infinite potential for other names, other paths to take through the stars. And now, as ‘Utopia’ vanished from view, he also found it possible to laugh at the whole crazy episode, although he could not rid himself of the thought that deep down there had been a danger there too, that one wrong word, one wrong move could have spelled disaster for him. He thanked God, in a way, that he had escaped before the misunderstanding had been discovered.

On the other hand his heart was heavy. He had a feeling that this confusion, being mistaken for someone else, was a formative experience, that in different guises this incident would keep on recurring throughout his life. His despondency was prompted by the thought that perhaps he should not bemoan this fact: that it was, on the contrary, his only hope.

Jonas Wergeland stood on the deck of a boat and watched a Polynesian island disappear. He had left Norway with hardware and was returning with software, to use terms that were not common parlance back then. You set out carrying goods and come back with ideas. And unlike Erik Damman Jonas Wergeland did not return home with a Utopian ideal of Norway, of a new way of life, but with a Utopian ideal of himself. This might be a side of himself – the great director, metaphorically speaking – of which he knew nothing. Maybe, he thought, I’ve been wrong about myself all this time.

And somehow Jonas sensed that this journey was not over, that no journey is ever over, that they go on, that, like Carl Barks’s most thrilling adventures, they often end with a ‘to be contd.’.

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## The Pursuit of Immortality

The natural thing would, therefore, be to proceed to the trip to Jerevan, but if we're to follow the sequence I have in mind – that sequence that will, I hope, explain everything – then this is not the place for it. Nor for the story of the stamps, which another – dare I say? – less seasoned narrator might have presented at this point. Here, instead, we must turn to another island. This same thought had also occurred to Jonas Wergeland himself while he was in Samoa: that all the seashells around him reminded him of the large, burnished shells in the parlour of the house on Hvaler, souvenirs of his paternal grandfather's seafaring days, shells which, when Jonas held one to each ear, brought him the sound of the sea in stereo.

Jonas was not always alone with his grandfather on the island at the mouth of the fjord. His cousin Veronika Røed, was often there too, especially in the last summers before they both started school, the house being just as much the childhood home of her father, known as Sir William because of his way of dressing and his aristocratic leanings. There were the two of them, Jonas and Veronika, and the grandfather. Just them and a storybook island abounding with treasure and dragons, with hedgehogs and kittens and bowls of milk, with baking hot rocks and jetties where you could spend half the day fishing for a troll crab only, when you finally caught it, to let it go again.

They often went out in the rowboat. Jonas loved to watch his grandfather rowing, loved to hear the rasp of skin on wood, the creak of the rowlocks; Jonas would sit on the thwart, admiring his grandfather's technique, noting how he flicked the blades of the oars and rested on each stroke, rowing with a rhythm that seemed to take no effort and made Jonas feel that they could go on rowing for ever. Actually, it was a funny thing about his grandfather's rowing: he didn't row forward, as was usual, but backed the oars, rowed backward so to speak, or rather, the reverse – he said it was easier that way.

Jonas's grandfather had once built a model of a Colin Archer lifeboat, an exact replica with the red Maltese Cross ringed in blue on the bow and all, and sometimes they would gently set this in the water. When the wind filled the tiny sails it would sail so well that, seen against the right bit of the background, it could have been taken for a real boat. They would row alongside it, and Jonas played that they were gods, watching over it, that his grandfather was Poseidon and he and Veronika his attendants. Which was not so far from the truth, because to Jonas his grandfather really was a god.

It was also while pottering about on the boats that their grandfather taught the children to tie knots: first a half-hitch and a bowline, then more complicated rope techniques such as splicing. He even showed them how to tie a double Turk's Head, the sort of boy-scout knot that Daniel tied in his Cub neckerchief. Veronika slipped the knotted rope onto her finger and gave Jonas a funny look: 'Now we're engaged,' she said. Jonas had nothing against that. They were the same age, and Veronika was prettier than anybody else he knew, even darker and sultrier than Little Eagle's mother.

That summer Jonas was often to be found sitting against the sunbaked wall of the shed, looping bits of rope together. There was one particularly tricky knot which he never mastered: a clove hitch which had he got it right, would have been almost as intricate in appearance as the drawings that Aunt Laura, the family's artistic alibi, had shown him, with Arabic characters intertwining in such a way that it looked like a labyrinth. Far easier, and really just as lovely was the square knot. Jonas could n

understand how two simple loops could produce something so strong. He never forgot how to do square knot, not after his grandfather taught him how to tie it by telling him a story about two wrestlers and how the one wrestler won both times.

But then Omar Hansen told stories almost non-stop, more often than not in the blue kitchen, in the room as full of gleaming copper as an Oriental bazaar. And sometimes when his grandfather was telling a story Jonas was allowed to pound cardamom pods in a brass mortar: spice to be added to the dough for buns. There was nothing quite like it, those thrilling tales combined with the knowledge that they would soon be having freshly baked buns. On his arm, his grandfather had a tattoo of a dragon done in Shanghai, so he said, and before starting a story he always rolled up his shirtsleeves. 'The dragon has to have air under its wings if the imagination is to soar freely,' he said. And whether it was the dragon's flight that helped him or not, Omar Hansen never ran out of stories, he could go on telling them for as long as he could row; he seemed to have lived all his life for only this: to sit one day in a blue kitchen with saucer-eyed grandchildren sitting opposite him. And as he spun his yarn, each one more amazing than the one before, he peered at a point that seemed somehow beyond time and space, in such a way that fine wrinkles fanned out from his eyes to his temples, as if he were also actually, endeavouring to twine these tales into one enormous clove hitch, into the story, the crucial knot, that lay behind all the others and bound them together.

One day, when old Arnt had been left to keep an eye on Jonas and Veronika, Omar Hansen came back home from Strömstad – which is to say, all the way from Sweden – with a new treat, a wondrous thing: a peach. These days, when tropical fruit is taken for granted in Norway, when you can buy anything from mangoes to kiwis just about anywhere, no one would give it a second thought, but those days peaches were a rarity – Jonas had certainly never seen one, nor had Veronika; they had eaten canned peaches with whipped cream on one occasion, but this was something quite different: this was the real thing. Their grandfather laid the peach on a silver platter. 'This peach is from Italy,' he said. 'But originally the peach comes all the way from China.'

It was one of the most beautiful things Jonas had ever seen: that groove in the flesh, the golden skin blushing pink on the one side. Their grandfather let them touch it, and Jonas held it tenderly, savouring the feel of the velvety surface; it reminded him of the fuzzy-felt pictures in Sunday School. From that day onwards he had no problem understanding how a complexion could be described as 'peachy'. Grandfather said it had to sit a while longer, it wasn't absolutely perfect yet. 'We'll share it tomorrow,' he said and solemnly placed the peach back on its silver platter.

They sat round the oilcloth-covered table, gazing at the fruit, which seemed almost to hover above the silver platter, while Omar Hansen outdid himself with a story featuring Marco Polo as its central character and Jonas and Veronika as his armour-bearers – or perhaps it was the other way round – and this peach as one of the props; it had something to do with a city in China called Changlu and a battle about the pursuit of immortality, a thrilling adventure, almost as thrilling as the peach itself.

Late that night – a warm, almost tropical night – after they had gone to bed, Veronika padded upstairs to where Jonas lay in the old bed in a small room in the attic. It's not easy to describe the relationship between two children, but there was something between Jonas and Veronika, something which caused their lips automatically to bump together when they played hide-and-seek in the dark under the barn, or when they came face to face in the tunnels formed by the dense tangle of juniper bushes on Tower Hill.

Outside of Jonas's room, the wide loft extended like a wilderness beyond the bounds of civilization. Here, old clothes hung over battered trunks plastered with labels from exotic cities, and weather-beaten chests from Zanzibar full of faded copies of *Allers Family Journal* and *The Illustrated*

*Weekly.* And in one corner, under some nets, stood the most mysterious thing of all: an old safe, heavy and forbidding. An unopened treasure.

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At the other end of the loft, deep in shadow, loomed a harmonium – what in Norway used to be called a ‘hymn-bike’ – a memento of their grandmother who had, by all accounts, been a God-fearing woman whose heart had burned for the mission service. Actually it was on this instrument that Jonas’s father had begun his musical career, one that had since led him to the organ in Grorud Church. When it was light, Jonas had been known to slip into the shadows and play triads, his feet pumping away on the pedals for dear life. It surprised him to find what a lot of noise it made; he pulled out some knobs and observed how more keys than he had fingers for were then pressed down, as if an invisible spirit were sitting playing alongside him. His grandmother, Jonas thought. The choral songbook, which for a long time he had believed to be full of songs about the sea and fish, was still there, shrouded appropriately enough – in gloom and open at her favourite hymn ‘Lead, Kindly Light’.

Jonas sits up in bed, can tell right away what Veronika has in mind. She cuddles up close to him wearing a thin cotton nightdress with blue dolphins on it. ‘Why do we have to wait till tomorrow to eat the peach?’ she says, smelling like no one else: sweet, confusing. Jonas isn’t sure, he wavers: ‘But Granddad has to have a bit too, doesn’t he?’ he says. ‘He’s going to let us have it all anyway,’ she says. ‘Couldn’t you at least go and get it?’

Jonas tiptoes down to the kitchen, stands for a moment on the linoleum floor gazing in awe at the fruit on its silver platter, hovering in the bright summer night. A planet called China. He feels the pull it exerts on him. As if they belong together, he and the peach. He is Marco Polo. He picks it up and climbs back up to the loft, places it on the sheet in front of Veronika. They look at it. Jonas thinks it is divinely beautiful.

From an early age Jonas was always on the lookout for objects that were more than they seemed, things that in some way illustrated something he could not put into words. At home he had taken the works out of an old alarm clock. They sat on top of the chest of drawers. A tiny, transparent factory. He liked to look at the gears inside the metal frame, how the cogs turned, how they meshed with one another, not to mention the balance wheel, which pulsed like a little heart. Most mysterious of all was the spring, the spiral that powered all the cogs by slowly expanding. A coiled steel sling. ‘The only thing that spoils it a bit,’ Jonas told Little Eagle, ‘is that the works have to be wound up, that they don’t run by themselves all the time.’

Daniel had a similar set of clock workings, but he, of course, just had to try to unscrew the frame with the result that bits went flying in all directions, a bit like splinters from an exploding shell. Jonas had gazed respectfully at the spring lying on the floor, ostensibly harmless and insignificant, almost a yard in length. He saw what force, what driving force it possessed. The secret lay simply in coiling it up.

The peach had some of this same quality about it. A tension. As of something compressed and yet capable of expansion.

‘Take off your clothes,’ Veronika says. Jonas does as he is told, tells himself that the peach demands this, it is a crystal ball which will not reveal anything if he keeps on his pyjamas. Veronika promptly puts one warm hand around his balls. Jonas watches in amazement as his penis rises up, skinny and eager. She puts the other hand around the peach and shuts her eyes. Then she lifts the peach to his mouth. Jonas feels the soft, furred skin against his lips: down, velvet, silk, all at once. He is filled with a fierce hunger. He’s got to have a bite of this fruit. The juice runs down his chin as he sinks his teeth into the skin. It’s good, deliriously good. Veronika takes a bite before offering it to him again. They take bites turn and turn about, sharing it, with her hand cupped around his balls all the

while.

Later in life, Jonas would say that nothing could hold a candle to those first bites of a peach. It was a delight, a treat, the like of which he would never experience again – not even when he dined at Bagatelle in Oslo, in those days the first and only restaurant in Norway to be awarded two stars in the Michelin guide. As the juice and the flesh glided over his tongue and down his throat Jonas felt a glow emanating from the very cortex of his brain, along with a taste in his mouth, which gave him a sinking inkling of continents, spheres, of which he knew nothing.

Veronika looked adorable, sitting there in her flimsy nightie with its pattern of blue dolphins. Jonas beheld the soft lines of her body, her ankles, calves, the blonde hairs on her arms, brown summer skin covered in golden down. They snuggled up together, taking turns to eat, licking and sucking up every shred, every drop.

At last all that was left was the stone. It looked like a minuscule, worm-eaten brain. ‘Can I have it?’ he asked, not knowing whether it was because the stone looked nice, or because he wanted to make sure that the evidence of the theft lay in his hands, even though he knew they could never wangle their way out of this particular jam.

Veronika let go of his balls, lifted up her nightie. She wasn’t wearing any panties. She displayed her genitals. Jonas sat quite still and took in this sight, didn’t touch her, just sat and looked, studying those lines, the gentle swelling, the fleshy softness, the dark slit. She spread those fleshy lips and showed him the inside. It occurred to him that the clitoris – not that he knew that word for it, of course – was a sort of fruit kernel. That this too lay at the heart of something juicy, a fruit, something that could cause the cortex of the brain to glow. At the same time, for some reason he thought of the Turk’s Head knot, saw this thing before him as a knot, a circular knot. Veronika slid her finger a little way into her slit, or knot, then stuck it into Jonas’s mouth. ‘Now we’re spliced forever,’ she said. ‘Now nothing can part us.’

Jonas slept soundly that night and wasn’t really feeling at all guilty when he came down for breakfast. Veronika and their grandfather were already sitting in the blue kitchen, staring at each other in mutual sorrow at the empty silver platter. Jonas knew right away that his cousin had told the grandfather a tale in which all the blame rested with him, Jonas, alone – all alone; no matter what he said, he would not be believed. So he said nothing. They ate in silence, bread with cold mackerel from dinner the day before, and he was on the verge of telling a story, but he couldn’t bring himself to do so. He realized that the story was no good.

And afterwards? I don’t know what to say about what happened afterwards, Professor. It would be far too easy to psychoanalyse it. His grandfather was calm, he was perfectly calm when he went out into the forest with a knife: ‘Only one thing’ll do any good here – and that’s a good old-fashioned taste of the birch,’ as he said; he was calm when he took Jonas up to the attic and demonstrated the use of the birch twigs on the boy’s bare backside, rolled up his sleeves, giving Jonas the feeling that it was the tattooed dragon that was angry, that lashed and lashed at his behind; his grandfather brought down the birch again and again, beating steadily, with the same rhythm as when he rowed, as if he could keep it up for hours, but it was this very calmness that vouchsafed Jonas a glimpse of the towering rage, the almost berserker-like frenzy beneath the surface. There was something altogether a little too relentless, a little too self-righteous, a little too much solemn conviction in the blows his grandfather rained down on Jonas’s behind. For, no matter how he looked at it, Jonas could not see how the eating of this peach, however cheated his grandfather might feel, could justify a grown man with a lifetime of experience behind him putting a terrified little boy over his knee and thrashing him – on his bare behind, at that, and for a long time, for far too long – with a bundle of birch twigs, ceasing only ju

before the skin broke and the blood ran. It was a brutal, nigh-on wicked act, thought Jonas, you though he was. And it was during those seconds that it dawned on him that there was something wrong, possibly even seriously wrong, with his grandfather. That behind all those stories and yarns behind the patient backward rowing, there lurked some dark secret, a tricky, inextricable knot. And this suspicion grew no less when his grandfather stood up and gave a sort of a sigh before walking over to the harmonium in the shadows and, with his back to Jonas, proceeded to play 'Lead, Kindly Light'.

Don't put down your pen, Professor, I'm not finished. Because even when it hurt the most, Jonas knew that it was worth it. He would have done it again. For he had eaten the peach not just to find out how it tasted but also for another reason: to feed a craving that was more than physical hunger – just as the clock workings on the chest of drawers at home were more than just clock workings – and suddenly he knew that he was willing to endure a great deal in order to satisfy that craving. As he lay there, feeling the birch twigs strike his backside again and again, he sensed a mysterious power building up inside him, and when his grandfather allowed him to get up he felt a jolt run through his body, as if he had taken a huge leap forward, aged several years in one minute.

The next day, just for fun, he tried to tie that trickiest of knots, the labyrinthine clove hitch, and got it right first time, as if he had been doing it all his life, as if he suddenly had those twists and turns of the rope at his fingertips.

Jonas kept the peach stone. He made believe that it was a dragon's brain. Dragons had tiny brains, he knew, but they could harbour a secret, like the safe in the corner of the loft. A pearl, maybe. One day, with Veronika standing over him, he crushed it with a hammer and found another kernel inside the stone, something like an almond. 'Would you like to have it?' he asked Veronika.

'If you plant it in the ground, it'll grow into a dragon,' she said. 'Come on, I know a place in the woods, just next to our rope ladder.' And on the way there she stays him and, with what might almost have been tears in her eyes, says: 'Did it hurt?'

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## The Vertebral Disc

Allow me, in this connection – and remember: the connections between the stories in a life are as important as the stories themselves – to tell you about a time when Jonas Wergeland felt real hurt or, more correctly, about an incident which took place in the midst of that pain. It happened in that emotionally charged year of the EEC referendum, the year when Jonas Wergeland was due to sit his university Prelim – although the thought of sitting an exam seemed the farthest thing from his mind, not to say an absolute impossibility, at that time. He found himself at the northern end of Norway's largest lake, in the 'dayroom' of a hospital, to be more exact, one of those rooms which, with their spartan, simulated cosiness seem more depressing and godforsaken than any other place on earth. As a small boy, whenever he saw a diagram of the human circulatory system Jonas would think to himself that the heart must be like a knot, and that was how it felt now. A knot tightening. Jonas Wergeland sat there, swollen-eyed, twisting a handkerchief round his fingers. Outside it was winter, and dark – a dark and impenetrable as life when it seems most pointless.

Jonas thought he was alone, but when he looked up, as if through water, there she was. She took him as much by surprise as a car you haven't seen in your wing mirror, one that's been in the blind spot but which suddenly appears, seemingly materializing out of thin air, when you turn your head. He felt like asking her to go away, had a truculent 'Piss off!' on the tip of his tongue, but bit it back. He shut his eyes. He sniffed. It sometimes occurred to Jonas that the reason he didn't take up smoking was because he was afraid he would lose the ability to inhale women: to let their scent flow into his bloodstream and excite visions. He had caught a whiff of this scent before, in Viktor's room.

She spoke to him: 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'No,' Jonas said – curbing his irritation: 'No, thanks.' He kept his eyes shut, as if the world would grow even darker if he opened them.

But she didn't go away, she sat down on a chair next to him and placed her hand over his, thinking perhaps that he was a patient. She said nothing. Jonas inhaled her scent. Even with his eyes shut, even amid a maelstrom of black thoughts, he felt something seize hold of him, not of his hand but of his body, that something was drawing him to it, was intent on worming its way inside him: her, the unknown woman.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

He kept his eyes shut, his head bowed, thought first of leaving, but something made him stay, made him speak, say something, tearfully to begin with, but without it being embarrassing, about his best friend, about himself and Viktor, about the Three Wise Men, the bare bones only but enough for her to possibly – to grasp the magnitude of the disaster. She said not a word, simply sat with her hand on his. Jonas had the feeling that her hand led to light.

When she gets to her feet he looks up. The first thing he sees is a high forehead. Rationality, he thinks. Exactly what I need right now: rationality. A white coat hangs open over her indoor clothes. Her badge reveals that her name is Johanne A. She has just come off duty, is on her way out, home. She nods, gives him a searching look before walking off down the corridor. He follows her with his eyes, feels a faint pressure on his spine, a pressure that spreads throughout his body, like a tremor.

the nervous system.

~~Jonas skived off school and stayed for some days in Lillehammer, in a town he would always hate.~~ He met Johanne A. again. She was in her mid-twenties, a resident on the surgical ward – this was her first post. She told him what the neurologist had said about Viktor, about the depth of the coma and the swelling. Viktor was still on a respirator in intensive care. She explained the uncertainty of his condition, what treatment they were giving him, how things were likely to go from here. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘But there’s nothing more we can do.’

Shortly before he was due to return home to Oslo, Jonas was sitting on a bench in the Swaen Chemist’s Shop on Storgata, staring listlessly at a wall hung with portraits of generations of chemists. All chemists’ shops reminded Jonas of his maternal grandmother, because always, on trips into town with her, they would purchase a mysterious ointment at the chemist’s, the apothecary, on Stortorvet in Oslo – that one, too, with a swan on its façade: the symbol of immortality. And every time they stepped inside that shop his grandmother would throw up her hands in delight at the sight of the tiled floors, the pillars of creamy-coloured marble and a ceiling decorated with symbolic paintings; and while they were waiting she would tell Jonas about the fine old fittings of mahogany and American maple, with drawers of solid oak. ‘Like a temple to medicine,’ she would whisper. For this reason Jonas always felt there was something rather antiquated – something holy, almost – about chemists’ shops, also now, here in Lillehammer. There was also something about the atmosphere of the place, the odour of creosote, of aniseed and essential oils, which reinforced this sense of a bygone, somewhat alchemical, age. Even so, as he was washing down a headache tablet with a drink of water, he instantly recognized that other scent, it was as if he had been caught up in a whirlpool. He turned around. It was her. And there was something about Johanne A.’s figure, her dress and, above all, her high forehead that made her seem utterly anachronistic in those surroundings, like an astronaut in the middle ages. Nonetheless, he knew that there was a connection between her and the chemist’s shop. Or to put it another way: all of Jonas Wergeland’s women represented an encounter with the past.

Johanne A. invited him back to her place for coffee. She lived above the hospital, not far from the open-air museum at Maihaugen. They strolled up the hill. It was cold; it was growing dark. She was wearing a big hat, the sort of hat that made heads turn. In the hall Jonas noticed a shelf holding several other eye-catching pieces of headgear.

The flat was furnished in an unusual style: ‘avant-garde’ was the word that sprang to Jonas’s mind. The furniture in the sitting room looked more like works of art, architectonic concepts sculpted in chairs and storage units. The lighting too was highly original: little flying saucers hovering over glass-topped tables. Products from Bang & Olufsen – a television set and an expensive, metallic stereo system – seemed to belong to a universe unlike any Jonas had ever seen. Jars, vases, ashtrays – even the salt and pepper shakers on the shelf between the kitchen and the sitting room – appeared to have been designed for the atomic age. Jonas felt as if he had stepped into a laboratory, a room which proclaimed that here, within these walls, some sort of experiment was being carried out. ‘The world is progressing,’ was all she said when she noticed the way his eyes ran round the room in astonishment, occasionally glancing out of the window, at the old buildings on the hill, the vestiges of tarred-browed medieval Norway only a stone’s throw away.

She poured coffee for him from a transparent jug in which the grounds were pressed down to the bottom by a shining strainer. He pointed to an old microscope over by the window. ‘I’ve had that since I was a child,’ she said. ‘Pasteur was my great hero. These days, of course, viruses are the thing, electron microscopes.’ For a long time, while at university, she had considered a future as a research scientist but had abandoned this idea, was happy where she was now, expected to end up in general



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