

The Wedding

Travelling to his son's wedding, he is looking out of the train window. Although the sky is leaden, it is still not raining. He sees fields with brown, stooping sunflowers, full-grown maize, dry stubble left by harvesters; he sees collapsed barn roofs, caravans parked at the roadside, a deep-green forest that starts at the bottom of the valley, down by the river, stretching up past the ridge where two cars are following an invisible farm road: slowly, their lights on, like glow-worms.

Flying would have been quicker. Much quicker. But in less than two hours he will arrive in the small French town, where – for reasons he has failed to grasp – the wedding is to take place; and his son will be waiting on the platform, just like he himself waited so many times in the past when his son came home from school in town and needed a lift from the station; and if he's lucky, his son is better at remembering appointments than he himself used to be.

Diagonally opposite him, his back to the engine, a young man is sitting, thirty perhaps, or thirty-five – his son's age. The man boarded at one of the very first stations; there were still plenty of empty seats and yet he sat down just there, diagonally opposite him, as if they were acquaintances or the carriage was already nearly full. Not only did it feel intrusive, there was something unpleasant about the man's face that put him on his guard; and it is partly to avoid striking up a conversation or other contact with this man that he is sitting like this, looking out of the window. Now darkness is falling; soon there will be no refuge in the window, soon he, and certainly the other man, will be uncomfortably present in it.

He is well aware that he has been invited for the sake of appearances. The bride must have insisted, or her parents; or, more likely, his son has realised that Helga would have insisted, and, like himself, his son can hardly, yet, have got over Helga.

He ignores the emerging contours of his own reflection and tries to distinguish the river from its banks in the dark. He thinks of his suitcase under the luggage rack in the corridor, of what is inside it, of how his son will react to the gift. For this time, instead of declining, or turning up out of sheer politeness and disappearing as soon as possible, he has decided to seize the opportunity: Perhaps is it still not too late to do something, say something, for Helga's sake, if nothing else, for the sake of her memory.

The train slows down. A middle-aged woman gets up, puts on her coat, lifts a bag down from the rack above the windows and moves towards the exit. Outside, low buildings and street lamps come into view, there is a squealing of brakes as the train

glides into the station. The name of the town is lit up by white neon lighting; on the platform, like shadows in the advancing darkness, people are waiting. He sees the middle-aged woman clamber laboriously down from the footboard onto the platform, now carrying a suitcase as well; perhaps it isn't hers, he thinks, perhaps she's just taken one she liked the look of. Once more he remembers the gift, and the suitcase it is lying in, which is new and of genuine leather – he should have chosen a different one, cheaper, uglier. And even though he knows it's ridiculous, he starts to follow people's movements on the platform: make a note of who is leaving the train, their sex, age, appearance, what they are carrying, he becomes so obsessed with this that he forgets, for a moment, the young man, not until the train sets in motion again does he discover the man's reflection in the window-pane. And because it is not really him the man is looking at but his reflection in the glass, their gazes meet there, in the window, for a short, uncomfortable moment.

He gets up, so suddenly that he himself finds it embarrassing, and goes towards the exit to fetch his suitcase. It is standing precisely where he left it, on the floor under the rack. He bends down and pulls it towards him. It is quite large, and heavy; his dinner jacket had to be included, a pair of good shoes, a travel-iron, toiletries. He hauls it into the compartment, pulling it carefully after him between the rows of seats while the door glides shut behind him and the noise from the corridor dies away. And although he is tempted to choose another seat, he has left his coat where he was sitting; so he goes back and tries, clumsily and unsuccessfully, to lift the suitcase up onto the rack above the window.

'Let me help you.'

The young man is standing next to him. His accent, not French, more like Polish, East European, is pronounced. He takes hold of the suitcase with strong hands and it becomes light, flies up onto the rack, settles in position.

The stranger stands for a moment, considering the result; the suitcase is really too big, jutting out from the rack.

'I think it is OK,' he says with a smile.

The smile lingers a second too long: an artificial smile, affected. And it is this smile that reminds him, once more, of Yngve, his son, and the wedding; for although this East European admittedly does not look like Yngve – Yngve has lighter hair, less reddish skin, Yngve's face is regular, more handsome – this quick smile is something he recognises, the beggar's smile, this hope of approval, or at least acceptance, the understanding that acceptance is unlikely to materialise.

He nods briefly at the Pole and just as in the old days his body starts automatically to cheat on him. He knows it is time to take in a breath, knows that it must be done

calmly, without a sound, knows that he must soon remember to breathe out again. He sits down with his gaze fixed firmly in front of him, registers out of the corner of his eye that the Pole also sits down, he doesn't know why a stranger smiles at him like that, doesn't know why his own son still, on the rare occasions when they meet, smiles at him like that.

The compartment is quiet. He closes his eyes, tries to rest his jaw muscles. After a little while he registers an irregular murmuring that increases in strength, accompanied by a distant rumbling sound, as if a pile of something heavy is falling over somewhere else in the train. He opens his eyes and realises, from the wriggling streaks on the window-pane, gleaming in the light from the compartment, that what he hears is rain against the roof of the train, rain and thunder. His son was always afraid of thunder. He would run into his room and hide under the duvet, screaming with fear; and he and Helga would stand outside the door, both of them angry, shouting at each other: '*Pull yourself together*', he would shout at her, 'how's he to know it isn't dangerous if we behave as if it was,' and she would cry out: 'Let me in!' tearing herself away from him, running over to the boy to take him in her arms, while he would be left standing there alone outside, in the corridor. 'There, there,' he would hear her say. 'My little boy. Look, here's Rabbit. See? Rabbit's afraid too. He was looking for you. Look, Rabbit, here's Yngve, you see? Now you're with Yngve. Now you don't need to feel afraid any more, Rabbit. There, there. Everything's fine.' And Yngve would snuffle, his convulsive sobbing ending in a couple of final, uncontrolled gasps, he would stroke the nylon fur of Rabbit's head and whisper: 'Poor Rabbit. He was so afraid.'

When he stood like that, outside the child's bedroom door, he always tried to think that this was as it should be: each of them had their separate assignments, Helga, him – clearly she should comfort the boy, just as clearly he must try and prevent her while the boy may overhear it, let him understand that his father believed in him, knew that he was strong. But later, when both Helga and Yngve had fallen asleep, he would sometimes get out of bed without a sound, not to wake them, tiptoe into the child's room and stand there in front of the bed and watch Yngve sleeping, bend down over the boy, quietly, to catch the smell of his breath.

It was the disease that took her. It wasn't his fault. Even so, he can't rid himself of the thought that he himself, in some way, must have broken down her powers of resistance, just as he also must have broken down his own; he hasn't been to the doctor yet, but he's not stupid, birthmarks shouldn't grow that rapidly, become so lumpy and black as the one he has on his back. Presumably it's the sun, radiation against unprotected skin, he's been a lot in the sun; and he sees himself going home

from the beach with Yngve, who is five or six years old, both of them in shorts and bare-chested, and Yngve walks behind him, keeping in time with his father's steps, as in single file, and he suddenly stops, turns round, so that the boy crashes straight into him, and says loudly: 'For heaven's sake, do you *have* to keep time with me?' And Yngve shakes his head, blinks, looks down, they continue, him in front, Yngve behind him, he doesn't turn round again but knows, senses, that the boy is keeping an eye on his feet, making small, strange leaps so as not to keep in time.

Helga was there of course. Helga filled in the distance. Helga could have filled in any distance. But the years passed and Yngve grew tall and thin and not strong, he became weak, someone who shied away and looked at the floor, someone who only rarely approached his father and then with that begging look, and one evening it went too far, not just one evening, many, but this evening has become engrained in his memory, and it was him, not the boy, who went too far, he realises that now. The boy had been mobbed on his way from school and they could hear him crying after bedtime, Helga went in and sat with him; he himself was left standing outside, yet again, passive, helpless, listening to those sobs, to Helga's whispering, and finally he couldn't stand it any longer, he marched in to them, nauseous, indignant, switched on the ceiling light, wrenched the toy rabbit from the boy's arms and held it up in front of his face, close, one centimetre or so from the boy's forehead, shouting: '*Do you know what this is?*'. They stared at him, Helga and Yngve, neither of them moved. '*A cuddle cloth,*' he shouted, his own voice fuelling him, setting something loose in him, '*Do you know what I'm going to do with it?*' he screamed, '*Right now? I'm going to burn it, Yngve.*'

Back home in the flat there hangs a photograph with glass and a simple silver frame, taken twenty-eight years ago by the photographer in Main Street. Helga is sitting on a chair with Yngve on her lap, both of them are smiling, he is standing behind them, with his hand on her shoulder, the expression on his face can hardly be called a smile, that would be an exaggeration. He sits by the train window and in his mind's eye sees this hand on her shoulder and he remembers the first time he came home to an empty house, when the funeral was over and Yngve had left, how he just stood there staring at this photograph, telling himself that she was dead, only her, not Yngve.

It is Rabbit that's lying in the suitcase. It is wrapped in glossy, dark blue paper, with a silvery silk ribbon round it, tied with an elegant bow. He has spent a whole day going from one shop to the next in search of wrapping paper that wasn't too childish, too feminine, learning the knack of folding down, where to place the sticky tape, how to curl the synthetic ribbon, to tie the silk ribbon, he has been sitting at his desk

trying over and over again, various types of paper, various ribbons, various foldings, until he was, at last, reasonably satisfied. He has never told them, neither Helga nor Yngve, that when he saw the worn toy animal lying there, back then, in the narrow, sooty fireplace, while the match flared up between his fingers and the smell of sulphur caught his nose, that his courage failed him; and even though he put the match up to it and opened the vent, and there was a lively fire there the rest of the evening, he first removed the rabbit and hid it in the briefcase; and the following morning, at the office, he locked it in the safe, where it has lain ever since. The tail and one of its ears are still black with soot; he hasn't washed it, he was afraid it would change too much.

He listens to the rain against the roof of the carriage, his eyes are closed, a great fatigue descends on him. We're going to a wedding, Rabbit, he thinks, you and me.

He wakes up, disoriented and without the slightest idea of how long he has slept. It is dark outside, rain is pouring down. The train is standing still. He has been dreaming. He can't remember what.

He sees a few houses; it must be a small place. He sees no station name. Perhaps they have passed his station. Perhaps this is his station. He will have to ask somebody. He will ask the Pole, bite back his reluctance and ask the Pole. He turns round, opens his mouth and feels a growing sense of panic, the Pole isn't there. The compartment is empty. There is no one he can ask.

Once again he tries to locate a sign outside, a place name, without success. Then he catches sight of the Pole, out on the platform, in the rain. He barely recognises the man in the darkness; he is carrying a shoulder-bag and a large suitcase, glancing in through the train windows as if searching for someone, the shoulders of his coat stained with moisture, his hair already sticking to his skull. He comes closer. He is right outside. Their eyes meet. The Pole smiles, the artificial smile, waves with his free hand, turns, goes off. It is his own suitcase the Pole is carrying, the suitcase with the present.

He doesn't stop to think, weigh up the pros and cons, he runs towards the exit, manages to open the door and get off, down onto the footboard, down onto the platform. The Pole has disappeared. Rain strikes the top of his head, his face, his neck. He starts to run, in the direction he saw the Pole leave, the asphalt is covered with water, spurting up at every step he takes, he hears a sound and turns round: just in time to see the conductor wave his green light and board the train, just in time to see the train pull out.

His coat is on the train. His wallet is in the coat. His mobile phone is in the coat.

The suitcase is here.

He stands in the rain watching the train glide out of the station area. He makes no attempt to wave his arms, to call out; instead he turns his back on the lights from the train, its movement, its noise, tries to make his eyes adapt to the darkness, peers in between the low buildings, looks for signs of movement, entrances someone could have used, cars someone may be sitting in.

Behind him the train disappears. All becomes quiet; only sounds of rain surround him. And suddenly he catches sight of the Pole. He is standing under a projection, on the doorstep of an unlit building only a few metres away, with the suitcase in his hand.

‘You live here too?’ the Pole asks stupidly.

He feels the blood rising to his head, it is throbbing away inside, he feels the urge to hit out, grind the Pole’s face into the wet asphalt, it’s bad enough that the man steals, many people steal, it is this ‘*You live here too?*’ that is too much, as if they were close acquaintances, friends or family, and just as he knows he is going to lose his temper, do something – he doesn’t yet know what – he will regret, he discovers a fact that changes everything.

It is not his suitcase.

He is standing in the rain, without a coat, staring at the Pole. He sees a pale young man with a threadbare and wet coat, with a sharp nose and receding chin: a stray, someone who does not belong, not here, not anywhere.

A barrage of thoughts collide at a furious pace. He must phone his son and let him know. He must ask his son to wait at the station and fetch the suitcase and coat from the train, he must ask his son to come back afterwards, meet him at the next train, he must check when the wedding is to take place. But before he has time to move, or say anything, he remembers the answers: The mobile phone is on the train. There are no more trains that evening. Or early tomorrow. That was why he took this train, the last train to arrive before the wedding, at ten o’ clock tomorrow morning.

He must say something. His voice cracks, he tries again.

‘Do you have a phone?’ he asks.

The Pole shakes his head.

‘Sorry. Not working. No money.’

The voice sounds nervous. The man is afraid, he thinks, afraid of me.

‘A car? You have a car?’

‘Very sorry. I have nothing.’

The Pole makes a strange face, presumably he is trying to smile.

‘No money.’

He turns away from the Pole and starts to walk away. He thinks there must be a taxi rank somewhere, a telephone, a bus; he hasn't got any money, but he must phone his son, his son will help him.

'I live here,' the Pole calls out after him, 'this house. You need a place to stay?'

The rain strikes his face, hard, he has to blink, protect his eyes with his hand. He is crossing something that looks like a square. Not a human being in sight. A house lies next to the square, he can't find a bell, he knocks, a minute or two pass before an elderly lady opens, keeps the door just ajar, he doesn't even have time to say hello before she slams the door shut, in front of his nose, and locks it. He moves on, passes a closed shop, a small parking area. After a hundred metres there is no more street lighting. After another fifty metres the road is only gravel; there is no more town, it's unbelievable, a train can't stop in such a small town. He stands where the asphalt stops and looks out into the dark, soaked through, already cold, barely making out the large trees, the sky above: nothing else.

Slowly, he makes his way back to the station. Rainwater trickles down his neck along the inside of his shirt-collar. He thinks of the suitcase, the present. He notices a light from the Pole's window.

He is lying under a warm woollen blanket in the Pole's bed, in borrowed, dry clothes, trying to sleep; the Pole himself, who judging by the sounds is asleep already, has insisted on lying on the floor. They have shared a little cheese and cheap table wine, in silence, the Pole has smiled, perhaps he has also smiled. He no longer knows. He listens to the other's regular breathing, closes his eyes and is back on the train; the suitcase is lying on the rack above him and he has just woken up, confused, uneasy at the lack of noise, lack of movement, the Pole waves to him through the window, he gets up, leaves his suitcase, goes towards the exit, runs towards the exit. He opens his eyes again, stares out into the darkness. My courage failed me, he thinks, that was all, my courage has always failed me.

Outside he hears the sound of the rain. He cautiously pushes the blanket aside, places his feet on the floor, stands up. Bluish light from the street lamps comes through the curtains and falls onto the floor, over the man who is sleeping, over the open suitcase. He carefully tiptoes over to the Pole, stops, kneels down in front of him. In the faint light the man's features have become regular, soft, like those of a child. He leans forward over the stranger, feels the urge to lie down, close to him, feel the smell of the Pole's breathing, of tobacco and wine, the acrid odour of an adult's inside; and all of a sudden he realises, like a revelation, that he can still get to the wedding on time, not the ceremony, but the wedding party.

He straightens his back, closes his eyes and stays in that position, on his knees, next to the sleeping man, he is already at the wedding, the room is warm and close and full of people and noise, and he, the father of the bridegroom, is dancing with the bride, whom he has never met before, and his son, Yngve, is standing on the edge of the dance floor and raising his hand, and Yngve is smiling at him. And that is why he lets go of the bride's hand – just for a moment, before they continue dancing, the bride and him – in order to wave to Yngve, to return Yngve's greeting: now, at once.

Translated from Norwegian by John Irons