

Per Petterson
**Out Stealing
Horses**

TRANSLATED
BY

Anne Born



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1

Early November. It's nine o'clock. The titmice are banging against the window. Sometimes they fly dizzily off after the impact, other times they fall and lie struggling in the new snow until they can take off again. I don't know what they want that I have. I look out the window at the forest. There is a reddish light over the trees by the lake. It is starting to blow. I can see the shape of the wind on the water.

I live here now, in a small house in the far east of Norway. A river flows into the lake. It is not much of a river, and it gets shallow in the summer, but in the spring and autumn it runs briskly, and there *are* trout in it. I have caught some myself. The mouth of the river is only a hundred metres from here. I can just see it from my kitchen window once the birch leaves have fallen. As now in November. There is a cottage down by the river that I can see when its lights are on if I go out onto my doorstep. A man lives there. He is older than I am, I think. Or he seems to be. But perhaps that's because I do not realise what I look like myself, or life has been tougher for him than it has been for me. I cannot rule that out. He has a dog, a border collie.

I have a bird table on a pole a little way out in my yard. When it is getting light in the morning I sit at

the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and watch them come fluttering in. I have seen eight different species so far, which is more than anywhere else I have lived, but only the titmice fly into the window. I have lived in many places. Now I am here. When the light comes I have been awake for several hours. Stoked the fire. Walked around, read yesterday's paper, washed yesterday's dishes, there were not many. Listened to the B.B.C. I keep the radio on most of the day. I listen to the news, cannot break that habit, but I do not know what to make of it any more. They say sixty-seven is no age, not nowadays, and it does not feel it either, I feel pretty spry. But when I listen to the news it no longer has the same place in my life. It does not affect my view of the world as once it did. Maybe there is something wrong with the news, the way it is reported, maybe there's too much of it. The good thing about the B.B.C.'s World Service, which is broadcast early in the morning, is that everything sounds foreign, that nothing is said about Norway, and that I can get updated on the position of countries like Jamaica, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka in a sport such as cricket; a game I have never seen played and never will see, if I have a say in the matter. But what I have noticed is that 'The Motherland', England, is constantly being beaten. That's always something.

I too have a dog. Her name is Lyra. What breed she is would not be easy to say. It's not that important. We have been out already, with a torch, on the path we usually take, along the lake with its few millimetres of

ice up against the bank where the dead rushes are yellow with autumn, and the snow fell silently, heavily out of the dark sky above, making Lyra sneeze with delight. Now she lies there close to the stove, asleep. It has stopped snowing. As the day wears on it will all melt. I can tell that from the thermometer. The red column is rising with the sun.

All my life I have longed to be alone in a place like this. Even when everything was going well, as it often did. I can say that much. That it often did. I have been lucky. But even then, for instance in the middle of an embrace and someone whispering words in my ear I wanted to hear, I could suddenly get a longing to be in a place where there was only silence. Years might go by and I did not think about it, but that does not mean that I did not long to be there. And now I am here, and it is almost exactly as I had imagined it.

In less than two months' time this millennium will be finished. There will be festivities and fireworks in the parish I am a part of. I shall not go near any of that. I will stay at home with Lyra, perhaps go for a walk down to the lake to see if the ice will carry my weight. I am guessing minus ten and moonlight, and then I will stoke the fire, put a record on the old gramophone with Billie Holiday's voice almost a whisper, like when I heard her in the Oslo Colosseum some time in the 50s, almost burned out, yet still magic, and then fittingly get drunk on a bottle I have standing by in the cupboard. When the record ends I will go to bed and sleep as heavily as it is possible to sleep without being dead, and awake to

a new millennium and not let it mean a thing. I am looking forward to that.

In the meantime, I am spending my days getting this place in order. There is quite a lot that needs doing, I did not pay much for it. In fact, I had been prepared to shell out a lot more to lay my hands on the house and the grounds, but there was not much competition. I do understand why now, but it doesn't matter. I am pleased anyway. I try to do most of the work myself, even though I could have paid a carpenter, I am far from skint, but then it would have gone too fast. I want to use the time it takes. Time is important to me now, I tell myself. Not that it should pass quickly or slowly, but be only *time*, be something I live inside and fill with physical things and activities that I can divide it up by, so that it grows distinct to me and does not vanish when I am not looking.

Something happened last night.

I had gone to bed in the small room beside the kitchen where I put a temporary bed up under the window, and I had fallen asleep, it was past midnight, and it was pitch dark outside. Going out for a last pee behind the house I could feel the cold. I give myself that liberty. For the time being there is nothing but an outdoor toilet here. No one can see anyway, the forest standing thick to the west.

What woke me was a loud, penetrating sound repeated at brief intervals, followed by silence, and then starting again. I sat up in bed, opened the window a

crack and looked out. Through the darkness I could see the yellow beam of a torch a little way down the road by the river. The person holding the torch must be the one making the sound I had heard, but I couldn't understand what kind of sound it was or why he was making it. If it *was* a he. Then the ray of light swung aimlessly to right and left, as if resigned, and I caught a glimpse of the lined face of my neighbour. He had something in his mouth that looked like a cigar, and then the sound came again, and I realised it was a dog whistle, although I had never seen one before. And he started to call the dog. Poker, he shouted, Poker, which was the dog's name. Come here, boy, he shouted, and I lay down in bed again and closed my eyes, but I knew I would not get back to sleep.

All I wanted was to sleep. I have grown fussy about the hours I get, and although they are not many, I need them in a completely different way than before. A ruined night throws a dark shadow for many days ahead and makes me irritable and feel out of place. I have no time for that. I need to concentrate. All the same, I sat up in bed again, swung my legs in the pitch black to the floor and found my clothes over the back of the chair. I had to gasp when I felt how cold they were. Then I went through the kitchen and into the hall and pulled on my old pea jacket, took the torch from the shelf and went out onto the steps. It was coal black. I opened the door again, put my hand in and switched on the outside light. That helped. The red-painted outhouse wall threw a warm glow across the yard.

I have been lucky, I say to myself. I can go out to a neighbour in the night when he is searching for his dog, and it will take me only a couple of days and I will be OK again. I switched on the torch and began walking down the road from the yard towards where he was still standing on the gentle slope, swinging his torch so that the beam moved slowly round in a circle towards the edge of the forest, across the road, along the river bank and back to its starting point. Poker, he called, Poker, and then blew the whistle, and the sound had an unpleasantly high frequency in the quiet of the night, and his face, his body, were hidden in the darkness. I did not know him, had only spoken to him a few times on the way past his cottage when I was out with Lyra most often at quite an early hour, and I suddenly felt like going back in again and forgetting all about it; what could I do anyway, but now he must have seen the light of my torch, and it was too late, and after all there was something about this character I could barely make out there in the night alone. He ought not to be alone like that. It was not right.

'Hello,' I called quietly, mindful of the silence. He turned, and for a moment I could not see anything, the beam of his torch hit me straight in my face, and when he realised that, he aimed the torch down. I stood still for a few seconds to recover my night vision, then I walked to where he was, and we stood there together, each with our bright beam pointing from hip height at the landscape around us, and nothing resembled what it looked like by day. I have grown accustomed to the dark. I cannot remember ever being afraid of it, but I must have been,

and now it feels natural and safe and transparent – no matter how much in fact is hidden there, though that means nothing. Nothing can challenge the lightness and freedom of the body; height unconfined, distance unlimited, for these are not the properties of darkness. It is only an immeasurable space to move about inside.

‘He’s run off again,’ said my neighbour. ‘Poker. My dog, that is. It happens. He always comes back. But it’s hard to sleep when he’s gone like that. There are wolves in the forest now. At the same time, I feel I can’t keep the door shut.’

He seems a bit embarrassed. I probably would be if it were *my* dog. I don’t know what I would do if Lyra had run off, whether I would go out by myself to search for her.

‘Did you know that they say the border collie is the most intelligent dog in the world?’ he said.

‘I have heard that,’ I said.

‘He is smarter than I am, Poker, and he knows it.’ My neighbour shook his head. ‘He’s about to take charge, I’m afraid.’

‘Well, that’s not so good,’ I said.

‘No,’ he said.

It struck me that we had never really introduced ourselves, so I raised my hand, shining the torch on it so he could see it and said:

‘Trond Sander.’ That confused him. It took him a moment or two to change his torch to his left hand and take my right hand with his, and then he said:

‘Lars. Lars Haug. With a g.’

‘How do you do?’ I said, and it sounded as bizarre and strange out there in the dark night as when my father said ‘Condolences’ at a funeral in the depths of the forest many, many years ago, and immediately I regretted saying those four words, but Lars Haug did not seem to notice. Maybe he thought it was the proper thing to say, and that the situation was no odder than it might be whenever grown men greet each other in a field.

There was silence all around us. There had been days and nights of rain and wind and incessant roaring in the pines and the spruce, but now there was absolute stillness in the forest, not a shadow moving, and we stood still, my neighbour and I, staring into the dark, then I felt certain there *was* something behind me. I could not escape the sudden feeling of sheer cold down my back, and Lars Haug felt it too; he directed his torchlight at a point a couple of metres past me, and I turned, and there stood Poker, quite stiff and on guard. I have seen that before, how a dog can both sense and show the feeling of guilt, and like most of us it was something it did not like, especially when its owner started talking to it in an almost childlike tone of voice, which did not go well with the weather-beaten, lined face of a man who had undoubtedly been out on a cold night before and dealt with wayward things, complicated things in a contrary wind, things of high gravity – I could tell that when we shook hands.

‘Ah, where have you been, Poker, you stupid dog, been disobedient to your daddy again? Shame on you, bad boy, shame on you, that’s no way to behave,’ and

he took a step towards the dog, and it started growling deep down in its throat, flattening its ears. Lars Haug stopped in his tracks. He let his torch sink until it shone directly on the ground, and I could just pick out the white patches of the dog's coat, the black ones blending with the night, and it all looked strangely at odds and unsymmetrical as the growl low in the animal's throat went on from a slightly less definite point, and my neighbour said:

'I have shot a dog once before, and I promised myself then that I would never do it again. But now I don't know.' He had lost his confidence, it was clear, he could not work out his next move, and I suddenly felt desperately sorry for him. The feeling welled up from I don't know where, from some place out in the dark, where something might have happened in a different time entirely, or from somewhere in my own life I had long since forgotten, and it made me embarrassed and ill at ease. I cleared my throat and in a voice I could not wholly control I said:

'What kind of dog was it that you had to shoot?' Although I do not think that that was what I was interested in, I had to say something to calm the sudden trembling in my chest.

'An Alsatian. But it was not mine. It happened on the farm where I grew up. My mother saw it first. It ran around at the edge of the forest hunting roe deer: two terrified young fauns we had several times seen from the window grazing in the brushwood at the edge of the north meadow. They always kept close, and they did so

then. The Alsatian chased them, encircled them, bit at their hocks, and they were exhausted and didn't stand a chance. My mother could not bear to look any longer, so she phoned the bailiff and asked him what to do, and he said: 'You'll just have to shoot it.'

'That's a job for you, Lars,' she said when she had put the receiver down. 'Do you think you can manage it?' I didn't want to, I must say, I hardly ever touched that gun, but I felt really sorry for the fauns, and I couldn't exactly ask *her* to do it, and there was no-one else at home. My big brother was away at sea, and my step-father was in the forest felling timber for the neighbouring farmer as he usually did at that time of year. So I fetched the gun and walked across the meadow towards the forest. When I got there I couldn't see the dog anywhere. I stood still listening. It was autumn, the air was really clear in the middle of the day, and the quietness was almost uncanny. I turned and looked back to the house, where I knew my mother was by the window watching everything I did. She was not going to let me off. I looked into the forest again, along a path, and there suddenly I saw the two roe deer running in my direction. I knelt down and raised the gun and laid my cheek to the barrel, and the big fauns were so frantic with terror that they did not notice me, or they had not the strength to worry about yet another enemy. They did not change course at all, but ran straight at me and rushed past a hand's breadth from my shoulder, I heard them panting and saw the whites of their wide staring eyes.'

Lars Haug paused, raised the torch and shone it on Poker, who had not moved from his place just behind me. I did not turn, but I heard the dog's low growl. It was a disturbing sound, and the man in front of me bit his lip and ran the fingers of his left hand over his forehead with an uncertain movement before he went on.

'Thirty metres after them came the Alsatian. It was a huge beast. I fired immediately. I am sure I hit it, but it did not change speed or direction, a shudder might have run through its body, I really don't know, so I fired again, and it went down on its knees and got up again and kept on running. I was quite desperate and let off a third round, it was just a few metres from me, and it somersaulted and fell with its legs in the air and slid right up to the toes of my boots. But it was not dead. It lay there paralysed, looking straight up at me, and I felt sorry for it then, I must say, so I bent down to give it a last pat on the head, and it growled and snapped at my hand. I jumped back. It made me furious and I gave it two more rounds right through the head.'

Lars Haug stood there with his face barely visible, the torch hanging tiredly from his hand, throwing only a small yellow disc of light on the ground. Pine needles. Pebbles. Two fir-cones. Poker stood dead still without a sound, and I wondered whether dogs can hold their breath.

'Bloody hell,' I said.

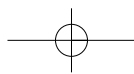
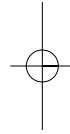
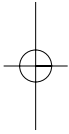
'I was just eighteen,' he said. 'It's long ago, but I shall never forget it.'

‘Then I can well understand why you will never shoot a dog again,’ I said.

‘We’ll see about that,’ said Lars Haug. ‘But now I’d better take this one inside. It is late. Come, Poker,’ he said, his voice sharp now, and started to walk down the road. Poker followed him obediently, some metres behind. When they came to the little bridge, Lars Haug stopped and waved his torch.

‘Thank you for the company,’ he said through the darkness. I waved my torch and turned to walk up the gentle slope to the house and opened the door and went into the lighted hall. For some reason I locked the door behind me, something I have not done since I moved out here. I did not like doing it, but all the same I did. I undressed and lay down in bed under the duvet staring at the ceiling waiting for the warmth to come. I felt a bit foolish. Then I closed my eyes. At some point while I was asleep it started to snow, and I am sure I was aware of it, in my sleep, that the weather changed and grew colder, and I knew I feared the winter, and I feared the snow if there was too much of it, and the fact that I had put myself in an impossible position, moving here. So then I dreamt fiercely about summer and it was still in my head when I woke up. I could have dreamt of any summer at all, but I did not, it turned out to be a very special summer, and I still think of it now when I sit at the kitchen table watching the light spread above the trees by the lake. Nothing looks as it did last night, and I cannot think of a single reason for locking the door. I am tired, but not as tired as I expected to be. I will last

until evening, I know I will. I get up from the table, a little stiff, that back is not what it used to be, and Lyra, by the stove, raises her head and looks at me. Are we going out again? We are not, not yet. I have enough to do, thinking about this summer, which begins to trouble me. And that it has not done for many years.



2

We were going out stealing horses. That was what he said, standing at the door to the cabin where I was spending the summer with my father. I was fifteen. It was 1948 and one of the first days of July. Three years earlier the Germans had left, but I can't remember that we talked about them any longer. At least my father did not. He never said anything about the war.

Jon came often to our door, at all hours, wanting me to go out with him: shooting hares, walking through the forest in the pale moonlight right up to the top of the ridge when it was perfectly quiet, fishing for trout in the river, balancing on the shining yellow logs that still sailed the current close to our cabin long after the clearing of the river was done. It was risky, but I never said no and never said anything to my father about what we were up to. We could see a stretch of the river from the kitchen window, but it was not there that we did our balancing acts. We always started further down, nearly a kilometre, and sometimes we went so far and so fast on the logs that it took us an hour to walk back through the forest when at last we had scrambled onto the bank, soaking wet and shivering.

Jon wanted no company but mine. He had two

younger brothers, the twins Lars and Odd, but he and I were the same age. I do not know who he was with for the rest of the year, when I was in Oslo. He never talked about that, and I never told him what I did in the city.

He never knocked, just came quietly up the path from the river where his little boat was tied up, and waited at the door until I became aware that he was there. It never took long. Even in the morning early when I was still asleep, I might feel a restlessness far into my dream, as if I needed to pee and struggled to wake up before it was too late, and then when I opened my eyes and knew it wasn't *that*, I went directly to the door and opened it, and there he was. He smiled his little smile and squinted as he always did.

'Are you coming?' he said. 'We're going out stealing horses.'

It turned out that *we* meant only him and me as usual, and if I had not gone with him he would have gone alone, and that would have been no fun. Besides, it was hard to steal horses alone. Impossible, in fact.

'Have you been waiting long?' I said.

'I just got here.'

That's what he always said, and I never knew if it was true. I stood on the doorstep in only my underpants and looked over his shoulder. It was already light. There were wisps of mist on the river, and it was a little cold. It would soon warm up, but now I felt goose pimples spread over my thighs and stomach. Yet I stood there looking down to the river, watching it coming from round the bend a little further up, shining and soft from

under the mist, and flow past. I knew it by heart. I had dreamt about it all winter.

'Which horses?' I said.

'Barkald's horses. He keeps them in the paddock in the forest, behind the farm.'

'I know. Come inside while I get dressed.'

'I'll wait here,' he said.

He never would come inside, maybe because of my father. He never spoke to my father. Never said hello to him. Just looked down when they passed each other on the way to the shop. Then my father would stop and turn round to look at him and say:

'Wasn't that Jon?'

'Yes,' I said.

'What's wrong with him?' said my father every time, as if embarrassed, and each time I said:

'I don't know.'

And in fact I did not, and I never thought to ask. Now Jon stood on the doorstep that was only a flagstone, gazing down at the river while I fetched my clothes from the back of one of the tree-trunk chairs, and pulled them on as quickly as I could. I did not like him having to stand there waiting, even though the door was open so he could see me the whole time.

Clearly I ought to have understood there was something special about that July morning, something to do with the fog on the river and the mist over the ridge perhaps, something about the white light in the sky, something

in the way Jon said what he had to say or the way he moved or stood there stock still at the door. But I was only fifteen, and the only thing *I* noticed was that he did not carry the gun he always had with him in case a hare should cross our path, and that was not so strange, it would only have been in the way rustling horses. We weren't going to shoot the horses, after all. As far as I could see, he was the same as he always was: calm and intense at one and the same time with his eyes squinting, concentrating on what we were going to do, with no sign of impatience. That suited me well, for it was no secret that compared with him I was a slow-coach in most of our exploits. He had years of training behind him. The only thing I was good at was riding logs down the river, I had a built-in balance, a natural talent, Jon thought, though that was not how he would have put it.

What he had taught me was to be reckless, taught me that if I let myself go, did not slow myself down by thinking so much beforehand I could achieve many things I would never have dreamt possible.

'OK. Ready, steady, go,' I said.

We set off together down the path to the river. It was very early. The sun came gliding over the ridge with its fan of light and gave to everything a brand-new colour, and what was left of the fog above the water melted and disappeared. I felt the instant warmth through my sweater and closed my eyes and walked on without once missing my footing until I knew we had got to the bank. Then I opened my eyes and clambered

down the stream-washed boulders and into the stern of the little boat. Jon pushed off and jumped in, picked up the oars and rowed with short, hard strokes straight into the stream, let the boat drift a stretch and rowed again until we reached the opposite shore about fifty metres further down. Far enough for the boat not to be seen from the cottage.

Then we climbed up the slope, Jon first with me at his heels, and walked along the barbed wire fence by the meadow where the grass stood tall under a light veil of mist, and would soon be mowed and hung on racks to dry in the sun. It was like walking up to your hips in water, with no resistance, as in a dream. I often dreamt about water then, I was friends with water.

It was Barkald's field, and we had come this way many times, up between the fields to the road that led to the shop, to buy magazines or sweets or other things we had the money for; one øre, two øre and sometimes five øre coins jingling in our pockets every step we took, or we went to Jon's house in the other direction where his mother greeted us so enthusiastically when we walked in you would have thought I was the Crown Prince or something, and his father dived into the local paper or vanished out to the barn on some errand that just could not wait. There was something there I did not understand. But it did not worry me. He could stay in the barn as far as I was concerned. I didn't give a damn. Whatever happened, I was going home at summer's end.

Barkald's farm was on the far side of the road behind

some fields where he grew oats and barley every other year, close up to the forest with the barn at an angle, and in the forest he kept four horses in a large area he had fenced in with barbed wire, from tree to tree at two heights. It was his forest, and there was a lot of it. He was the biggest landowner in the district. Neither of us could stand the man, but I am not sure why. He had never done anything to us or uttered an unfriendly word that I had ever heard. But he had a big farm, and Jon was the son of a smallholder. Almost everyone was a smallholder alongside the river in this valley only a few kilometres from the Swedish border, and most of them still lived off the produce of their farms and the milk they delivered to the dairy, and as lumberjacks in the logging season, for Barkald in his forest, or elsewhere, and in the one owned by a rich bastard from Bærum; thousands and thousands of parcels of land to the north and the west. There wasn't much money about, as far as I could make out. Maybe Barkald had some, but Jon's father had none, and *my* father certainly did not have any, not that I knew about, anyhow. So how he had scraped together enough to buy the cabin where we stayed that summer is still a mystery. Frankly, I never had a clear idea what my father did to earn a living; to keep his life going, and mine, among others, because it often seemed to change from one thing to another, but there were always numerous tools involved, and small machines, and sometimes a great deal of planning and thinking with pencil in hand and journeys to all kinds of places around the country, places where I had never

been and never knew what they looked like, but he was no longer on any other man's payroll. Often he had a great deal to do, at other times less, but still, he had managed to save enough money, and when we went there for the first time the year before, he walked round looking things over and smiling a secret smile and patting the trees, and sitting on a big stone on the river bank, his chin in his hand, looking out over the water as if he were among old friends. But of course it could not have been so: could it?

Jon and I left the meadow path and walked down the road, and although we had been this way many times before it was different now. We were out stealing horses and we knew it showed. We were criminals. That changes people, it changes something in their faces and gives them a particular way of walking no-one can do anything about. And stealing horses, that was the worst thing of all. We knew about the law west of Pecos, we had read the cowboy magazines, and although maybe we could say that we were *east* of Pecos, it was so far east that you might just as well say it the other way round, as it depended on which way you chose to look at the world, but with that law there was no mercy. If you were caught, it was straight up in a tree with a rope round your neck; rough hemp against the tender flesh, someone whacked the horse on its rump and it flew out from under your legs, and then you ran for your life in bottomless air while that very life flashed past in review with fainter and fainter images until they were empty of your own self and of all you had seen, and then filled

with fog, and finally turned black. Just fifteen, was your last thought, that wasn't much, and all for a horse, and then everything was too late. Barkald's house sat heavy and grey at the edge of the forest, and it seemed more threatening than ever. The windows were dark so early in the morning, but maybe he was standing there looking down the road and could see the way we were walking and *knew*.

But it was too late to turn round now. We walked stiff-legged a couple of hundred metres down the gravel road, until the house disappeared round a bend, then up another path across another field that was Barkald's too, and into the forest. At first the wood was thick and dark among the spruce trunks with no underbrush at all, only deep green moss like a huge carpet that was soft to walk on, for the light never wholly found its way in here, and we walked along the path one in front of the other and felt it yield each time we put a foot down. Jon first with me at his heels on worn gym shoes. Then we turned off in a curve, still to the right, the space and the light above us gradually expanding until suddenly we saw the two strands of barbed wire glinting, and we were there. We looked in at a clearing where all the spruce had been felled and the sapling pine and birch trees were standing strangely tall and solitary with no shelter at their backs, and some of them had not survived the wind from the north and had fallen full length with their roots in the air. Between the spruce stumps the grass was growing lush and thick, and behind some bushes further on we saw the horses, only