

# **The Man on the Motorcycle**

**Jon Michelet**

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"... and I remembered what an old Norwegian whaler captain I had met in Durban had told me; that Norwegians are imperturbably calm in any hurricane, but their nervous system cannot stand becalmed seas."

Karen Blixen, *An African Farm*

"No society is perfect. All societies have in their natures an impurity in conflict with the norms they proclaim, and which is given concrete expression in certain portions of injustice, callousness and cruelty."

Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tropical Elegy*

## Prologue

"In my modest forest dwelling, 'illegally' erected on the semi-feudal forest-owner's land. I studied *The Molecule*. After a careful study of *legislation* back to our most ancient laws, and the literature of *political science* (of which a great deal is anaemic rubbish, in my opinion), and against a background of observations I have made of Norwegian society (and previously of America), I have come to the *conclusion* that the three fundamental elements in our democracy are no longer the *free atoms* they are supposed to be. As everyone will understand, I am thinking of the *Legislative Power*, the *Judicial Power* and the *Executive Power*. Our democracy is dependent on the fact that these are independent of each other. But with its colossal power of *fusion*, the immense pressure of capitalism has compressed them together into a *molecule*. It is my conviction that this *Molecule* must be exploded and the atoms thus released. If anyone asks who has the courage to light the fuse, then my unostentatious reply is: Here I am. An experienced and conscious working man in my best years. Slightly gun-shy in my youth. But since then become used to bangs and explosions. Fire away."

K.H.Sundin  
"Philosophy House"  
Hook Forest

NOVEMBER (1984)

1.

A regatta for radio-controlled mini-yachts is being held on the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. The mist that has lain over the park is lifting, the sun breaking through. Moisture gathers on the bare branches of the park's black trees. But this change in the weather has not produced as much wind as they had all hoped for. A few puffs of wind, faint ripples on the pond, then the wind dies down again.

Every event in a large city soon acquires an audience of some kind, and that is also true of a regatta on a pond, even if there is practically no wind. People out exercising their pets in Kensington Gardens stop by the Round Pond, assemble in groups and comment on the boats, the radio equipment, the lack of wind. Most of the pets are dogs, but there's also a guinea-pig. An elderly man is out exercising his guinea-pig. The animal is sitting on the man's shoulder, chewing on the material of his coat. It has been allowed to continue undisturbed and has managed to make a hole so that it can get at the shoulder-padding. It is now hauling out bits of stuffing with quiet mouse-like movements, and either eating them or dropping them on the ground.

Perhaps the man notices that he is attracting the attention of the onlookers. Some boys circle round him. They feel like doing something, for boys can't stand deviants, and their fingers itch to fling a stone at the guinea-pig and thus end this abnormal meal. If the man had spoken to them, or just looked at them, they would certainly have gone into action. But he is standing quite still and looking straight ahead. If he has noticed the boys at all, he shows no sign of it. And that frightens them. They move off and throw their stones at a flock of pigeons and miss.

The man stands still. His silent message is: "I carry my guinea-pig any way I like."

Anyhow, that's how Thygesen interprets it. For Vilhelm Thygesen – the man who hardly ever gets shot – has been standing by the Round Pond for a long time, studying the man with the guinea-pig with far greater interest than he has given the boats on the pond. The man reminds Thygesen of Sundin.

Thygesen had come strolling through the park. He had sat for a while on an abandoned bench under a tree, but had had to move, chased off by the drips from the branches. At first the boats had made him stop by the pond, the boats gliding through the muddy water, the surprising rays of sunlight, the green grass, the boys running about in shorts – all these visual impressions gave an illusion of spring, a spring morning. But it was the first Sunday in November and in the afternoon.

He stood on the outskirts of a small group of onlookers, a solitary figure outside the crowd. When he's in England, he thinks occasionally in English, especially when he imagines that he can see himself from the outside. A stranger. A solitary figure.

Then he noticed a man who was genuinely solitary. This man standing at the east end of the pond made Thygesen think of the statue of King Haakon in Oslo, a thin figure in a long tailored greatcoat, his gaze directed straight up in the air. What was that animal sitting on the man's shoulder, a monkey, a rat?

Thygesen edged closer. He knew he was going to become victim of an obsession, but couldn't help moving towards the statue-man with an animal on his shoulder. When he saw it was a guinea-pig, and that the guinea-pig was eating its way through the man's coat, Thygesen realised there was no escape. He would have to stop and watch. He would try to read the man's thoughts, as it were a matter of life and death to understand them, as if the end of the world or its continued voyage through space were dependent on him, Thygesen,

understanding what was going on in the mind of the man under that filthy knitted cap, and what kind of heart was beating under the coat, under the tie.

A typical big city obsession seized him and held him. He is in the big city where no one knows him. rather different from being in Oslo, where they all think they know what kind of murderer you are. In the city and park where no one knows you, and you know no one, the cramp in your soul loosens its hold, softens and is receptive to signals it otherwise does not receive. He has felt this most strongly in Central Park in New York, where he had once gone to see Grete Waitz coming in first and setting a new world record in marathon running. But as she came in at the finish, he was sitting under the bridge she was running across. He was talking to an ancient black man who lived there, under the bridge, in a large cardboard box, a fence of flattened cans surrounding it. The shouts from the crowd were like the roar of a waterfall, and the loudspeakers were bawling out that Grete really had broken the record – while he was sitting under the bridge asking the black man in his box how he managed to survive by collecting beer and Coca-cola cans. "No problem," replied the old man, "as long as the aluminium price holds on the world market." He demonstrated his technique of flattening the cans to the thickness of a finger. He placed a can upright and squashed it flat with a light but firm jab with his heel. Thygesen tried without success, and the black man laughed, showing his white teeth in the semi-darkness under the span of the bridge in Central Park.

It is no chance that signals come from elderly people, people who have lived their lives. The young girl on a bench with her nylons neatly arranged over her knees naturally also wishes to attract attention, setting obsessions into motion, a tiny little obsession. But she is behind you in the race, has done a shorter run. She can't be any kind of prediction of the possible future.

A man who lets an animal consume his coat without moving a muscle, what can he be if not a genius?

Thygesen had earlier thought that this compulsion of his to get close to veterans in foreign places, like a photographer with no tele-lens, had something to do with solidarity, solidarity with the poor and with defeated warriors of the proletariat. He had no wish to deny that such a feeling of solidarity did exist, and is even genuine. But it is not that feeling which drives him into a strange kind of close contact, and which had driven him straight into the arms of Sundin. This is a stronger force, nothing to do with the collective, but with the individual, his own life and how it would end. So he seeks out the oddest symbolic creatures in the streets and parks. Maybe they are archetypes. Sundin used that word about himself, "archetype". But Thygesen doesn't really know what the word means, so says what the hell.

He has seen the way the city and life have rolled a black man into a box under a bridge, and made another man stand in front of a skyscraper, the Grace Building, every day and blow on a trumpet for hours and hours. He has not forgotten the vagrants of his childhood by the waters and streams of the West End. That's the way it can go. That's where you might end.

The man with the guinea-pig is a find. You go out into a park after a few hours' wretched sleep in a hotel, glad to have got out of the nightclub in Greek Street intact and escaped the claws of the go-go-girls, but so trembling with drunkenness, you feel that it is only your clothes – your new suit and coat – keeping you upright, and your new shoes keeping you walking. You find what you are looking for, a man who allows himself to be eaten in public by his tame rodent.

The boys threatening him have now gone, and the wind has got up sufficiently to speed the sailing-boats up and turn the audience's attention away from the man. But not Thygesen's. Would the man come out of his trance once left to himself? No, he is still there, like a pillar of salt. What is he thinking?

"Just you gnaw on, you little bastard. Gnaw your way right through to my collar-bone. Crawl right down into my chest and start scratching at my diaphragm. Gnaw your way right through. Haul out my intestines. Let people see my entrails."

The latter doesn't make sense. The man is no exhibitionist, nor a fakir. Who is he? An old desert soldier, one of the Tommies who fought against Rommel's desert rats? The greatcoat may well come from the Second World War, and the man hasn't the usual London pallor, but was once tanned brown. A man from the docks? A man whom unemployment and bad times have pushed into inactivity? It is Sunday, and he could actually be free. But he doesn't look as if he had done anything for a great many years.

His hands are pale and clean as they dangle from the worn coat-sleeves. The coat – not least the greasy ragged tie, the English working man's badge of respectability – are relics of days gone by, something he puts on when he goes out into the park to show what he has once been.

Gnaw away, then, little bastard. And show the well-dressed gentleman still staring at me the way things might go for *him*, when his own guinea-pig sets about his brain.

Without any warning, the animal leaps to the ground. The man doesn't appear to notice. Thygesen then hatches out a fantastic theory. The guinea-pig does not belong to the desert-fighter/docker, but is a totally strange animal which has crept up on him without him noticing anything at all. He is probably paralysed by drink just as Thygesen is.

The man glances down. The animal darts backwards. The man whistles a long note and fixes the guinea-pig with a hypnotic gaze, leans down surprisingly quickly, catches the fugitive and stuffs it into his coat pocket.

"Take it easy, darling," he says.

Darling?

Thygesen should have gone up to him and started a conversation. He ought to have had a crust to offer. But conversations are seldom possible and mostly impossible.

The man starts walking, patting the pocket where the guinea-pig is. Thygesen feels relief spreading through him as if he had drunk something hot, piping-hot cocoa, for instance. The genius has gone. Your future life does *not* lie there. That destiny is not yours and you will not end up a guinea-pig man. It is the relief and satisfaction you experience when the poor and defeated, disappear out of your sight. The spell is broken. Goodbye. If you are really strict with yourself, maybe you will admit that that is why you seek out such types – in order to feel relief when they disappear or you manage to drag yourself away from them. Perhaps that is what lies behind your preference for masturbation with old people in parks, and in secret?

Long ago, when no one had ever heard of homos and gay processions, some of Oslo's pederasts used to hang around the urinals in the wall below the Deichmann Library. Young Vilhelm Thygesen had gone in there with a bundle of books cheerfully dangling on his back, firmly in their strap, just as he had seen American college boys on films. An elderly man, nicely dressed, had come out of one of the booths and asked Thygesen if he would like to earn ten kroner.

"What for?"

"If you'd be so kind as to pee in my pocket."

"What?"

"Pee in my pocket. Ten kroner. A whole ten."

The young Thygesen headed straight for the door, considerably frightened by this confrontation with a secret burden. But once out in the sunny street, he had laughed, the laugh of a college boy, happy that *he* would never have to pay anyone to urinate in his pocket. Then more often than he strictly speaking needed to, he had gone down into the urinal below the Deichmann Library, and would sit for a long time in one of the cubicles listening for the voice of an elderly gentleman, "pee in my pocket". Then he would rush out, roaring with laughter.

He never heard the damned voice again. In the end he did a drawing in the cubicle of men peeing in pockets, a whole series of drawings. First the actual urine-ceremony, then the pee-er's route to the gallows, where he hung with his prick dangling out of his flies. It was a good serial, but it had not given him the pleasure he had thought it would.

Only English boys, brought up by their fathers, could think of spending a raw November afternoon out of doors in shorts, in temperatures as low as ten or twelve degrees. The sport they are involved in is also typically English, a regatta on a pond, with strict and complicated rules, a kind of maritime cricket. And a minimum of wind. Who can sail without wind? Boats with so little canvas presumably need more wind than real sailing-boats. There is a row of orange buoys on the pond with small red plastic flags on their tops. They are the markers. The boats have problems getting round the markers at the south-west end of the pond. One of the fathers, all of them better dressed than their sons, is acting as umpire. He's a big man with a skipper's cap and a jutting jaw. Now and again he shouts a command. He also has a whistle round his neck, but he doesn't use it.

Thygesen has taken the side of a freckled boy with girlish fair curls and legs as thin as sticks. He is remote-controlling a handsome two foot long blue boat, with lemon-yellow sails. Twice the boy has got the boat right up to the critical marker and both times it had drifted off just before rounding it. The father is close at the heels of the boy, looking at the boat through opera-glasses, pointing and offering advice, but leaving the boy to press the buttons of the control.

Maybe he's not the father, but an uncle? He and the boy do not resemble each other. The boy could have been Vanessa Redgrave's younger brother. The father, or whoever he is, looks like Sundin.

Sundin. Damned, garlic-stinking bastard Sundin. Why hasn't he phoned?

Naturally it's a simple formula that makes Thygesen put an equals sign between Sundin and this chance Englishman. Sundin is short, the Englishman is short. The Englishman = Sundin.

Most Londoners are sturdy Anglo-Saxons and belong to the working class. In the multitudes of Londoners, there must be many who look like Sundin, even if they don't go round in tight-fitting black leather suits with crocodile motifs on the back, but in wind-cheaters like the father of this curly-headed boy. He's probably the father, for didn't he say "swing 'er round, son"?

A good puff of wind has given the blue boat sufficient speed to forge on. It rounds the buoy and the father thumps the boy on the shoulder. But the umpire shouts, waves his arms and blows his whistle. Does he really mean that such a successful and elegant manoeuvre is incorrect?

Yes, he does. The blue boat has blocked another boat, which the umpire is pointing at, a strange craft, a tub with ketch rigging. The tub was nowhere near the marker, and would undoubtedly take several years to circumnavigate the Round Pond. Maybe it was being steered by the umpire's son or nephew?

The boy with the curls drops the control in his confusion. He starts crying, his freckles merging over his face. He picks up the control and waves it and its long antenna under the nose of the umpire, who grabs the delicate rod and bends it. To Thygesen, it looks as if he was thinking of bringing the metal up to his jutting jaw and biting the antenna in half, but Thygesen hasn't a clear view. He's landed up on the edge of the crowd surrounding the umpire. They have all forgotten the wind, which is now rippling the water beautifully.

The umpire is unmoved. You can see from his gaberdine that he is part of a civilisation in which for a thousand years since the Magna Carta the umpire's word has been the last word. He has the law behind him. On this occasion it's "the rules".

"Do you want anarchy on the pond?" the umpire asks. The fathers solemnly shake their capped heads.

"Justice!" cries the father.

Someone laughs. Aren't they all members of the same club? Haven't they accepted a rule which all of them have agreed on? The guarantee of a sensible settlement lies in that. It's no use coming here and shouting for justice. Supposing everyone did that, in and out of season?

The boys stand frozen and wide-eyed in a bunch on their own. They're being given a lesson of the kind that will turn them into men.

"Dictator!" cries the father.

"If you mean I'm a dictator, then you must depose me," says the umpire calmly.

But one weeping boy runs on his stick-like legs round the pond and lifts the blue boat out of the water. It has a red keel and a white plimsoll line and must be quite heavy. He can only just carry it. He runs with the boat in his arms, then stumbles and falls. The mast breaks. The boy sits sobbing on the grass.

The father flings a taboo word straight at the umpire.

"Fuck you!" Thygesen says, too.

The father tears a piece of paper into shreds. His membership card of the sailing club?

The pieces of paper get caught up by the wind and fathers and sons see that the wind is filling the sails, and the flags on the buoys are standing straight out. One boat has already capsized. The umpire blows his whistle and signals that the regatta is to continue. To eager shouts, a man wades out to put the capsized boat on an even keel, thus re-establishing the established order in the pond.

Father and son walk slowly through the park with the boat and its broken mast and filthy sails. Thygesen walks in the same direction towards the Bayswater Road. He would like to tell them he's on their side in their fight against injustice, that he sympathises with their action. He could say it rather grandiosely, telling them he comes from a seafaring nation where the king himself, a man over eighty, is an active sailor. Back home in Norway, no such idiotic decision as the one the umpire had taken would ever be accepted. In his country the whole matter would have been taken to the very top, tight p to the sailor-king.

Then he would be deceiving them again, and like all Norwegians abroad, he would show loathing for every sign of despotism abroad, whereas his own home conditions would be idealised. He had never been a member of the Royal Norwegian Sailing Society, but he had seen the umpires, all gathered in a mahogany cutter stemming from the days of prohibition. The ruling Admiralty of the RNSS in their smuggler's boat is probably just as authoritarian as any umpire in the Round Pond. On this point, as on most points, Norwegian society is not all that different from English society.

Keep quiet and invite the two of them to a pub, stand the father a beer and the son a Coca-cola? But that might seem intrusive. If there's one thing Englishmen can't stand, it's pushy foreigners. He looks like an Arab or an Indian, and he speaks with an accent as if he came from the Gulf, the Middle East. They would be sure to think he is an Arab and has no such thing as a sailor king. And neither does he know whether the pubs are open on Sunday afternoons. The whole thing might become painful. The two of them probably want to forget their defeat. Next Sunday they would be back at the pond again, the mast repaired and their membership renewed.

Maybe the umpire's decision was meaningless when it comes to the crunch. What does he know, an outsider, about disqualification regulations of English pond-sailing?

He could see an aggressive glint in the father's eye. He had had enough of complainers. He had Sundin to deal with. His tormentor. Sundin – Devil take him – was an

amateur lawyer, but a professional complainer, and had even invented a term for it – complainer. "I'm a genuine complainer," Sundin says.

Most complainers have one good quality. They keep their appointments. They keep their appointments come hell or high water, to the extent that they drive any ordinary person stark staring crazy. Sundin is no exception. If he says he's going to phone at twelve o'clock, he phones at twelve o'clock on the dot, or at midnight. Not a minute later, nor a minute earlier. On the dot twelve, Sundin makes his presence known on his mobile telephone.

He was to have phoned at eight o'clock today. At that time, Thygesen was flat out in his hotel room, but not so flat out that he would not have heard the telephone.

Father and son with their boat walk on through the wrought-iron Lancaster Gate. Thygesen has walked in Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park so many times during the past week, he knows the name of all the gates and paths. He turns round and walks off towards the Serpentine, stops and fills his pipe, the tobacco a mixture of rarest oriental and Virginia, Sullivan Powel Gentleman's Mixture Original. It is so scented that he can't smoke it indoors. The pipe is French, recently purchased in Paris, a Butz Choquin Capitain. He has been to Paris and is now walking the parks of London to initiate his new tweed coat and new shoes in order to break in the pipe. Doing nothing.

His shoes are Hush Puppies, but don't correspond to their soft name. They have been made out of hard inflexible leather and creak for every step he takes, and they pinch the two stumps of toes of his right foot. He had once had to have two frosted toes amputated, up in the Telemark mountains. Since then, he had had two very narrow escapes, a few new injuries, but none fatal.

"The man who is hardly ever shot". That was the first thing Sundin had said when he telephoned one September morning in Oslo. "May I speak to Vilhelm Thygesen, the man who is hardly ever shot."

Very amusing.

But Vilhelm Thygesen, re-established lawyer, had accepted his first client, who soon offered to become his partner. Thank goodness things have not yet got that far.

His right foot is cold. It always gets colder than his left foot. New shoes always pinch that foot, just as the right cuff of new shirts always stick out of his jacket sleeve. You're deformed, man. You're a Norwegian. In that Norwegian way, you're out for a Sunday walk. The lawyer is out for a walk in the park. You're walking off your hangover. It's not as bad as you hoped it would be. You've taken six Dispril. You've escaped the topless lady in Greek Street and you won't get AIDS this time, either. AIDS is clearly a relation of leprosy, and like leprosy infects only through intimate relations or frequent touching over a length of time. AIDS will soon be confronted by its conqueror, its Armauer Hansen, who will find out what kind of virus causes the disease. But in the meantime, it has not been found. AIDS is urban civilisation's cruel secret scourge in the same way as leprosy was the scourge of the bush and the jungle. The advantage of AIDS is that you no longer need fear rabies quite so much. For what is acute foaming rabies in comparison with creeping AIDS?

Thygesen confronted the dogs in Hyde Park with a firmer look than he would have done in the pre-AIDS epoch. Rabies? Huh. There is a vaccine against rabies. He walks confidently through the park. In Paris, he had had nothing special to do, so he was driven from Paris out of restlessness, and took the train out. In London, he had had something to do. It had been done, and had not gone badly. He could steer his steps with a certain lawyer-like dignity towards the glassed-in café by the Serpentine.

Fuck you.