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**Per Petterson**

## **I Curse the River of Time**

Sample translation

### CHAPTER 3.

I did not realise that my mother had left. There was too much going on in my own life. We had not spoken for a month, or even longer, which I guess was not that unusual, in 1989, when you consider the things that went on around us back then, but it *felt* unusual. It felt unusual because it was intentional on my part. I was trying to avoid her, and I did as I had no wish to hear what she might say about my life.

That afternoon when my mother took the Underground alone from Veitvet in Groruddalen down to Jernbanetorget with the brown suitcase in her hand to cross the damp square on the seaward side of the old Østbane Station, the headwind in her hair on her way to the flat, windswept terminal building that

belonged to J.C. Hagen & Co, and the quay where the Holger Danske lay moored in what turned out to be her final week, I, at the same time came driving in a car that was not my own, from the gravel roads in Nittedal with my two daughters in the back, one ten years old, the other seven. The car was a 1984 silver grey Volkswagen Passat that belonged to a man I had known for eight years, who would have given me his shirt, if I asked him for it.

It was starting to get dark, yes, the dark came rolling in like the tide used to do at the Jutland coast when I was as old as the girls were now, always surprisingly sudden, and it probably still does. It was early November, the girls in the back were singing a Beatles song they had learned from one of my old records, 'Michelle' it was, from *Rubber Soul*, and that song you would not call a masterpiece, but they liked Paul McCartney, he wrote songs that were easy for children to sing. And really, it sounded quite good, even the lines that were supposed to be in French, sounded good, and I let go of the steering wheel as we drove the straight part of the road after Hellerudsletta towards Skjetten along the ridge and applauded as best I could.

It was good to have them both in the back seat. In that way they could talk to me about anything they wanted without having to look me in the eye, and I did not have to look *them* in the eye, and sometimes even they stopped looking at each other, and then the three of us would sit staring out of the windows each in our direction without saying anything at all, while the car rolled along, and we all knew that things were not as they ought to be. The girls knew it, and I knew it, and she who was not in the car, perhaps knew it best of all, and that was the reason she did not come with us on these trips.

This was the situation.

- Do you want to go fieldwatching, I would sometimes shout from the hallway, and the girls nearly always replied:

- Yes! from their two little bedrooms. - Yes, we do! and my wife would say:

- You just go. I'll stay here.

And that was the whole point. That was what she was supposed to say. If she had said:

- Yes, I want to come, then none of us would have known how a trip like that should be carried out, what to talk about, which roads to take. So we went, the girls and I, down the stairs to the garage, through the yellow metal doors that slammed hard and hollow behind our backs, and most often we would go north to Nittedal, and sometimes to Nannestad, if there was time enough, and even all the way up to Eidsvoll and the river there, crossing the fine cast iron bridge while we stared into the water that flowed right below us and then park in the centre of that very place to eat waffles in a café we had been to before. But what we liked most of all were the gravel roads between the fields, the bumpy grey roads along the meadows and grainfields, going past the chequered sheep pens and the old electric fences with the white porcelain knobs on the posts, past the rusty, half-collapsed barbed wire fences. Just driving along those roads singing Beatles songs, up hill, down hill, on and on around the bends ahead, and the curves, the way it was that autumn, in 1989, in the fading light in Nittedal, at Nannestad and all the way up to Eidsvoll, the trees by the streams blown bare, and see it all arching up the colour of straw, in vast sheets and expanding rectangles, and around some bends see an orange colour come sneaking into view with a sickly glow where the stubble fields had been sprayed with Roundup only days ago, and then see them turn into the colour purple and after that an all-consuming black where the farmers had ploughed the fields just in time before winter came falling, and all light was drained out of them and simply vanished. We drove a little faster past those scary spots and laughed a bit too and cried out in high-pitched frightened voices:

- Watch out, for Gods sake, we screamed. - Here comes a black hole!

And I had explained to them about black holes, how things were sucked into them and were gone, how lives were sucked down, whole worlds sucked down, maybe *our* world sucked down, and I swerved the car to the opposite verge, and the girls squealed in the back and we had a narrow escape. And then we sighed with relief and laughed again, as we had never been this close to the cosmic abyss, and sang *I should have known better* in harmony, while I hammered out the beat on the steering wheel.

And then the early dark descended and there was nothing more to see. Inside the car it grew dark around our shoulders and dark around our hands. Only the girls' hair was shining in the glow from the lights along the road, in red and in yellow, and the numbers glowed on the speedometer and the tiny blue light for the main beam went on and off with the oncoming traffic and we stopped our singing on the way past Skjetten and were silent on the bridge by Strømmen station.

Half a day might have passed since we left the garage beneath our block of flats at home, and by now we were famished, our heads were swimming and felt numb around the edges, if you could say that a head has edges, but none of us wanted to break the silence inside the dark in the car where the indicator only ticked in green flashes to the right of the dashboard for a last detour along the edge of the forest, around the big hospital in a sharp curve before we turned in front of the old church and began the climb up the steep hill to the suburb where we lived, and I badly wanted to know what the girls were thinking about in the back. What *I* was thinking about was my divorce that came closer with each day, quietly swooping like an owl through the night, even though it was still just something we had agreed on, no date, no season set, we two who had held together for fifteen years and had these girls between us, with their shiny hair in red and in yellow, or to be honest, it was something she alone had agreed on. My face felt like a mask, my mouth was dry. If someone had asked me, how do you feel now, I would say, it hurts right here, and point to a place at the top of

my chest, or rather at the very bottom of my throat. With each new morning, I left earlier for work. My eyelids stung when I sat on the bus. I did not know what I was facing. Perhaps it might get even worse, later, when I was all alone? I was afraid it would get worse. I was afraid of what it would do to my body, the pain I felt in my chest, that would get worse, the struggle to swallow the tiniest bit of food, that would get worse, and the unexpected numbness in my legs, my thoughts swirling around like damaged radiowaves, and in my sleep the wild, endless falls; all this would probably get worse, and then the shocking realisation that there was nothing I could do about it. No act of will would get me out of this state, no leap of thought pull me up. At times the only option was to sit in a chair and wait for the worst ravages to calm down so I could perform the most basic tasks, to cut a slice of bread, to go to the toilet, or drag myself all those exhausting metres through the hallway to lie down on my bed. Many times I just gave up and slept where I sat and each time woke up with a start and a crackling blue light in my head when I heard her key in the door.

What I could manage were these drives through this landscape, Nittedal, Nannestad, Eidsvoll. There was something about the colours just before winter descended, or the lack of them, something about the lines along the forest's edge and the bends in the road; I thought I might remember it all, when things were different. And there was the fact that I did not stand still, but on the contrary moved forward in my champagne coloured Mazda, or as on this day, early in November 1989, in a silver-grey Volkswagen Passat that was not my own. There was something about the girls, as well, sitting in the back singing 'Eleanor Rigby' and 'When I'm sixty-four', which were also written by Paul McCartney. I had never heard those songs sung this way before, and I thought, that too, was something I must never forget.

We came up the last hill in third gear, the road was long and steep and almost scary in winter when the ice lay shining in the wide curve, and then we drove

along on the top in a semicircle around the blocks of flats past the trees, and finally turned towards one of them and drove into the garage where the automatic door was already open because it was wrecked and had been so for weeks. I stopped almost at the far end of the garage and backed into the space where the number of my flat was painted in yellow on the raw concrete wall where you could see the imprint of the rough boards right down to the annual rings, and the girls closed their eyes tight shut, sucked the air down with a sharp sound and held it there, because this was a tight fit. On one occasion it went really wrong, and then there was a big fuss with a neighbour who had now moved out, I am glad to say. He lived in the flat above ours, and on some evenings I would hear his stereo blast at full volume and his wife shouting, Turn it down, for Gods sake.

This time it went without a hitch. I neatly slipped into my space with a good margin on both sides, and I praised my luck, as it was not my car, and we pulled ourselves out and slammed the doors hard, like we always did, to feel reckless, and the sound of it rolled down the long garage and came back again. I carefully checked that everything was according to regulations, the doors locked, the key in my pocket, before we walked up the stairs to the flat with me trailing reluctantly behind.

And then I entered the hall and walked into the kitchen, the living room, where everything was as it had been for almost ten years, the same posters on the walls, the same rugs on the floor, the same goddamn red armchairs, and yet not like that at all, not like it was in the beginning, when there was just the two of us against the world, just she and I, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, *there is just you and me*, we said to each other, *just you and me*, we said. But something had happened, nothing hung together any more, all things had spaces, had distances between them, like satellites, attracted to and pushed away at the same instant, and it would take immense willpower to cross those spaces, those distances, much more than I had available, much more than I had the courage to

use. And nothing was like it had been inside the car either, driving through three or four districts in Romerike, in eastern Norway, east of Oslo. There the car was wrapped around me, but up here, in the flat, things fell out of focus and spun off to all sides. It was like a virus on the balance nerve. I closed my eyes to true up the world, and then I heard the bathroom door open and her footsteps across the floor. I would have known them anywhere on earth, on any surface, and she stopped right in front of me. I could hear her breath, but not close enough to feel it on my face. She waited. I waited. In one of the bedrooms the girls were laughing out loud. There was something about her breath. It was never like that before. I kept my eyes closed, I squeezed them tightly shut. And then I heard her sigh.

- For Christ's sake, Arvid, she said. - Please stop that. It's so childish.

But I did not want to open my eyes. It was all so clear to see. She did not like me anymore. She did not want me.