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Author: © Jesper Wung-Sung
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Foreign Rights: jenny_thor@gyldendalgroupagency.dk
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Abridged Sample: *JUST MEN* (2014) by Jesper Wung-Sung

Translated from the Danish by Lindy Falk van Rooyen
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I walk through an empty house. It is like being in the wake of a natural catastrophe that has destroyed everything in its path. I follow the large muddy footprints—from the corridor to the guest room, from the guest room to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the bedroom, from the bedroom to the kid's room—as if I were hunting another man.

On the fridge, stuck under a ladybird magnet, there's a card with a photo no larger than a stamp. He's smiling, that guy, the guy with the tie. A man who has got it all figured out. I open the fridge door. Just a liter of milk, heavy as a brick.

There are bore holes in the wall, a white rectangle where the screen used to be. The Douglas fir floor. I could have denied it. Sworn that I had never set foot in the house. Never seen it before.

How can things change so much?

And what is left behind?

I remain standing in front of the window. The hedge is dark. There the play castle once stood. And I realize that I had long since made up my mind: First I will take his, then my own life.

It feels neither right nor wrong. It's as if we've already crossed that road, soaring above it, looking down.

It feels.

TWELVE WEEKS EARLIER

JON

I got off a bus at Svendborg Station only to get on another. We swung a large arc round the Catholic Church building, drove past The Cubic Statue, continued up along *Dronningemaen*, on past the library's low-slung, yellow-brick building, and out of town. In the descending sun's last remaining rays the broken strokes on the rain-smudged window looked like stalks of bamboo in a Chinese aquarelle. I imagined that I, similar to that big black cubic statue, was drained of all meaning beyond self-evident geometric significance, unable to think a single independent thought, and that this state of being would remain all the way over the three bridges leading to Langeland.

Svendborg Sound Bridge.

Siø Bridge.

And we were already one hundred meters up on Langeland Bridge, when I had to surrender, but it was a most unexpected figure catching up with me there, sitting on the last but one seat; it was a red-cheeked boy with a gun.

It wasn't something I'd given much thought, but last spring we'd had an incident at the Gymnasium where a pupil in his second last year had sat himself down in the girls' toilets with a gun.

A girl arrives early, she parks her bike in the shed, goes into the toilets by the hall to fix her hair, and is met with the shock of her life as she turns on the lights: He's sitting cross-legged on the floor and he has a gun in his mouth, as if he were sucking on a bong. The girl flees in tears. Shortly thereafter another girl comes through the door, and screams at the sight of the boy, still sitting in the same stationary posture, as if the gun had grown out of his mouth. It's someone from the cleaning staff, a Romanian man, who finally takes the gun from him and locks it in the boiler room. The boy appears to be willing, is led into the nearest classroom, where he only says one thing: If he may have a coke, please?

I always liked to arrive in good time, to acclimatize, to stand there, in an empty Gymnasium, alone with that soliloquy one's life can be, and accordingly, I'm one of the first adults on the chaotic scene that ensues before the police arrive. I'm standing

there in the girls' toilets, where only one of the girls' bags bears testimony of anyone having been there before me, when something prompts me walk directly to the fourth and final cubicle, look in the toilet, behind the toilet, and finally lift the lid of the cistern, where I find it—like a lost lipstick in a silver case—a cartridge belonging to a gun. Even so, I put it in my pocket, refrain from delivering it to the police, don't mention it to anyone. The next day, dropped in a plastic Irma bag filled with garbage, I toss the cartridge into the dumpster behind Anne's apartment block.

In due course the police were able to establish that the gun had never been loaded. The boy could be charged according to a lesser paragraph, but the media had gotten wind of the case that got coverage in the local weeklies, as well as a mention in various national morning papers, even TV2/Lorry aired a spot on the incident for three days in a row. Apart from the media, rumors about the boy circulated in the Gymnasium: It was said that his girlfriend had left him; that he was lonely; that he didn't have a dad. But as the gun had been empty, the case could be hushed up, dismissed as an highly inappropriate gimmick. The gun had been no more than a requisite in an ill-advised viewing of L.O.L by a generation without that unilateral verbal anchorage of my own generation, my parents' generation, and certainly the generation of my elder colleagues at the school. No, theirs was an explicitly visually oriented generation that had been spawned on Kubrick, and precisely therefore, *their* generation would see something entirely different in the tableau presented here; it would be regarded as an inter-textual postcard, a grotesque vignette, at very best, an anonymous letter of libelous intent—indeed, we teachers were very nearly obliged to swallow our ignorance together with a grand slice of humble pie and reward that pupil with a sky-high grade.

Also I had been singing from the front pew in that chorus of voices, but it was only once I was suspended in a bus below the arches of Langeland Bridge, that I was able to—perhaps even *dared* to—relate the incident to *myself*. During the unfolding of the actual events I had merely allowed myself to be swept along with the tide of words, I had simply noted with satisfaction that my act of missionary charity had been successful. The boy dropped out of school immediately, which, no doubt, helped to dampen the case. Even the local papers stopped writing about it. Within a fortnight, the matter was a lame duck as far as the media was concerned, and then came end-of-

term examinations, summer break, another teaching year, another summer holiday, and by the beginning of this week, I could've pitched up tanned and well-rested with a cleared desk, like everyone else. But I didn't. A week ago, I quit, I left Anne, and moved into a hotel on a side-road to Istedgade in Copenhagen, and sitting in a bus with a metallic taste in my mouth, I was obliged to admit that also the boy with the gun was, in some way connected to the man I am. No, I had not been in the right. The gulf between generations is not as fundamental as I had thought.

I got off the bus at Rudkøbing Bus Terminal that is no more than two kiosk-sized waiting rooms of glass and red-painted planks on either side of Ringvej. I lit a fag, swung my sports bag over my shoulder, and turned down Nørrebro that led me down a lane of villas with lighted window panes and on past the houses on Ørstedsgade; the sound of my steps on the warm, rain-moist road to Rudkøbing *city*.

Music from the café escaped through a ventilation grid in the alley between the two buildings. I stood on the opposite pavement having a smoke as a postal van slowly bumped over the cobbled stones on the square, its headlights lighting up the statue of Mads Lange at the foot of the stairs to the deserted, Classicist Town Hall. I stubbed out my fag, switched my bag from my right- to left hand, and crossed the square. I opened the door as a man dressed differently to the boy of yore and was hard-pressed to conjure up the corresponding, twenty-year-old youth inherent in the man standing there, dressed in a horrendously expensive suit, albeit creased, because I'd slept in it. The liberating aspect of fashion is that it has no core, or perhaps its ultimate extenuating circumstance is distilled in the idea that all of us—at all times—including right *now*, look ridiculous. Just wait and see.

I don't know what I'd expected. The walls were rust-red, applied with a sponge, and the location, with its spotlights *en miniature* in the ceiling, could've served as a bygone set of a sweeping Hollywood epic on the Life and Times of Stone Age Man. With an accelerated pulse between tables and chairs of imitation chrome and leather I headed for the bar.

The guy standing side-on behind the bar continued writing a message on his phone, he was wearing a T-shirt that exposed his muscular upper arms and a tattooed band of

black slugs wrapped around his biceps. I stowed the sports bag under the bar stool like a dog. The guy didn't look up, turning to face me just those few seconds too late, time enough to register that trill in my stomach, that familiar desire to *do* something. In recent years I had channeled that kind of energy into literary analyses of the first- and last pages of the world, reading thousand-year-old manuscripts in a room filled with students, but now it made me lean my weight onto the balls of my feet and clench my hand into a fist. The bartender, ten years my junior, bore the name of the location on the breast of his T-shirt. I didn't recognize him, and either he'd topped the scales of absence of mind, perfected his poker face, or he just didn't recognize me either.

What can I get you?

A large beer.

I threw a glance over my shoulder only to have confirmed what I'd seen, when I came in: Three elderly drunks at the gaming machines; a table of very young kids—two girls and two boys—and a middle-aged couple, perhaps tourists, who were making short thrift of a late dinner of the burgers of the house. A multifunctional location—bar, youth centre, café and restaurant, and, much later, a club—just as any place would have to be to increase its chances of survival down here. No one I knew.

Nice and quiet here, I said.

We are nice and quiet.

Does Peter Sørensen come here?

The guy put the beer down in front of me. Thirty percent foam, that false cordiality, and the balls of my feet were bobbing up and down on the foot-rest.

Doesn't ring a bell.

Big man, very big. Light hair. Carpenter.

The guy rapped his knuckles on the bar counter, as if he could conjure up Peter from a room out back.

He did the bar. That's the last time I saw him.

How long ago was that?

Two years. Maybe three.

A family man?

I wouldn't know anything 'bout that. But it's happy hour. If you drink up, you can get another for half price, he said, looking at me vacantly. Just so you know.

There was an oblong mirror mounted to the wall behind the bar, and I watched the clientele sitting in the room behind me. To the left of the mirror, the only faces that triggered some recognition. I counted them: Eleven men engaged in congenial man-talk over their packed lunches on a steel beam suspended over the skyline of New York. If you paddled your way up a river to an unknown Indian tribe in a spot darker than the heart of darkness, that photo would probably be nailed to wall in a hut. When I looked at it, I could be anywhere in the world, but I was home. I raised my arm, downing half the beer in four-or-five gulps.

The spotlights were dimmed, the music louder, but they stood firm, eleven men, and as the beers rolled aboard, I had to ask myself with increasing urgency: Was it a complete soccer team, or was just *one* disciple missing? And why had I come home?

I noted that the volume was increasing to the level of noise, that the location was full of people, and that I no longer was sober enough to keep an eye on the door. Still more activity to my left and right at the bar. I let folk stare in my direction, till I turned my head. Or didn't. At one point, someone called, *Hi Jon*, followed by a *what's up?* from a face I vaguely identified as belonging to someone I used play soccer with, but which otherwise failed to trigger any associations in one direction or another. The average age in the room had dropped considerably, local girls with painted make-up and peacock hair-dos, long-armed, shifty moped-boys in T-shirts, and a couple of biker-blokes with two millimeters of stubble on their heads.

I noticed that she was staring at me, and that she'd been staring for a long time. *Theeito de koure*—and the girl looked and looked. Her face didn't ring any bells. She was drunk, stoned, or perhaps something else, like dumb. If I let my glance glide in her direction, she didn't shift her own. It was difficult to judge her age. There was something teenager-like about the cheeks and chin that belied the dark circles under her eyes, the furrows alongside the nose, and the wrinkles around the mouth, a mouth that now opened with a flash from the ring pierced in her bottom lip.

What are you gawking at?!

If you didn't look so pissed off, I'd think you were flirting.

She didn't answer, but turned to face the bartender, the tendons in her thin neck straining below the jawbone.

A large beer—he's paying.

This said without looking at me. She was wearing a black top with thin straps and whichever way she turned, a new tattoo came to the fore. On the shoulder, some kind of sun, on the neck, a constellation of stars, and over the left breast, screwed up under the tight-fitting bra, a name in curling letters.

If you'd been here during Happy Hour, I'd have bought you two.

It sounded a lot smarter than I felt. To be honest, I was more than willing to buy absolution from whoever felt they deserved it in this establishment. I combed faces and body language for signs of any deductions being made about me; an accident, a young boy, who had killed himself on his way home from town. As if nobody had thought of anything else in the last seventeen years! As if it wasn't something that only a few people would remember! And for how many of those would it carry any *weight* at all? Many of the people present would barely have been in kindergarten when it happened. And that girl just had a well-developed sense for an uncle-buy-me-a-round, and in that case, you better buy her one. She'd come to the right uncle at the right time.

Cheers.

She looked at me as she drank, only returned my '*cheers*' afterwards, and then burped loudly.

Trays of shots were lifted over our heads. Somebody at the door let off some fireworks to the sound of whoops and squeals of laughter. The girl didn't turn her head in the direction of the smoke, she turned to the bartender instead, pointing to our glasses.

She was drinking with closed eyes, and she was drinking hard. I ordered two more.

Cheers, Daisy!

She shut her eyes for a long time; then she lowered her forehead, as if she wanted to head-butt me.

Natasja, she said.

Jon.

She nodded, but this time she drank too fast, half the beer ran down her chin, her neck, and disappeared between her breasts, but she didn't bat an eye, and I couldn't decide whether she was attractive, or repulsive—perhaps repulsive in an attractive

way—but I was nearing that point where that kind of thing becomes irrelevant, when all you have to do is follow through.

It was only when she reached out and stuck her hand under my shirt that I realized who she was, that she was Christian's little sister, and my heart hammered away with me as she drew a hand across my stomach, as if looking for a scar by which she would know me. I could see by the look on her face that she didn't find it.

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