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Abridged Sample: *True Fractions* (2009) by Jesper Wung-Sung

Translated from the Danish by Lindy Falk van Rooyen
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[p.7-9]

(Janus)

Three years, ten months, eight days. So long the young Caligula reigns as Caesar of Rome before he is stabbed to death in a dark gallery where he had paused briefly to observe and encourage the dance of two Asian boys. A couple of leaps and pirouettes propel the lads behind the pillars and all at once Caligula is surrounded by rapidly advancing shadows and gleaming blades. Up to 100 times they stab their knives into him and his body, not only into his neck, breast and belly, but also his thighs and arms and repeatedly into his crotch and face. They hack away at his mouth and eyes as if they – on behalf of the masses – wish to revenge three years, ten months and eight days of tyranny. But most of all, because Caligula screams like a pig. And keeps screaming. He screams: *I am alive! I am alive! I am still alive!*

Janus knows all about the Roman Empire and its Caesars. His history teacher has long since thrown in the towel with a sigh and last list of books to read.

But in summer break before his final year, he stumbles upon the Forum Romanum. The curtains are drawn on the world, its 25 degrees centigrade and that lawn his father has no illusions about him mowing. And all at once, he's in!

Sat in front of the screen, Janus perceives instinctively that any measure of knowledge accumulated to date had been mere pop-quiz trivia. It is only now he would begin to learn. To understand the world.

You can't even log in without passing a test. A test on everything, whether it be the simplest pop-tourist-lexicon-trivia about the Palatine and Capitoline Hills, the latter's development from a marshy marketplace and burial ground to the centre of the world, or the likes of more detailed untranslated research, like the chronology and interpretation of Elagabalus' 5. prodigium.

It works.

He punches in the access code and Janus feels as if he's entering a virtual time machine that opens a massive, wooden port to a thousand-year-old Rome: He gropes his way forward to the nearest gigantic pillar, hides behind it, presses his body up against its surface, traces the column's cannellure, kneads its gritty, stony surface between his fingers, over and over again, till he can see the impression of its ionic shape in the palm of his hand, takes deep breaths of air, which billow the toga from his body and casts himself head-over-heels, out and into this world of messengers and marketplaces, whores and pickpockets, soldiers and senators and, soaring above it all like a luminous spirit, the Emperor.

*

(Marcus)

Three years, ten months, eight days. So long – or so short! – Caligula reigns as Caesar of Rome, till he is killed.

Marcus logs in as Incitatus II.

The name, as such, borrowed from that horse, which Caligula appoints as Consul.

It is an appointment that remains as a single weak, yet effective joke in the collective conscious of mankind, a quirky detail, which defines and brands imperial reign in general – and the reign of Caligula in particular – as a succession of barbaric regimes of insanity.

Popular history has long since lost sight of the context of events, which cannot be reduced to a single joke.

Even the brightest, most concise of experts assembled in the Forum Romanum, Servilius Glyco, fails to appreciate the full import of the issue. He sees it merely as some kind of jocular demonstration of power. A victor's madcap one-upmanship. Whereas the issue, in truth – like all else about Caligula – can be traced back to the death of his sister, Drusilla.

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[p. 19-20]

(Janus & Marcus)

It is 00:27 Sunday night.
The screen seems to throb like a heavy heart.
It isn't a middle-aged professor
from an overseas university.
The person is a Dane.
The man lives in the same city.
No. They are the same age.
They are both in their final year, in the city Gymnasium.
It feels like scoring in the final
just before the whistle blows.
It feels like drawing a line under a magical conclusion.
It feels like falling deeply, madly, head-over-heels in love.

*

I

It is Monday, and as far as Janus is concerned everything can be boiled down to one sentence: Nobody can tell me what to do!

Janus has taken a bath. He can't remember when he'd last taken a bath. A week. Maybe 14 days. It's all part of the trap: we're supposed to think with our hair instead of our heads. We're told to have a bath a certain number of times a year, and if we comply, revolutions will be stayed! In the end it's all sponsored by a huge shampoo consortium that operates in accordance with the laws of direct proportion between the number of baths taken and the amount of money in the pot; every extra blob of shampoo in our hair is a scam to the tune of millions! They don't want to hear our voices, they just want to suck us dry.

It is Monday morning, and Janus goes to assembly. Something he habitually fails to do: all those people, all that false sense of community. Folly-fops and pop-people. *There isn't a soul in high school I've got a single thing in common with.* This is what Janus thinks.

But there is one.

Thé one.

Incitatus II.

Janus skims the hundreds of faces in assembly hall. He doesn't usually take notice of the other students, he barely knows the names of half his classmates.

Janus finds himself staring at the guys who resemble Caligula – as he imagines Caligula to be. Janus studies one face after another – but it could be just about anyone! This is how he sees himself: nobody has a clue who I am.

...

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10:12 *Marcus*

There's a guy running down the corridor in front of me. For some reason or other he's still wearing his bag on his back. Perhaps he thinks it will protect him, perhaps he's got something valuable in it, perhaps the bag itself is of great value. Or maybe he just thinks he's on his way to class.

Then he drops it after all. It slides off the left shoulder, remains hanging by one strap, the weight shifts, it tips, and because the zip is undone, books and papers tumble out. There is an awkward halt in his progress, a backward jerk of the neck, as if he were in two minds to stop, bend down and pick up what he's lost.

And then he accelerates. He sprints.

He runs okay.

I straddle the contents of his bag. The titles reveal that he's a 10th grader, that they have gotten as far as the 30's.

I have half a mind to scan the contents, but I stop myself, that would be a cliché, and this isn't like a videogame. Nor is it like sex. Or being drunk. I don't know what it's like. If I had to write an essay about it, I wouldn't know what to write. I'd have to copy something, an assignment with an average grade, written by an Oliver or a Mikkel, who hasn't had any difficulty jotting a couple of lines on a piece of paper. Because they just spew it all out. Don't give it a thought. Because this isn't anything they take seriously, either. Just more of the same. Just blablabla ... line after line after line ... page up, page down ... Bla ... Bla ... Bla!

XII

It is Friday, and Marcus tries once more. It is the second Friday, and Marcus begins with his body.

The body must go for a run, and Marcus must fit into it.

Yesterday, it disappeared. Or he did. It was no longer *him*.

Marcus is in bed with Anna, when it happens.

He has experienced it once before. After the concert. That it just keeps going. Because he's thinking about every conceivable other thing; a thousand thoughts exploding in his head while he pumps away like a machine. He has to lie on his stomach to hide the fact that it's still hard as iron.

But this is worse.

He only notices it afterwards.

When Anna sighs.

—That was amazing! she gasps. She turns to kiss what must be him.

—I can't feel my legs ... that was so good ... you are so wonderful ...

She must have stuck her tongue in my ear.

She thinks I've come. She must have come for both of us.

And he gets as far as thinking *it's still hard*, when he realizes that he's not sure it is there at all.

Anna rolls over and checks the clock.

—One and a half hours! she laughs. Digs her teeth into what must be his shoulder.

Whispers something in an ear.

—I love you.

Somewhere in his mind Marcus thinks: *This looks like something I haven't dared to face, like an irrefutable truth: Never has it been so good, never have I been so distant.*

Marcus sends Anna home. He knows he cannot explain it, that it doesn't make any sense, but he cannot bear the thought of her sleeping in bed next to *someone else*.

Afterwards, a naked body is standing before a mirror. Marcus stares at it. Shoulders, rib cage, the trimmed stomach, penis, thigh muscles, legs – right down to the white scar on the right big toe, exactly the same spot, where *his* scar is.

Marcus' body is a back stage. He remains standing there till he's convinced the real McCoy will emerge from his navel. From behind an ear. And all at once the body takes on a distinct shape and identity: He is the size of a big coin, looks like a large piece of wax popcorn and his name is Mr. Canute. For some reason or other Marcus imagines that Mr. Canute is the born entertainer; the soul of every party. The kind of fellow who switches elegantly from an Italian aria to a dull joke, the kind of person, who is just too much and who, at the end of the day, you just cannot stand.

But Marcus is not so far gone that he cannot see exactly who Mr. Canute is.

Mr. Canute is a tumescent cancer; Mr. Canute is a forty-ton truck; Mr. Canute is a steel wire that snaps; Mr. Canute is a bloodsucking wood tick; Mr. Canute is five blokes with boots a-kicking.

Marcus feels only this, that he has just *one* chance: to beat Mr. Canute at his own game. This is why Marcus is going to kill himself. But as Marcus stands there with the contents of his mother's pillbox cupped in his hand, he realizes that this is not an option. A way out. You can never beat Mr. Canute at his own game, never be the one that decides. If the curtain falls, it's because Mr. Canute has decided that the curtain shall fall. Marcus returns the pills to their box, *one for one*.

And then he writes to Janus. But what he writes, he writes to himself. A vital note. He reminds himself what a normal teenager should be thinking about. What should fill his life:

Anna
football
The final exam

So Marcus forces the body to run. It must be jerked into line; it must release those hormones, which give the kick, give us the will to live.

...

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10:35 *Janus*

Marcus is sitting on a chair in the middle of assembly hall. He is bent over, his forearms resting on his thighs, as if he were in a locker room. I can see that his shirt is drenched with sweat.

—Where are they? he asks.

He's holding the gun in his hands in a way that reminds me how, as a child, you could fish for crabs and sticklebacks the whole day long.

—I was certain that everyone would congregate here, he says. —That we would all sit here, together.

I grab hold of a chair.

—They're obviously only thinking of themselves.

He nods, and I let myself dump into the chair in front of him.

He looks at me for a long time.

—Shall I?

I nod, and all at once I feel so terribly tired.

I can barely summon the energy to move my head.

But I manage to do so.

I rest my forehead against the muzzle.

I wait.

It doesn't feel unpleasant, more like the pressure of a massage.

And then ... nothing.

That life, which ought to pass before my eyes, stays jammed in the gun.

How fucking symbolic is that!

No movie, neither high-speed, slow motion, nor as much as a single zoom.

Nothing.

I drop my chin to my chest as the gun is removed from my forehead.

As though he had seen the empty thought bubble above my head.

—No. says Marcus. —You shoot me first.