

Packed Lunch

Hans Jespersen, aged forty-four, had only one arm, though no one mentioned it, hoping that he had forgotten.

Hans was an early riser. The rest of the family were early risers too. At 6:45 a.m. precisely, the old brass alarm clock clanged loudly, shattering any dreams that might still be in progress, and in one easy flowing move that suggested one-armed poetry in motion, Hans shut off the noise and climbed from bed. Meanwhile, his wife stirred slightly and unenthusiastically. Hans pulled open one of the curtains and was greeted by a gloomy and leaky and oppressive gathering of clouds, hanging about with characteristic unwillingness to move along please.

Dressed in a dark blue flannel dressing gown, Hans walked purposefully onto the landing towards the bathroom, knocking once—and once only—on the bedroom doors of his two sons, calling, "Morning," sharply after each knock. This was the Monday to Friday routine. Saturday and Sunday were exactly alike.

He busied his one-armed self in the bathroom, accidentally seeing, in the mirror, a face that still held a hint of youth; but Hans knew otherwise: the hint of youth was really the past laughing at him.

He took his tooth brush from the rack, placed it carefully on the ledge beneath the mirror, gawkily removed the top from a tube of paste and carefully squeezed out the stripes. It was an awkward business; one of countless daily reminders that he was missing an arm—actually three-fifths: there was a stump of it still remaining. It was, if nothing else, a spectacular deformity.

Hans Jespersen was born in Silkebarg, Denmark. He had been, essentially—and especially according to his mother—a perfect baby, with all the right limbs and all the left limbs and all the required body pieces. As a child, people in the town had always remarked what a pretty boy he was, impressed, no doubt, by his complete collection of parts. When his mother took him out for walks, old ladies blocked their way, tugged his cheeks fondly and gave him five Øre from their purses, saying, "Er han ikke sød." What a cute fellow. And it happened to be the truth. And then Hans reached an age where the compliments—and money—dried up. Even frue Christensen, the old widow next door, stopped her flattery. It was the ensuing silence that suggested the potential power of his good looks.

By the time Hans had returned to the bedroom to dress, his wife had taken herself well and truly out of the way, downstairs, to begin her housewife work that was certainly no labour of love.

Hans, after the usual struggle to dress, appeared in the kitchen holding the morning paper in the only hand he had. He was wearing a black suit with crisp creases, a light grey shirt, a Christmas gift from one of his sons—though he could not recall which—and a thin black tie.

His wife was preparing breakfast.

"Are the boys not down yet?" Of course, the answer was self evident, and her silence was taken as a kind of reply.

Hans, sitting at the kitchen table, flicked one-handedly through the newspaper. When his wife silently served tea, Hans, rather than offering thanks—the words, after all, could easily provoke displeasure—recognised her effort by taking a sip.

John and Michael appeared and joined him at the table.

They were no longer children: John was sixteen, Michael seventeen. They were strapping young men, both with a shock of blonde hair and powerful features.

"Anything in the paper?" John asked. His mother brought them tea.

"Not really," he answered. Hans, a resident in England for almost a quarter of a century, had steeped himself in the national character like a tea bag in boiling water; and now it was not only appropriate, but second nature for him to live in the glory of the past; to avoid looking reality straight in the eye. So there was nothing in the newspaper: bad news was no news.

"I forgot to tell you," Hans said, looking reluctantly at his wife, who was now serving a greasy breakfast. "I won't have time to go out for lunch today. There's a lot on." John and Michael glanced at each other, surreptitiously.

"All right. Will cheese and tomato do?" Her tone suggested the question was actually a veiled threat.

"Lovely."

After a few minutes, his eyes left the inky pages of the newspaper and he turned to his two sons, who were talking about a certain girl they knew.

"How's the job hunting coming along, John?"

"Michael," Michael corrected him. "Not too well."

"I'm not surprised. Unskilled jobs are like gold dust these days. I told you that when you dropped out of school."

"Something'll turn up. Besides, I was thinking of going on Social Security—in the mean time."

Hans paused for a long moment, half shaking his head and half not shaking his head. What would the neighbours think? He never actually spoke to his neighbours, but if he did,

what would they think?

"Are you sure you should? I mean, it sounds a bit . . . well a bit . . ."

"It's just an idea."

"What is?" It was the proximity that scared him, and Hans had quietly slipped away.

"The Social Security."

"Or yes." He pronounced "oh" like "or." It was a safer word. It was like admitting that he might be wrong, and so there was no need to argue. "It's just that it seems a bit . . . drastic."

"Like I said, it's just an idea."

"What do you think, Michael?" he asked, turning to John.

"John. I don't know. It's up to him."

Hans's wife returned to the room: "Do we have to have arguing at the breakfast table?"

No-one dared answer, and a fearful silence joined them like an unwelcomed guest.

If only—Hans did not think—there was a way out. But there was no way out. Even if his love was all used up, sapped away over the one armed years, there was no way out. Hans knew she still loved him. Madly, she still loved him. The quick-tempered words, scolding looks, the affection she never showed, they were all testament to her eternal-overwhelming-couldn't-live-without-it love. So there was no way out. For pity's sake, there was no way out.

Hans stood to leave.

"Your sandwiches are on the counter," his wife said. Hans was putting on his suit jacket. The left sleeve, like the left sleeves of all his clothes, was pinned back. He picked up his packed lunch and offered a well phrased, "I'll be off then," which renounced any obligation to reply. The

door slammed and they heard the sqwunch sqwunch as he walked over the wet gravel of the drive. The two brothers looked at one another.

"Shall I check?" John asked.

"Better," Michael answered.

John stood and walked over to the bay window, lined with long trickles of rain. Outside, Hans had reached the car. He placed his packed lunch on the shiny white roof and fished in his pocket for the keys. He found them, opened the door, removed them and climbed inside. It was an awkward business. With a slam, the door was shut.

"He's forgot," John said, hurrying away from the window and out of the house.

"Dad!" he called. The car was beginning to pull away with the packed lunch still sitting on the roof. "Dad!"

It was a thirty minute drive from Edging Close to the office in St. John's Wood. Hans Jespersen was always the first to arrive. Normally, he checked and revised his agenda until his secretary arrived at 8:30. The British Swimming Federation employed five people and was headed by a one-armed foreigner who could not, for obvious one-armed reasons, swim. It was an open plan office, separated into different sections by portable screens that had never been moved. Hans's secretary appeared at the far end of the room.

Even before her coat was completely off she asked, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please."

Agnes's secretarial skills were far from adequate, but she could brew a lovely cup of tea. Besides, she had other qualifications, and as she slipped out of her coat, Hans furtively appraised them.

Hans was soon busy, shuffling papers from one file to another, like a magician spellbound by his own familiar tricks; barely noticing as the others arrived, one by one, soaking wet and complaining about the rain.

When Hans looked up from a drug testing paper—an urgent case that required attention sometime that year—the office was empty. He glanced at the clock on the wall, its second hand sweeping up time like the brush of a conscientious char-lady, and saw it was already after twelve. As usual, Hans had been left alone. He took out his packed lunch and thought about being left alone.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—his first year in Odense University. His major was physical education, and all the girls showed keen interest in his athletic body. Several weeks passed before he began to realise the possibilities, the power of his looks; but then, like a cannibal suddenly and unexpectedly set free in a Christian town, half crazed with the flavour of female flesh, Hans began to gorge.

When the summer holidays came around, rather than return to Silkebarg, where his parents would certainly frown on his copious gobbling, Hans set out on a hiking tour of the Lake District. It was his first visit to England.

Hans wandered over hill and dale; an attraction in all the small villages. He was invited to spend the night in several houses, where cheerful farmer's wives tempted him with home cooking—and Hans never turned down a free meal. The young country girls, he found, made tasty deserts.

But there was one girl, from Windermere, who was not like the rest. For one thing she was actually good looking. She was an English rose called, strangely enough, Rose.

Hans chewed his cheese and tomato sandwich mechanically, hardly bothering to notice the flavour.

Agnes and a young man, whose name Hans could never remember, were the last to arrive from lunch. They were fifteen minutes late, yet still looked hungry. As they came in, Hans looked at his watch, making a certain expression involving special manipulations of the cheek muscles that was his own safe, silent way of going, "Tut tut."

He knew they all laughed at him. Agnes and what's his name and him and the other. They were irritated by the sight of his one armed body, and made nasty jokes behind his back. Of course, he had never heard any of the nasty jokes behind his back, but he knew nevertheless. At least they pretended to be nice. They pretended to be nice and Hans pretended to be nice. The English were good at doing that, and he was one of them.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—how he had been drawn back to England, like a criminal returning to the scene of the crime. He had found a job teaching physical education at St. Vincent's High School, in Brent Cross. Naturally enough, thoughts of Rose began to slip back into his mind, where they twisted and turned and showed a willingness to please. He decided to write to her. He had the paper, the pen, though his unbridled fantasies seemed to have robbed him of things to say.

It was summer. Hans took the train up to Windermere. It was late when he arrived, so he checked into a Bed and Breakfast, took a solitary drink in the local pub, and then retired to bed.

The next morning he awoke early and scampered out before

breakfast. Rose lived in an old house with her parents, opposite the cemetery, and Hans crouched behind the headstone of Mr. M. Welks, who died in 1924 at the age of fifty-three. From there he was offered an uninterrupted view of her red front door.

It was after eight o'clock when he finally turned out the lights of the deserted office.

At home, his wife was watching television.

"Are the boys out?" he greeted her.

"Yes," she said. Hans left her to her soapy programmes and retired to the study to read.

At ten o'clock they went to their separate beds. Hans looked over in the half and half darkness and saw the space between their beds like an enormous chasm. Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—the last time he had tried, for her sake, to bridge that yawning space. She had felt hard and unyielding—he did not recall—like an alabaster column lying on its side. Even then it was a pointless gesture. Ever since John had been born—the same year as the car crash, when Hans had lost his arm, when the surgeon had chopped away his symmetry—she had gone off sex. It was funny how having babies made them go off sex. So Hans watched her in the darkness, wishing she did not love him, wishing she could live without him, and then went to sleep.

Knocking once—and once only.

The next morning, at breakfast, Hans again informed his wife that he would be requiring a packed lunch.

"Will egg do?"

"You work too hard, dad," John said.

"I don't have any choice, Michael. The season starts in a few weeks."

"John," Michael corrected him with a sympathetic smile.

"Can't you ever get their names right?" Hans's wife stood and stomped off into the kitchen.

"What time did you two get in last night?" Hans asked, as if nothing had happened.

"Around twelve," Michael answered.

"Isn't that a tad late?" Hans loved words like "tad." Words like "tad" were what separated the English from the not English.

"No."

"Or. Fair enough."

"Besides, we were only at Linda's," John added.

"Linda?"

"Linda Watlin," Michael said.

"Linda Watlin," he repeated.

Linda Watlin had a certain reputation in the neighbourhood. Even Hans, who never deliberately spoke to anyone in the street, had heard of her antics.

"Or, yes. I know who you mean."

"She's nice." John said.

"I'm sure she is. She's quite a . . . lively girl, I think."

Hans's wife was listening from the kitchen. Both the boys were having sex with the local harlot, probably at the same time, and all he could say was, "She's quite a lively girl." She could forgive the boys, but not him. She was tormented by his presence. She could hardly bear to look at him. His incomplete body was like a dirty joke with no punch line. But it was not only his obscene one-armed body that repulsed her, but his obscene one-armed mind as well.

Worst, she could see too much of him in John and Michael.

"She's a bit young, isn't she?" Hans offered.

"Who?"

"Linda"

"Not really. She's fifteen," Michael said.

"Or, really? I never knew." He saw them taking the same road he had taken at their age, and knew nothing short of amputation could change it.

"Any way. What do you have on for today, John?" Hans asked, turning to Michael.

Hans left for work. As he began to pull out of the drive the youngest of his sons appeared at the door and called out, "Dad! Dad! Your packed lunch is on the roof."

Agnes and what's his name arrived at the same time. Hans knew they had spent the night together and felt a nostalgia laced with envy.

Late that afternoon, Hans telephoned home. Michael answered.

"Is your mother there?"

Just a minute." He called out.

"Yes?"

"It's me. I'll be working late tonight. I have some work to finish. I should be back around ten or so."

"Right." And they hung up.

Hans's wife sat at the table, smoking a cigarette. She was about to make up her mind twice and for all. It was a big joke, all this "working late." He was going off to visit his whore. She knew only a whore could stomach the sight of his deformed body, could feel his touch without wanting to vomit. He was going to pay money and the whore would do sex to him. She must be an ugly whore too. A desperate whore.

It was six o'clock and every one had left. The office was nice like that, Hans thought, with no eyes watching his incomplete body. There was a lot to be said for solitude. He closed up a folder, placing it neatly on his desk. He stood up, stretched his solitary arm, tired from too much sitting down. The left sleeve of his shirt had unfastened, hung down ridiculously, but there was no one around to laugh and so he seemed now like a tragic figure, like an aging clown with no audience.

Hans packed away his things, closed his briefcase and stood to leave. He paused by the door, making sure the office was in order before turning off the lights. Outside a fine drizzle fell through the darkness; the wet paths and roads reflected the lights of the world above.

When Hans came to park his car in Walnut rise, Islington—he always parked the car several houses up the street, to avoid suspicion—the rain had stopped, though tiny drifting balls of moisture still hung in the air.

Hans, crouching behind the headstone, had been watching the red door for almost two hours. Finally, he admitted the secret vigil was futile and set to out to walk the lake shore for a while. Later, in *The Horse and Hounds*, which was Rose's local, he ordered a pint of Bitter.

"Ah, that's a nice drop of beer. I needed that," he said to the young bar man, wiping his mouth on his mouth.

"Aye," he agreed. "Aye, ya right there."

"Can I offer you one?"

"That's nice of ya. A'll just 'ave an 'arf though." The bar man pulled himself a glass.

"Cheers." They both took leisurely drinks. Besides Hans,

there were only two old men in the pub, playing dominoes and drinking half-heartedly by the unlit fire.

"It's quiet in here."

"It'll liven up in a bit. Round about twelve."

"Oh, yes. I forgot how early it is. It's been a long morning."

"Ya've got quite an accent there." Actually, Hans had almost no accent. "Where ya from?"

"Denmark."

"Denmark? What the 'ell ya doin' up 'ere then?" We don't get many of your lot in these parts. Just a minute though, 'aven't a seen ya before. A few years ago, there was a fella 'ere from somewhere like that."

"Yes, that was me. I used to come in here with Rose Waterhouse."

"Aye, now a remember. That ya did. Ya were on an 'iking tour."

"That's right. Do you know if Rose is still around?"

"Rose? Nor round 'ere, that's fer sure. She slung 'er 'ook a while back."

"Where to?" Hans felt his heart fall into his stomach.

"Ya got me on that 'n'. From what I 'eard, she 'ad a big row wiv 'er mam 'n' dad or summat, 'n' wnet wiv out tellin' any one where to."

"When was that?"

"A while back. Last year mebbe."

"And nobody knows where she is?"

"I don't fink so."

Hans stayed in Windermere for a few more days; finally, with admitted relief, climbing on board the train and heading back to London.

The next day, Hans found himself strolling sure footedly

about Piccadilly, looking at the menu of passing girls. Hans not only had good looks on his side, but nationality and language too. When he picked up foreign girls, he pretended to be from North London, knowing that they wanted to sleep with an Englishman as a kind of souvenir. When they were natives, he presented himself as a Scandinavian, spoke with an accent, and sleeping with them was like giving them a free holiday abroad.

He saw a girl, French by the looks of her, struggling with an uncooperative map that had unfolded itself completely and seemed intent on withholding information.

"Are you lost?" Hans offered with a smile.

"I don't know," she said, "I t'ink so."

Summer drew on, and the failed trip to the Lake District receded into the mists of memory, until finally it disappeared completely. Meanwhile, Hans continued to stalk the streets, to guzzle and groan, obsessed.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—the excitement of those early days, when life gasped, out of breath. His body was a temple, his cunning a god, with a world of flickering long-lashed eyes watching, offering, praising him.

And then, just before the start of the new term, he did not recall, Hans found himself repeatedly, yes repeatedly sleeping with the same girl. He had found her working in a baker's shop and had offered, in no uncertain terms, to knead her dough.

"I bet you have a different girl here every day," she had said.

"No. I rest on Sundays."

And then they were married . . .

The damp air clung to Hans. He breathed a tremendous sigh, checked to see if he had his wallet, straightened his tie, glanced at the time, and knocked on the red door of number two Walnut Rise. When the door opened, he said, "Hello," and stepped inside.

"Hello," a woman answered, closing the door behind him. She was wearing a pink dressing gown, which hung loosely, revealing a large portion of her right breast.

Hans could remember, if he wanted—which he did not—the day before his wedding. It was a Friday, and the headmaster, "In view of the circumstances," he had said, offered Hans the day off.

With nothing else to do, Hans took the tube to the West End. He strolled around the familiar streets, enjoying the warmth of the autumn sun, his mind blank. He was in love, though far from certain he was ready to marry, and had decided the best thing to do was not think about it.

Sitting himself down on a bench beside Leicester Square, Hans began to notice the girls walking by, and wondered if he might have one last snack. He was, in fact, feeling exceedingly peckish. Coming towards him, dressed in a tight black skirt that stopped above the knee, and white stockings and blouse, was a girl who's every movement seemed an invitation to gobble and devour, to Guzzle and deflower, to ravish, masticate, consume. Hans had no choice.

"Excuse me," he said, standing as she came up. "Don't I know you?"

"Hans!" she said.

"Whoops," he thought. "I must've had her already."

"Flip in Ek," she said. "What a surprise."

And then he realised who she was: "Rose! Goodness me. Rose Waterhouse. I heard you were in London."

"You did? 'Ow's that then?"

"I was up at Windermere, early this summer. I tried to look you up."

"Ya saw mi mam 'n' dad?"

"No, no. The bar man in The Horse and Hounds told me."

"Ya 'ere on 'oliday then?"

"No, I live here. In Brent Cross."

"Ya don't! Flip!"

"Listen, are you in a hurry to go somewhere?"

"No."

"Good, let's go have a drink then."

They walked from Leicester Square towards Charring Cross Road and stopped into the first public house they saw, which happened to be the third along the way. As they walked through the doorway, Hans slipped his arm around her narrow waist for a moment, as if helping her step up onto the carpet.

"What would you like?"

"Just a bitter lemon."

"Nothing stronger?"

"No. It's still too early."

Hans ordered drinks and they sat themselves at a table. He was wondering, during all this, if he should tell her about the marriage business. He wanted her and could not decide how to play it.

"Ya rEnglish is good."

"It was always good."

"A know. Ya sound more fancy now though."

"So what made you move down to London, Rose?"

"A should be asking you the same fing. Me, a just felt

like it. When you went back ta Denmark, everything seemed borin'. Really borin'. So finally a got up the guts to leave. A'll tell ya somefin, a should've moved away years ago."

"How old are you? I've forgotten."

"Twenty-one."

"Mmm."

"What about you? How come ya live 'ere now."

"I don't know really. There was a job available, I applied, I got it, and here I am."

"Where ya working?"

"St. Vincent's, in Brent Cross."

"Fancy. You're really a P.E. teacher then?" Rose was clearly impressed.

"I missed you, you know."

"Me too."

"That's why I went back to Windermere, this summer."

"I fought about writing to you—in Denmark—about mi movin', but I never got round to it."

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"I'm getting married tomorrow." He was not smiling.

"You are?" She was not smiling.

"Maybe . . ."

"What?"

"I don't know." They took drinks of their drinks.

"Where do you live," Hans asked.

"Chelsea. I 'ave a nice flat there."

"Chelsea? You must have a nice job as well."

"Great. A'm modelling for this clothes fellas. We go round ta all these snobby shops and a parade around for a bit, and that's it. All the old men, you know, in the shops,

they all drool over me and say how nice the clothes look. Ha! The clothes! All along it's me they fink's nice." She laughed. "They wish they could buy me instead of the clothes."

"And? Do they?"

"Not yet." Rose smiled. "It's fun though. A feel like a've got all this power in me."

"You have."

"I know," she laughed. "And so do you.

"Listen, why don't we drink up, 'op in a taxi and go over to my place. I'd like ta show ya."

"I'm sure you would." Hans took the last drink of his drink eagerly, spilling half of it down his shirt.

By the time they reached Rose's expensive looking flat, Hans was starving to death.

"So you're getting married tomorrow?" Rose asked, as Hans pulled off her blouse.

"Yes," he mumbled, his mouth full.

It was like the last supper.

Outside number two Walnut Rise, the air was still burdened with droplets of water, hanging about and even dancing in the black chill.

Hans had removed the woman's pink dressing gown and was squeezing the cheeks of her bottom in his one-armed way, digging his five fingers into the flesh until she cried out.

"You're a whore," he said, and pushed his tongue into her mouth.

"I know," she groaned. "Let's go into the bedroom."

His clothes were pulled off. She began to kiss him, with tiny bird-like kisses, on the cheek, nose, chin, neck,

chest, right shoulder, right arm, back over the chest, left shoulder, left stump.

"That's it, kiss it, Rose," he said. Rose Waterhouse began to kiss the stump and lick the stump as if it were an extra penis. After a while he pulled her head up and began to kiss her. They were lying side by side and Hans moved his arm down her back and squeezed her bottom.

Hans moved down, pushing the stump of his left arm between Rose's legs, and she groaned with pleasure.

"You should've stopped me you know." Hans said cryptically, when it was all over.

"What?"

"You remember the time we met up again? The day before my wedding. You should've said something."

"Like what?"

"Like, 'Don't do it.'"

"We were too young. Neither of us knew what we were doin'." She paused a moment. "Everything's like a dream when you're that age. Things just happen by themselves. It seems like a dream when we think back, 'cos it really was a dream."

"It's kind of ironic. When I married my wife, sex was everything. Sex was even love—I think. And now look. I haven't touched her for years."

"It's a dirty business," Rose said, distantly.

"What?"

"Sex. It's the most disgusting fing people do to each other. If there's no love there as well, to balance fings off . . . well it'snofing but dirt."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Hans said.

"Leave her then."

"You know I can't."

Rose stroked his back gently and they gazed silently across the semi darkness, into each other's eyes. After the wedding they had avoided each other. For years they had avoided each other. But then, slowly at first, the affair began, and quiet soon they both knew it could never end.

At last he said, "It would kill her if I left. You don't know how she loves me."

"If that's love, then give me 'ate."

"She's just got in the habit of treating me badly, you know. That's all. Once you get into a habit, it's hard to get out."

"You're the one in a habit."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. And you're fooling yourself if you think she loves you."

"You never even met her, Rose. You don't know anything about her."

"Maybe not, but I know a lot about you."

"I wish she didn't love me, but she does. What can I do?"

Hans moved his hand onto her right breast and caressed it gently. Rose no longer had a left breast. She too had been the victim of a surgeon who had taken away her symmetry.

It was eleven o'clock when Hans arrived home.

"Are you two still up?" Hans entered the living room and saw Michael and John sitting on the couch. The coal fire was lit and everything seemed warm and cosy.

"I love a real fire," he said, walking over and standing in front to warm himself.

"Something's happened," Michael said.

"What?" It certainly was warm and cosy and Hans was feeling in good spirits. Whatever had happened had happened

and that was that; besides, nothing ever happened. Well, rarely. A cat had been squashed under the wheel of a passing juggernaut last month; and Mr. Crosby, down the street, had painted his fence pink; but mostly nothing happened—and a good thing too. The two boys were looking serious and Hans thought perhaps they had made a girl pregnant.

"Mother's left."

"Where's she gone?"

"She's left. She's not coming back."

"Or."

"She's gone for good."

"Yes, I get the point Michael. Did she say anything?"

"Yes, she gave us a big talk."

"What about."

"Just stuff."

"Come on Michael. What kind of stuff?" Michael looked down towards the carpet, unsure what to do. Hans turned to John.

"John?"

"She said she'd been waiting till we were grown up. She's been wanting to leave for years."

"For years?" Hans was astonished.

"Yes."

"What else?"

"She was babbling a lot."

"What else?"

"She was just going on about love and all that." John said, embarrassed. "She said she's never really loved you, and she only stayed for us."

"Never?"

"No."

"She never loved me," Hans repeated, over and over in his mind; but no matter how many times he said it, the feeling of utter flabbergastation remained.

"It was one-armed thinking, then," Hans thought, as soon as he had climbed into bed. "All those years, staying with her for nothing. It was just me and my one-armed thinking."

The next morning, Hans was the last one downstairs.

"You're late dad," Michael said, barely concealing his amazement.

"I thought I'd have a sleep in. Is there any tea in the pot?"

"Yes." Hans poured himself some and sat.

"Do you want breakfast?" John asked.

"No."

"It seems strange this morning," Michael resumed.

"Yes, I noticed the sun's decided to make an appearance." Hans said, sardonically.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

"Are you all right, dad?"

"Yes, why?"

"You don't seem yourself."

"No, no, I'm pretty sure this is me."

"Aren't you going to be late for work?"

"Probably. But I've heard it's the boss's prerogative."

"How come it's taken you all these years to figure that out?"

"I used to be a P.E. teacher. Were not known for our brains." Hans took a slurp of his tea and they sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I made you a packed lunch," John said.

"You did? I supposed I'd better take it then."

"You don't seem very sad about mother going."

"Sad?" He paused for thought. "No, not really. I'm surprised though." He took a sip of the tea. "But that's life for you. There's always a few surprises waiting to jump out and say 'boo.' We all have so much purpose when we're young, but most things happen by chance.

"Any way, I think I might as well get going." He put on the jacket of his suit and collected his packed lunch from the kitchen. "I should be home around five. Bye."

"Bye," the boys said, and watched him go.

Outside, the spring sun was shining with what seemed a conditional promise of summer. Hans stood on the porch and looked out at the budding trees in the garden and down along the length of the street. He could see Mr. Crosby's pink fence, shouting out greetings to the sun and the blue sky, and they shouted back. Along the hedge, at the foot of the garden, yellow tulips nodded their heads at Hans, who now made his way to the car.

Inside the house Michael and John were watching from the bay window.

Hans placed the packed lunch on the shiny white roof and fished in his pocket for the keys. Hans found his keys and opened up the door and removed them from the lock and picked up the packed lunch and climbed inside. The car door slammed closed and the engine chugged and the wheels spun over the gravel and the vehicle and the father and the packed lunch all disappeared down the street.