

While They Walked on the Moon

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Translated by Per K. Brask

Imagine that we could take each other by the hand across time and space, the dead and the living, all the way back to the Stone Age.

At four o'clock on a summer morning I get up and walk over to the cemetery. For a few hours in the morning you have the world to yourself. I bring a rake and a hoe and then I weed graves starting at one end. It used to be my father working here, now it's me. The sun rises in a glow. While the sky brightens darkness clumps to the ground and underneath bushes and trees. Then the birds begin; the titmouse, the yellow bunting, the starling and the blackbird, the doves coo. There are mice and insects.

Some of those lying here I knew when they walked the earth. Most of them I never met when they were alive. Our time with meat on our bones is so short. We bustle around like critters. There's something we must do and something we want and our clever minds scuffles with things no one can handle. Everything happens on the run, helter-skelter, like a mystifying movie.

The dead have no phones; we can't call them and ask. But on such a morning they may sneak about or stand speculating in the shade by a gravestone, as though they were still marveling at something.

I hoe the weeds and seeds immediately sprout everywhere; next week they'll be back, I know. But they must be weeded out. All the while my thoughts are allowed to touch on anything at all and look forward and back.

Goul moved the factory over here from Copenhagen. They couldn't stand the stench, so we had to get used to it. I remember that during the first few years, when I was just a big boy, dead birds and fish lay about everywhere. Whenever they drove toxic waste out to the ocean it made a frightful stench. People didn't actually enjoy the smell but there wasn't much talk about it because the good part was the new jobs that arrived. And probably no one thought he could murder the fjord.

He probably hadn't intended to either. His plan had been to exterminate vermin and insects with chemicals and maybe he did more good for humanity than most of us ever will. But he had no respect for nature.

His wife's name was Gertrud; she was the one people saw the most. She played piano. When she was young she attended the conservatory and she probably had considerable talent. There was a grand piano in the moving van when they arrived. It was the largest item. It was placed in the living room by the large panorama window. Outside there was a pool and a lawn. Everything

was new. He had designed the house at Insektvej himself according to his own ideas.

During the first years she was an elegant lady no one dared talk to. She practiced the piano some hours every day while the children were in school. She played with the doors open and the neighbours weren't always appreciative. They said it was noise; it was classical music. It's possible that some of them turned up their radios a little more in order to drown it out. Complaints were received. In any event the doors were closed and then she sat there in the living room playing for herself.

Goul was always on the go. While the children were growing up he was at the factory day and night. He'd rush home driven by a chauffeur and a moment later he'd sit up in his gable office with all lights burning.

Gertrud must have been a beauty; she was tall and slim. She 'd even get the notion to go for a walk just to walk. No one did that back then. They had a maid and their groceries were brought to the door. No one needed to go shopping. So it was difficult for her to make contact with people. She might stop and speak to someone on her way but I think that was all, and the next day she'd be at the grand piano again.

As a boy I only heard her play once and that was an experience I've never forgotten. Back then I was delivery boy for the grocer's and I'd been sent over there with groceries. When I entered the scullery and opened the kitchen door there was no one there but all the doors in the house were open so I could hear the piano.

I put down the groceries on the kitchen table. Then I went to the living room door to say that I'd delivered them. And there she sat playing.

My heart skipped a beat. I stood frozen at the door and watched her. Music poured out of the grand piano, she was swaying; her whole body was involved in playing. I'd never seen anything like it. It was as if it was from a different planet. She melted into the instrument like a murderous animal. There was wildness there, she was completely gone.

I stayed there. Perhaps I stood there for five or ten minutes. It was unthinkable to disturb her. I could have just left but I couldn't tear myself loose.

Suddenly she turned her head and looked at me. I got a shock. There was something in her eyes I'd never before seen in this world. Everything was fine because I was the one she was playing for.

Startled I stepped aside. I wanted to run away. Then she stopped and flew after me into the kitchen. She wanted to give me a tip. I think I got a buck or some excessive amount like that. Then she gave me a hug; that was even stranger.

How old was I, 13? Just a big boy. But that experience has stayed with me.

After she and Goul had lived here a few years there was going to be a concert. The grand piano was moved over to the school's gym one day, chairs were put up and announcements made. There may have been posters as

well; in any event there was probably something about it in the paper. Everyone talked about that concert; it grabbed people. They found it funny that she was going to play.

But no one came. Not a single person. Only the janitor and the principal because he was supposed to introduce her. But there was no one to introduce her to. I don't know why. People probably thought that this wasn't their kind of event and that they weren't classy enough. They didn't want to pose and pretend.

How Gertrud reacted is hard to know. She sat in the locker room in her finest and waited for her cue. Whether the principal went out to her or whether she entered and stood in the door and looked at the empty chairs and the gaping empty hall. The janitor bustling about. It can't have been fun.

After that she stopped playing. Possibly from one day to the next. The grand piano stood in the living room but she didn't touch its keys.

After I was confirmed I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I had no desire for fishing. My father had sold everything and had become sexton. I helped him one summer with cutting hedges and weeding graves. I learnt to ring the church bells and I could dig a grave.

Then I went away for a few years, the wide world pulling me. I thought I was going to be a sailor, got my papers and signed up for a tour with OK.

When I came back it was to help my father. He was sick and in hospital at Holsterbro, so my mother and I took care of the cemetery. Every afternoon some schoolgirls came over. They walked about giggling with each other, arms intertwined. In some way or other I was interesting because I had been away and seen something of the world.

One of them was Gertrud and Goul's, the youngest of their girls. Her name was Marike and eventually she'd show up by herself, often just before the end of work. When I was going to ring for sunset she came along to the weapon house because she wanted to see how it was done and she wanted to talk. She asked me about everything between heaven and earth; how was Shanghai? She had such a lively imagination; she was impossible to resist. I was sold on the spot.

She had black hair like her mother. Just a glimpse of her and my heart skipped a beat and began pounding. There was a sweetness to her I have never since come across. While we stood there in the weapon house ringing down the sun she also wanted to pull the rope, she wanted to give it a try.

I let go and let her take over. She grabbed hold of the rope and was pulled a meter off the ground, screaming and hollering. The bell skipped out of its sling and it could be heard all over town when she let go and clung to my neck. We kissed and just stood there while the bell dangled to a stop. There were no prayer bells, we'd completely

forgotten about them. I don't know what people must have thought.

I supposed we must have agreed to meet after dinner. In any event, we began going for walks together in the evening. Just after Mid Summer we drove out to the ocean on our bikes and lay in the dunes practicing kissing while the sun set in a glowing pool. She was so curious and wanted to try everything. The globe stood still in the universe. We rolled about with our eyes closed and could hear the surf booming against the breakwater.

Whenever we looked up or sat up to smoke a cigarette we could see people walk by down on the beach. Further away we could see the tractor from Cheminova coming down the road at a snail's pace heading towards the dunes with a load of toxic waste to be unloaded at night time so people wouldn't get anxious over it. When they opened the bung the stench would float along the coast and we ducked down again.

We had other things on our minds. The sun stayed just below the horizon; it never got really dark. Often it was two or three in the morning before we drove home.

I don't remember what we talked about. Maybe we didn't say much to each other or we just joked around. We were as different from each other as a daddy longlegs from a stickleback. On other evenings we'd walk about on the estate. My impression was that we were boyfriend and girlfriend, but we kept it to ourselves, no one else was involved.

Until the night the Americans landed on the moon. That we wanted to see. I had walked her home several times and we'd been stood kissing by a hedge while the whole town slept. But this night was bewitched; everyone was up watching TV, every house was lit up. The moon hung thick and glowing faintly above the dunes, as though it were pregnant and just about falling down. We couldn't turn away from it.

That night I was allowed in. We went through the foyer and into the living room where Goul sat watching the TV. He was completely wound up. Who I was and what we were doing he gave no mind.

"Sit down," he said.

He talked about the moon landing as if it was something he'd come up with. As if it was all something he'd arranged and was directing. He had studied the details of how it worked and now we were going to be told. I think he was glad we came.

We sat next to each other in the sofa with some space between us. There were pictures from the moon where the space capsule stood on its three legs. Then from the control centre in Houston. We watched Armstrong open the capsule and walk down the steps; we watched him set foot on the moon. There was a sense of euphoria, Gould talked and explained. I liked him.

At some point Gertrud entered. She stood in the middle of the room. She didn't say anything; her eyes seemed swollen from tears.

“Why are you standing there gaping,” Paul said to her, “sit down!” In that tone; he was completely swallowed up by the TV.

But she didn’t sit down. She just stood there. Behind her the grand piano was gathering dust.

“Mom!” said Marike.

Then Gertrud turned around and left. No one mentioned it; she just left and didn’t come back in.

The rest of us sat following what has happening on the moon. It took hours and once in a while I almost fell asleep.

Suddenly Marike got the idea that we should go for a swim.

“Come on,” She said and pulled me.

Outside by the pool, she dropped her clothes and jumped in. I stood at the edge; I’d never learned to swim.

“Come on,” she said.

Maybe she thought I was shy. We rumbled about and somehow she got me pushed in.

I panicked and swallowed a lot of water. I thought I was going to drown and threw my arms around. The bottom and the sides were slimy and slippery but I managed to get up. I was fully dressed and soaked. I stood like that at the edge and watched her swim back and forth, the moon having turned into a pale dot in infinity. It was

unfathomable that people were walking around up there. And here I stood shivering in my wet clothes.

I think we all went to bed that morning with the feeling that from now on the world would be completely changed.

I suppose it did too, but not much turned out as we had thought. The next day Marike broke up with me. When I called her up she said that we weren't dating any longer. I probably asked why but I never got an explanation. Maybe it was because I couldn't swim.

We haven't really spoken since. I believe I wrote some letters to her but she didn't answer. After the summer holidays she left for Copenhagen to start university. We only met again when at Goul's funeral. By then half of eternity had passed.

I stayed here. My father died and I took over the cemetery. At first on an interim basis, then it became permanent. But walking here in the morning one knows very well that nothing is in this world.

Goul had long ago donated his factory to the university at Århus. I don't know if he was fired. He stopped working in any event. He never came out there any longer and he had no contact with people in town. It felt somehow as if he were done with us. But he hadn't lost his spark, until the very end he had plans of improving the world. That's what he sat striving for in his office.

He could suddenly take off for Africa or India without warning. He had some project out there. The last thing mentioned in the paper about him was about that. How to

produce enough food for the world's millions, that absorbed him. He was quite intent on doing something good for humanity and I suppose he succeeded in much out there.

But we remember him for something else back here. When the deposits of toxic waste were discovered at the breakwater he was already an old man. I don't know whether he sat at home following on TV as the they walked around in space suits in the dunes cleaning up after him. The fishery in the fjord was made illegal, which was probably the worst thing for us. We weren't allowed hunting anymore either. It probably hadn't been the plan but in any event he'd managed to murder the fjord.

When he died I dug his grave myself by hand. Some of those who worked for Cheminova came to the funeral. There were large wreaths and lots of flowers but who really knew him when it came right down to it? He stayed a strange bird till the end. The new director was there, of course, and a handful of professors from the university, maybe just for show. It was after all his money they lived from.

Marike was there too with her husband and a couple of grown kids. I said hallo to her but I don't know if she recognized me. She didn't say anything. It all happened so long ago after all, my own kids were already grown up.

I remember Gertrud. She was dressed in black and wore sunglasses even though the sun wasn't shining.

A son, a son-in-law, the director and someone from the university, carried out the casket. In the middle were the two daughters. I rang the bell until they reached the grave. While they stood there a huge flock of geese were heading south from Thyborøn, the largest formation I've ever seen. There was a massive sound in the sky, like a high singing jubilation and something. Everyone looked up. For a couple of minutes everything stopped.

After the funeral something happened to Gertrud. She was past seventy but suddenly she began coming out among people as if she now realized that she actually did belong here. She also began playing the piano again.

She didn't do anything about the house; it fell into disrepair. I came around with a bill from the cemetery a few times. The pool had been emptied of water, old patio furniture, braches and garbage covered the bottom. Several of the thermo windows were punctured, the house was covered in ivy and the garden was grown over. She sat in the living room playing in the middle of a huge mess.

The grand piano had been polished and it had probably been tuned. It stood among worn out furniture and old newspapers and sparkled, as if nothing had happened in the world the last forty years.

Gertrud got up. Her hair was completely white now, but her smile was as overpowering as ever. She greeted me heartily. We needed to go up to Goul's office for a chequebook. I was also going to have a glass of port wine. She picked up a dusty bottle and two glasses from the

hutch. We sat and talked. I was there for maybe three quarters of an hour, but could have stayed longer. She was worth listening to.

From now on we saw her everywhere, in the supermarket and at parties. She was there whenever something was happening. She was surely a little peculiar, but who isn't. She was one of us and belonged in the picture.

A year later it was decided that Gertrud would play at the bazaar at the community centre; they'd gotten a new piano.

We were all there, of course. Before there'd been bingo, people sat with their trophies and the children ran around screaming. But it grew completely silent when Gertrud got started. I don't know what she played but it was fantastic music. The children crawled up to their parents, the wheel of fortune was closed down and everything stopped. We just sat and listened; it was serious.

Gertrud played. What can I say? Words are too miserly. She was old and her hair was white but you couldn't hear that. The music flew to us like a greeting from the big wide world and she landed it right in front of our noses. It was an event. It went straight to my heart.

There was applause like never before. She got up and bowed. The light fell vertically down through the chalk white hair. She bowed again and you could almost see her skull under the thin layer of skin.

Then she exited. But people kept clapping. Nothing happened but they wouldn't stop.

Until she came in again. The executive director of the centre gave her flowers and she hugged him. Her eyes were large and searching, she smiled happily. Then she sat down at the piano and played some more.

Her last years she lived in the nursing home. Now she's gone too. The house Goul built on Insektvej is leveled, the pool is filled in, everything is razed and something else stands there now.

People have been buried on this lot since no one knows when. People have carried their dead here and they've brought beachcombers and drowned fishermen. There have been suicides and traffic accidents and all manner of deaths. The little children playing in the sand grow into youths and adults; settle down with houses and children. Then they grow old and tired and look for a place to lay down their bones. That's the order. In the end we're put into a hole here. Perhaps there's no reason to spend time considering that.

I check my watch. In a few minutes it'll be seven o'clock. I put away the hoe and the rake and walk over to unlock the church door. In the weapon house the rope for the bell hangs on a hook. I bring down the rope and stand following the move of the second hand. Then I raise my arms, pull the rope and feel the bell begin to move in the belfry. The tongue beats rhythmic peals against the bell metal. Outside the town is soon wide-awake; children running with their school bags, cars backing out of driveways. The day is in full flow.



Niels Hav is a full time poet and short story writer with prestigious awards from The Danish Arts Council. In English he has *We Are Here*, published by Book Thug, and poetry and fiction in numerous magazines including *The Literary Review*, *Poetry Canada*, *The Antigonish Review*, *EVENT*, *Exile*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *DanDelion Magazine*, *Filling Station* and *PRISM International*.

In his native Danish Hav, he is the author of three books of short fiction and six collections of poetry, most recently *Grundstof* and *The Married Wives of Copenhagen*.

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