



The
Murder of
Hattanol

Pia Juul

translated by Martin Aitken

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With thanks to Herman and Gustav

*May they come together,
happy in heart forever,
who long to be as one!*

–Swedish Ballad (trad.)

1

The night before, we sat in the living room. I had a coffee; he drank a beer. We watched a police drama. 'I wouldn't mind looking like her,' I said, referring to the detective, Danish tv's only mature heroine. 'You don't, though, do you?' I looked over at him. Women's faces shrivel; men acquire substance. 'You've acquired substance,' I said. 'Where?' he asked, worried. 'Ha ha ha,' I laughed mockingly.

'I need to leave at seven tomorrow morning,' he said, and turned off the tv.

'I'll write for a bit.' I hugged him as tight as I could. We kissed. I rubbed my cheek against his stubble. 'Won't be long.'

In my study I tripped over something. I shuffled gingerly to the desk and turned on the lamp. My laptop was in sleep mode. Next to it stood a glass of tepid water. I swallowed a mouthful before turning to the stereo and inserting a cd. Schumann filled the room. I turned off the cd player. I can only listen to such music if the volume's turned way up, which wouldn't have pleased the neighbours at this late hour.

I switched on the laptop, picked up a book, then put it down again. I clicked open the document that came up on the screen. I had made the last set of changes two days earlier: just moved some commas, really. I thought of going to bed; perhaps he would still be awake. Feeling cold, I retrieved a sweater from the floor, pulled it over my head and began to read. Then I wrote.

Unusually, I became totally absorbed in my text and lost track of time. Eventually I looked up with an aching back. A

grey dawn was breaking. I pushed the chair back and opened the window. A blackbird trilled on the roof of the summer house, greeting the loveliest of spring mornings. But when you haven't slept and your limbs feel stiff and your mind is full and empty all at once, everything seems out of sorts.

I found myself wondering how to describe the colour of the fjord. Quite unlike me, too. With the sun coming up, the water changed hue with each passing second.

I didn't want to wake Halland; he had to be up soon anyway. After going to the washroom, I went back into the living room and collapsed on the sofa under a blanket. When I opened my eyes again, I knew a sound had woken me, but I had no idea what sound. An echo reverberated inside me. I sat up and ran my fingers through my hair the way they do in films. I pulled myself together again and clutched the blanket around my knees. Was I afraid? I don't think so. That would have been psychic, insane almost. Though I remember thinking that something wasn't quite right. Had I merely heard the door closing behind Halland?

I checked the bedroom and noticed the empty bed. He had gone.

As I stood under the shower, I suddenly realized that I had seen his coat and briefcase in the hall. He hadn't left the house after all. Turning off the water, I called out to him. Nothing. The silence made me anxious. I wrapped the towel around me and moved through the house. I passed the front door and caught sight of someone through the little frosted pane. There he is, about to come in. Then the doorbell rang. 'Just a minute!' I yelled, dashing into the bedroom. I yanked off the towel and pulled on Halland's dressing gown, tying the cord as I went to open the door.

'In the name of the law!' proclaimed the bewildered-looking man on the step. His voice cracking, he raised his hand. 'It is seven forty-seven. I am arresting you for ... bear with me ...' He was out of breath.

I was stunned. Although I recognized the man, I didn't know him personally. Every morning he parked his car opposite the house, by the police station. Once I had gone to the station to get my passport renewed. I had no idea whether he was a clerk or a policeman. I didn't laugh: this clearly wasn't a laughing matter. The man was beside himself. He looked terrified.

'Are you the wife of Halland Roe?' he asked.

'I am!'

'I'm arresting you for the murder of your husband ...' Breathless, the man doubled over.

I stepped out onto the cold cobbles and looked around. A crowd had gathered at the far end of the square. Sirens approached from a distance.

'What's happened?' I asked.

Inger came out of the house next door. 'What's going on, Bjørn?' she asked the man.

'Halland Roe's been shot!' he gasped, while he gestured across the square. Then he pointed at me. '*She* did it ...'

I ran.

'Stop her!' the idiot yelled, chasing after me. But I wasn't running away; I was running to see what had happened. This was ridiculous. I was astonished not so much that I had been accused but rather that Halland was the one who had been shot. I didn't believe it. Not until I saw his body.

'If you leave me,' my ex-husband had said ten years earlier, 'you'll never see Abby again.'

'It's not for you to decide!' I replied. The shrillness in my voice surprised me. Abby was fourteen at the time; surely she could decide for herself. And she decided. Either he knew her better than I did, which was likely, or he talked her into it, which was equally possible. Since then I had only seen her a few times. She was a stubborn girl. I owned a little album with photos of her. I had looked through the pages so often that they were all dog-eared.

It is of course easy to be sentimental. She despised me; and I despised myself when I thought about it, so I hardly ever did. I nearly gave up drinking after I moved out; at least I stopped getting drunk. As I cried about Abby, I could sense through the cloud of alcohol Halland's irritation that I thought more about her than him. He didn't mind if I just drank a beer or a glass of wine as long as I remained in his thrall. He didn't need to say a thing; I knew his little signals. Anyway, if I hadn't been besotted by him, staying would have been pointless.

I stopped. I stared down at the bulk that was Halland's body. His face against the cobbles, one eye half open. His full mouth, his thin lips. His white hair combed back from his face. His black tie, his bloodstained shirt. Substance.

I thought of Abby.

The wet cobbles glistened in the morning light. Normally, the square would be deserted. Now it was filling with people. Roses bloomed against the yellow and whitewashed walls.

Someone said, 'That's her husband.' Everyone stepped back, but I had seen enough. I sensed them all staring at me. An inexplicable urge to fling myself across the body and weep overcame me, but everything seemed hazy and unreal, and theatrics wouldn't change anything. So I turned and walked back towards the house on icy feet. The door was still open. The minute I

took hold of the handle, I began to shake. I staggered inside and fell to the floor, where I curled up, sobbing. But I didn't think, Halland! Oh, Halland! I thought, Abby! I want Abby!

2

*Father was troubled. He narrowed his eyes. Short-sighted?
No, it was the way William Tell looked at his son under the
apple tree as he drew his crossbow and took aim.*

Hugo Claus, *The Sorrow of Belgium*

I heard the commotion outside, but didn't pay any attention. I got up and went over to the telephone on my desk. Though we hardly ever rang each other, my mother's number was saved on the speed dial. To warn me if she rang. She sounded surprised to hear my voice. It was early.

'Has something happened?' she asked immediately.

I hesitated. Then I said, 'Mum, give me Abby's number. I need to talk to her. It's important.'

'Yes, it is important. It's been important ever since you went off and left her in the lurch. But why now, in the middle of the night?'

'It's not the middle of the night! I've been up for ages!' I replied. 'Can you just give me her number?'

From the sound of the duvet shifting around her, I could tell that she was still in bed. 'I'd prefer not to,' she said. 'I'll call her once I'm fully awake and tell her you rang. Maybe she'll get in touch.'

'That's not good enough!' I said desperately.

'There's something else,' she went on, suddenly sounding more alert. 'I've been meaning to call you all week. Your grandfather wants to speak to you.'

My heart pounded; I felt the beat inside my ear.
'He wants you to go and see him.'
'Is this some kind of joke?' I asked. 'Why have you waited a week to tell me?'
'He's ill.'
We both fell silent.
'Are you still there?' she asked.
'How ill?'
'He's in hospital in Reading. He's dying.'
My breathing quickened. The doorbell rang.
'You have visitors,' said my mother.
'No, I haven't.'
'I heard the doorbell.'
'I'll call you back.' I hung up.
Grandfather. I sat staring at the telephone, at the desk with my laptop. I lifted the lid and was about to turn the laptop on when the doorbell rang again.
A tall, dark-haired man on the step said he was from the police. An old man appeared behind him. They nodded their heads, looking sombre. They wanted to come in.
'I'm not even dressed,' I said. 'And I haven't had breakfast.'
'I'll make you a nice pot of coffee while you put on some clothes,' said the tall one. 'Or perhaps you'd prefer some tea?'
I led them through the living room into the kitchen. Then I went into the bedroom and closed the door behind me. The wet towel was still on the bed. I picked it up. I sat down and pressed the speed-dial key for my mother on the wall-mounted telephone.
'That was quick,' she said.
'What's wrong with Grandfather?'
'What's not? He's ninety-six; he's got stomach cancer. He's very poorly and he wants to see you.'

'Why didn't you call me right away?'

'Who was at the door?'

'Mother, how far gone is he?'

'Are you going to go and see him or not?'

'Yes. No. I don't know. Something's happened here. Have you rung Abby?'

I caught sight of myself in the mirror. Halland's dressing gown made me look small. My wet hair was all over the place. My eyes looked strange. On the wall above the bed hung two small black-framed photographs. An unusually personal touch in this house, where my study was the only room in which I felt at home. The photos showed my grandfather and Abby. She was fourteen when I left, but here she was seven, gap-toothed and pensive, her sun-bleached summer hair tousled by a breeze. Grandfather sat in a deckchair, wearing a straw hat.

'You should go and see him,' my mother said.

'Halland's dead,' I replied, and hung up again. I rummaged through a pile of clothes on the chair until I found a pair of trousers and a top.

Someone knocked on the door. 'Come in!' I called, dragging a brush through my hair. The tall policeman stuck his head round the doorway.

'Anyone else at home besides you?' he asked.

'No. I was on the phone.'

'Who were you talking to?'

'None of your bloody business!' Then: 'If you must know, I was talking to my mother.' My voice faltered. 'I'm sorry ... It's just that ...' I buried my face in my hands. He was a stranger; I didn't want him to see me cry. 'It's just that my ...'

'Let's have that coffee,' he said.

I followed him into the living room. Somehow the place looked wrong. Still crying, I picked up the blanket from the sofa and began to fold it. The phone rang. 'Leave it,' I said. 'It's my mother. I've just spoken to her. She told me my grandfather's dying ...' I now sobbed audibly and had to sit down. 'I haven't seen him for years. And now he's dying!'

The two policemen looked at one another, then at me, then back at one another. I went into the kitchen to fetch a tissue.

'You do realize why we're here?' said the older man.

I nodded imperceptibly. 'I saw him in the square.'

'Halland Roe has been shot. He's dead. Are you Bess?'

I nodded again.

'His wife?'

'We're not married,' I said, gazing around the room. 'We've lived together for ten years. This is Halland's house. Do you want to arrest me again?'

'Arrest you?'

'A man came ... Bjørn. He said I shot Halland.'

'Did you?'

Tears welled up once more. I didn't answer. Instead, I wept for my grandfather and for Halland and for Abby, and for all my silly attempts at being purposeful. Just a moment ago, the desire to speak to Abby had seemed so obvious, as though nothing else mattered. Now I didn't know any longer what I wanted.

A gunshot had woken me. That's what the noise had been. Bjørn worked as the caretaker at the school on the other side of the square; he had seen Halland stagger and then fall. And he believed he had heard Halland say, 'My wife has shot me.'

Gazing at me with pity, the policemen spoke, but I didn't understand a word. I didn't grasp that they wanted an explanation. The thought that I was somehow involved didn't occur to

me. I didn't realize that they were trying to find out whether I could have shot Halland. They didn't actually say as much, so I'm just guessing. But obviously they were waiting for me to say something. What I eventually said was, 'Can I see him again?'

I could, but later.

I stopped crying and sipped my coffee. The policeman had used the French press. It would have been dusty, but hopefully he had bothered to rinse it. I noticed that the dark-haired cop was talking to me and I looked up.

'What was your name again?' I asked.

'Detective Funder.'

'Funder,' I repeated.

'Does Halland have any family? Brothers or sisters? Children, perhaps?'

'No ...' I replied, then paused. 'As far as I know, his family are all dead. He'd lost touch with his sister by the time she died.'

'Was Halland married before you and he got together?'

'No. Why do you want to know?'

Funder looked disappointed.

'He can't possibly have said his wife shot him. What exactly did he say? Could Bjørn have misheard? How come he didn't see what happened?'

'Halland was shot with a hunting rifle.'

'How do you know?'

'From the sound of the gunshot and from the entry wound. The shot was fired from some distance away. Bjørn didn't see the gunman, and Halland won't have seen anyone either.'

'Then why did Bjørn say what he said?'

'Why, indeed,' said Funder. 'Do you or Halland own a hunting rifle?'

No. We didn't own any weapons.

No, I didn't shoot Halland.

No, I hadn't seen him since last night.

No, I had no idea why anyone would want to kill him.

And no, Halland had no enemies. Enemies only existed in films. As indeed did being shot. Anyway, what did I know about Halland's life outside of this house?

'And wouldst thou be free of sadness and sorrow, thou shouldst love nought upon this Earth,' I mused.

The police officers looked up quizzically.

'Ludvig Bødtcher.' I said.