

Jack Arnfinn

by Kevin Frato

... and the train pulls up and my shadow from yesterday steps off, and I'm standing on one leg balancing just like the weather between winter and spring, I hear a siren and my heart races, I'm about to step aboard when I hear footsteps behind me and two hands cover my eyes and — Guess who? in Swedish — I smell newly-turned earth and avocados and sour milk and it must be her, and I turn and Marisol presses her cheek against mine and — "You thought you were going to get away without saying goodbye, didn't you?" — and I glance back at her and almost lose my balance, and I catch my reflection in the train window just like I did two days ago at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia when my hair had looked as messy as the trampled wings of a pigeon splattered across the tracks, and Nancy with a scarf around her ears had held my hands, and I'd lost myself in her broken-mirror eyes and mumbled something about six months and a tourist visa, and when she hadn't answered I'd said, "Besides, I have to go see somebody," and she'd twisted her mouth and said, "Who is she?", and when I'd told her nobody she'd laughed and said, "Yeah sure, whatever," and I'd seen her ribs sticking out under her t-shirt, and her eyeglasses had been cracked and her sandals coming unglued but she never had the cash, did she? and standing on the platform I'd wondered what I'd ever seen in her.... Nancy had let go, blown me a kiss and strode off down the platform...

and Marisol is grinning as eighteen magpies circle the spire of the Mormon temple across the street, where gravel-covered snow-dogs cower in the ditch, melting in the early morning sun, and a dump-truck bumping down Tungalstavägen growls like my dad did yesterday as he unbuckled his belt and whipped it off.

I check my watch, shove a hand into my pocket: the bundle is still there, and something else that pokes through into my leg, and Marisol stands in front of me and lifts her chin, brushes her nose along my mouth, rubs her lips against my the tip of my nose and I'm

shivering and — "Why did you come back? If you're just going to leave again?" — but all I can do is shrug, why did I come back, did I really think it would be different this time, did I really think I would be different this time? and my mom asked that same question yesterday, she turned around at the stove where she was frying onions and cow's tongue, her eyes as wide as the horses' she works with, and she asked, "Why did you come back? When you disappeared six months ago and your father reported you missing, you know what the other cops did? Laughed. Cheered. Patted him on the back. So your father realized it was better, with you away. With your shadow no longer tainting him. So why don't you — why don't you just —" (now two women are loitering by the ticket booth and my Philadelphia-instincts say they're early-morning prostitutes working the out-of-town business crowd, but then I remember this is small-town Västerhaninge, Sweden and I see they're holding up copies of The Watchtower) "— why don't you just get back on the airplane and leave us alone again," my mom said yesterday as she snubbed out her cigarette, pulled a jelly jar from the drying rack, yanked open the fridge and filled it from the bag-in-a-box. She stood sipping and staring at me, and

"It's different this time, Mom," I said.

"Bullshit."

"I'm different this time."

"Ha. It's like your grandma Lena always says: times change, but people don't."

"Mom. I'm older."

"Old enough to move out."

"I did move out."

"So why come crawling back? Why now? Some girl, probably. What are you planning to steal from her this time? That one who moved to Bålsta. What was her name."

I shrugged.

"Sinnika. The one from way up north. She telephoned us. Told us what you did."

"I didn't do anything."

"Exactly, that's exactly what she said, she lent you all that money and you didn't do anything. Except disappear and never pay her back. I'm warning you, Jack Arnfinn."

I stared. She didn't flinch.

"When your father comes home," she said. "So help me."

And yes, when my father came home: he started breathing like a boxer through clenched teeth, and in the late-evening light from the kitchen window I could see his hair was streaked with grey that I'd never seen there before, and the corners of his eyes were wrinkled and his fingers were tobacco-stained, and his shoulders were hunched over as though he were an ox strapped to an invisible yoke, and that stupid Yankees cap he always wore was rattier than ever, and I wondered why he'd never gone to the States to meet his dad, and I wondered if maybe, just maybe he'd already turned into his dad — and I wondered how many years it would take before I turned into him, and then my mom said,

"Answer me when I speak to you."

"You...."

"Didn't you just hear me? Do the dishes."

and she back-handed me and blood splashed from my nose down my Philadelphia Flyers t-shirt, and I slapped her back, and then there he was standing in the doorway in full uniform with that baseball cap on his head, and he growled just like the dump truck rumbling down Tungelstavägen in the morning fog, he growled and twisted his Yankees cap and gritted his teeth and said, "You little hooligan, you leave your mother alone."

"No, you leave her alone," I said. "You should have from the beginning. I never asked to be born."

My mom said, "Give it to him good, Jimmy."

His eyes narrowed and he unhitched his belt and doubled it in half and

Whack! a lightning strike

Slap! electro-shock therapy

Whip! — barbed wire

and then: "He's damned right, I should have let you do it, Nenna."

When you found out you were pregnant. I should have let you ——"
and my mother grabbed my wrists and I tried to bite her, but I tripped and landed on my back, and she straddled me and pinned my arms to my sides —— the same way Nancy had straddled me, Nancy who I'd met at the gallery opening, Nancy who had stopped me from taking my sixth plastic cup of free wine and instead pulled half a bottle from her backpack and given it to me to swig from, Nancy who'd gotten me my job at Temple U. in North Philly, Nancy who'd taught me how to thin her paints with linseed oil and paint cityscapes onto grape-crate slats, Nancy who'd sat on me and rubbed my crotch until I was stiff as a paintbrush, and then she'd squeezed and twisted and pulled until I tasted blood on my tongue, and flies had been crawling around her ceiling and a butterfly had been circling her lamp, and when I'd cried she'd just laughed and kissed my tears, and wrapped her fingers around my throat and pressed her thumbs into my windpipe until I'd coughed and choked and, "You've been thinking about somebody else, haven't you?", and I couldn't breathe and it was true, every time with Nancy I'd wished it was Marisol, just like with Marisol I'd always wished it was Sinnika, wishing until I could no longer remember Sinnika's back under my hands, her breasts squeezed up against my chest, her dried-mint breath when our lips were about to touch...

... and the bell rings and a guy with dreadlocks pulls a cart full of newspapers down off the train, he glances at us, Marisol touches my fingers to her lips, and says,

"Stay."

"Come."

"I can't," she says.

"Neither can I."

"Here." She shoves an envelope into my hand, and ——

"If your father knew I was doing this," she said yesterday night when I came home again, and "I don't want your money, Mom," I said, and tossed the bills onto the kitchen table where they landed in her ashtray, and her eyes burned like two dashboard cigarette lighters and she coughed and said, "Then blame yourself,"

— and now Marisol steps away and looks past me towards the stairs, there are two trains waiting, humming, one on either side of us, and she says, "If my brother finds out," and so I look at my shoes and step across the platform to the train, and I pass myself getting off yesterday, I bump shoulders with my memory, and I step up onto the train and turn, balancing, one foot in and one foot out, and my ass still aches from the belt yesterday, and — sirens in the distance, coming down the road from Handen? — that thing in my pocket is still jabbing my leg, and I feel like and there's a bird in my stomach, pecking away (the bird had been poking inside my belly since yesterday when he'd finished belting me, and I'd dialed Sinnika's number, I still knew it by heart, my hands were shaking and I counted the signals, and then she answered, and maybe this was why I'd come all the way back, I thought: "Arnfinn?" she asked, "I never expected to hear from you. Farnoud and I...." But when I heard his name I hung up, then I called Emilio and Kalle instead, and they had just gotten off work and their hands were all stained with grease, and I met up with them down by the grocery store and Emilio needed a hair-cut but Kalle had shaved his head bald, he had a leather jacket on, and their nails were cracked and bruised, and their work-pants were stained with oil and lube-grease, so I asked, "You guys start that tire-repair garage yet?" and Emilio got quiet and said, "We're working for Cünet," and I said, "That rat-face?" and they looked at each other and then Kalle said, "He's not so bad," and I said, "You can tell him to go to hell, he still owes me for those six weeks last summer," and they looked at each other and Kalle said, "That's just in the beginning. If he likes you, he starts paying you," and I said, "You stupid retards, what you mean is if he likes you, he stops stealing from you," and then they got quiet again, and Kalle said they could probably get me my old job back if I shaved and took a shower and put on some deodorant, and I laughed and asked if Cünet still kept the cash in an oil-filter box above the storeroom door, and they laughed again but didn't answer, and then Emilio said, "By the way, my little sister? She asked about you last week," and Kalle said, "That's because she got tired of screwing you and

wanted somebody else for a change. Tell her I can do it," and I said to Kalle, "Shoot, you can't do it, you're too busy screwing your mom" (I stand in the doorway of the commuter train and Marisol stretches out her hand and touches my cheek and says, "It could have been different. What about college?" and I say, "I already work at a university in Philadelphia," and her fingers trace my lips and she says, "I'll wait for you to come back," and "No, I'll wait for you to come.") and Kalle threw back his head and laughed and said, "Seriously, Marisol has a couple of sweet-ass melons. Man, I wouldn't mind sucking the juice out of them, what about you, Arn-Boy?" but I didn't dare answer, words were untied shoelaces that I knew I'd trip on, and so we bought chocolate milk and candy, and we tossed our wrappers on the sidewalk and went over to the pre-school that was closed for the day, where we'd all met all those years ago, we hopped the fence and crawled into the playhouse and Kalle pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket and we smoked and cracked jokes and sang pre-school songs, and then Emilio pulled out a can of spray-paint he had hidden under the playhouse and left an anatomy lesson all over the windows, and — just to make Emilio and Kalle laugh — I pulled down my pants and squatted on the bottom of the slide and then I wiped myself with leaves, and then we smashed our chocolate-milk bottles and hopped the fence and walked away, and Emilio stopped to scrape a sticker off a lamp-post but Kalle told him to leave it alone, he knew the guys who put those up, but Emilio pointed at me and said, "Shoot, Arnfinn's a latte-platte too, dark like me, how do you think we feel?" and Kalle looked at me, and I saw him studying my face...

...and then the train lurches and Marisol pulls her hand away, I stumble but regain my footing, and I glance out the window and there he is coming home in at three a.m. and I was at the kitchen table with the old laptop typing a story and checking plane tickets, just in case, and he said, "Your grandma Lena says that guy is coming to visit," and I said "Who?" and he said, "You know who," and I said, "That's your problem, not mine," and he said, "He's not my father, he's just an old man who wants to see me before he dies,"

and then we heard a sound in the hallway and Dad went out to check, and Mom had opened the front door and was squatting in the hallway outside of the neighbor's apartment, and I heard a sound like running water, and Dad said, "Come on Nenna, wake up, the bathroom's this way, come on," and when it was all cleaned up and she was back in bed he came and sat at the table with me and touched my hand, but I pulled it away, and he said, "You want to do a job for me?" and I said, "I don't know," and he said, "You know that guy you used to work for, who has the shop in Jordbro?" and I nodded, and he said, "He's causing me problems," and I said, "And?" and he said, "And nothing. Just if you want to," and I made a slight movement with my head that might have been a nod, or it might just have been me having trouble staying awake, and so I folded up the laptop and it sounded just like the train doors swinging closed — and Marisol touches my hand one last time and says, "Let me know as soon as you get there," and she takes my hand one last time and squeezes it, and the pneumatic levers swoosh and swing on their hinges, and we let go and her hand is out there, mine is in here, and the doors slam shut in our faces and — and I said, "Maybe I'll borrow your bolt-cutters," and he stares at me a long time and something happens to the corners of his mouth, it might be a frown or a half-smile or just nothing, and the street lamp outside collects moths and a long-haired cat goes scurrying by, and then Dad bows his forehead until it touches the tabletop and he mumbles, "Just remember to wear gloves goddammit," and then he turns in his chair and gets up and locks himself in the bathroom, but at least I had a father for a couple of minutes and that's all I wanted, it's all I ever wanted, and the train pulls out of the station and Marisol stands still as a statue, and is that a tear on her cheek or just a dewdrop on the window, and this morning after I'd come back with the bundle in my pocket, I was standing at the counter slicing bread, and he came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder, and I said "Get the hell off me!" and twisted out of his grip and pushed him away, and his shirt was ripped and stained, and he looked at me with his mouth wide open, and the bread-knife was still in my hand

as I grabbed my backpack and fled... and the train glides away from the platform and Marisol isn't waving, she's just standing there getting smaller, and I stand in the doorway of the commuter train watching Sweden go back in time and transform back into fields and forest, and I don't sit down, and I don't even notice until I'm halfway to Nynäshamn that I've gotten on the wrong train, I'll have to switch and go northwards again and what if the cops are already waiting? and what will Nancy say, and I wonder if she's been staying with that guy from the gallery, and something in my pocket is poking my leg, and I open my hand and see Marisol's letter folded up like a promise, and a flock of crows lifts from a field as the train barrels southwards, going the wrong direction, just like my life.

