

A
FAIRY
TALE



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JONAS T. BENGTSSON

TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH
BY CHARLOTTE BARSLUND



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First published in Denmark as *Et eventyr* in 2011 by Rosinante
First published in English in 2014 by House of Anansi Press Inc.
Published by agreement with Salomonsson Agency

This edition published in 2014 by
House of Anansi Press Inc.
110 Spadina Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, ON, M5V 2K4
Tel. 416-363-4343
Fax 416-363-1017
www.houseofanansi.com

Distributed in Canada by
HarperCollins Canada Ltd.
1995 Markham Road
Scarborough, ON, M1B 5M8
Toll-free tel. 1-800-387-0117

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As part of our efforts, the interior of this book is printed on paper that contains 100% post-consumer recycled fibres, is acid-free, and is processed chlorine-free.

18 17 16 15 14 1 2 3 4 5

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Bengtsson, Jonas T., 1976–
[Eventyr. English]
A fairy tale / Jonas T. Bengtsson ; translated by Charlotte Barslund.

Translation of: *Et eventyr*.
Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77089-306-1 (pbk.). — ISBN 978-1-77089-307-8 (html)

I. Barslund, Charlotte II. Title. III. Title: *Eventyr*. English

PT8177:12.E54E9413 2014 839.81'38 C2013-903469-2
C2013-903470-6

Cover design: Alysia Shewchuk
Text design and typesetting: Alysia Shewchuk



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

We acknowledge for their financial support of our publishing program the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund.



STATENS
KUNSTRÅD
DANISH ARTS COUNCIL

The translation is supported by the Danish Arts Council's Committee for Literature.

Printed and bound in Canada

To my son

1986



I'VE JUST TURNED SIX WHEN OLOF PALME IS SHOT. IT'S THE FIRST of March and very cold outside. My dad and I are sitting in the kitchen, we're eating crusty rolls for breakfast and I'm drawing. We hear it on the radio. My dad turns up the volume. The woman on the radio sounds as if it's important. Big news. I chase a poppy seed across the table with my fingernail. Then my dad tells me to get dressed. I can't find my socks. My dad bends down and sticks my bare feet into my wellies.

WE WALK DOWN THE street. My dad holds me by the arm. He's looking straight ahead. Dragging me along. I've become luggage. A suitcase on small wheels. I tell him that it hurts, that I can't keep up, but the wind blows away my words.

There are always lots of people out and about on a Saturday. Cars going in and out of carports, elderly women with grocery bags doing last-minute shopping before everything shuts. But not today, today we have the road to ourselves.

It's not a big town and we soon reach the main street.

My dad looks straight ahead; his mouth is just a line across his face. I think he has forgotten he's holding my arm.

My dad has shoulder-length blond hair with the same reddish tint as his beard. He shaves once a week and lets it grow in between. He cuts his hair with a pair of scissors in the kitchen. The cigarette is an extension of his hand, an extra joint on his finger. He wears only a T-shirt under his coat which is always open, but he's never cold. It's rare for him to feel the cold. I'm almost always cold. I look like him, I think. When I grow up, I won't shave, either.

He says I look more like my mum. But that it's a good thing. She was beautiful.

I tell him that when I grow up I'll only shave once a week like him, but again the wind takes my words, tears at the branches and shakes the trees, whistles down the drainpipes.

We reach the town's only television shop. The TV sets in the window all show the same picture, some in colour, others in black and white. We've already walked through the door, but my dad doesn't let go of me until we stand in front of a wall of screens. Big and small ones, price tags with long numbers. When the lady in one television turns her head or glances down at her papers, the ladies in all the other televisions copy her movements. It reminds me of a game we played in nursery school in another town.

The shop assistant is standing next to us. He wears a striped shirt with a name tag and he's staring at one of the TV sets, his mouth hanging slightly open. An elderly woman has put down her shopping bags and hasn't noticed that four apples have rolled away. My dad looks around as if he's searching for something; he finds it hard to make up his mind. Finally he opts for a huge colour television in the centre. The sound is already loud, but he turns it up even more. Then my dad stands very still too. I'm convinced that the first person to move has lost the game.

The television shows images of a dark street, road signs and snow. Stockholm. A sidewalk has been cordoned off

with red and white plastic tape, people have gathered behind it. They, too, are standing very still. Some are claspng their mouths. The woman in the television speaks very slowly, as if she has just woken up. She says that Olof Palme came out of a cinema not far from there. That he was with his wife, that they had been to see the film *The Mozart Brothers* and were on their way home.

On the grey pavement are dark stains that look like paint. The camera zooms in on them.

“It’s blood,” my dad says, never once taking his eyes off the screen.

WE’RE BACK IN THE street. We walk quickly as if rushing away from the images on the television.

I think we’re heading home until we turn right by the closed-down butcher’s. Towards the harbour, down a narrow, cobbled street.

My dad sits down on an iron girder; I sit down beside him, as close to him as I can get. The water in front of us is black. A couple of fishing boats are sailing into the harbour; there’s a huge crane to our right, its hook hangs just above the surface of the water. The sky is grey.

My dad hides his face in his coat sleeve. I hear loud sobs through the thick fabric. He squeezes my hand so hard that it hurts.

“They got him,” he says. “The bastards finally got him.”

I don’t remember ever seeing my dad cry. I ask him if Palme was someone he knew, but he makes no reply. He holds me tight. My feet are freezing in the wellies.

“They got him,” he says again.

The wind whips the sea into foam.

“I think we’re going to have to move again.”

1987



WE'RE SITTING IN THE CAR MY DAD HAS BORROWED FROM A farmer with mean, filthy dogs in his yard.

Everything we own is on the back seat or in the trunk.

"It's about time we returned to Copenhagen," my dad says. "You were born in Copenhagen, did you know that?"

He rolls down the window. As he turns the handle, the white station wagon rattles and creaks as if it's about to fall apart. Then he finds a hand-rolled cigarette in the breast pocket of his denim jacket.

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel, blows smoke out of the corner of his mouth, and removes a piece of tobacco from his lower lip.

He's always happy when we move and he laughs a lot.

We drive past tall concrete buildings. There are cars all around us. The motorway ends and the houses get lower. We could be anywhere. It looks like many of the places where we've lived before, places with supermarkets and hairdressers.

I CLOSE MY EYES and nearly fall asleep; we've been driving since the morning. At first I see white rings, then flashing lights on the inside of my eyelids. I'm gone a moment, perhaps longer.

My dad's voice brings me back to the car. "We're here," he says, and I open my eyes.

We've stopped for a red light. My dad revs the engine which hisses and splutters. He explained to me earlier that he does it to stop it from stalling.

I look out of the car's dirty windows and I see the city. It's different from anything I've ever seen before.

I hold on to my seat belt. It stretches tightly across my chest; I press my thumb against the edge of the seat belt until it hurts. Outside the car the city is teeming with people, all moving in different directions. So many sounds, so much noise. Cars beep and brakes squeal when a bus comes to a halt next to us.

When my dad drives across the junction, I hold my breath.

I can't understand how we don't knock down a cyclist or crash into any of the other cars.

I put my hand against the cool window and feel the city growl and snarl like an angry dog.

I roll down the window, open my mouth, and stick out my tongue. The city tastes of exhaust fumes and rotting apples.

MY DAD PARKS THE car and we walk under an archway and into a courtyard. We walk on smashed paving stones past a wooden shed with some of its planks missing and a roof that's about to cave in. The tenement block is a red brick building. My dad walks down the steps to a basement door and knocks.

"I hope this is it," he says, and smiles at me. We wait, my dad is about to knock again when the door opens. The man is big and quite a bit older than my dad. He has small tufts of grey hair on an otherwise shiny head. A brown

coat above dirty work trousers. Small blood vessels run like blue and red rivers across his cheeks towards the root of his nose and inside one nostril. I want to tell my dad that the man looks like a map, but I'm too scared to open my mouth.

"About time, too," the man says, and wipes his hands on his coat, leaving dark traces of oil.

WE FOLLOW THE CARETAKER across the courtyard. The bunch of keys dangling from his belt is the biggest I've ever seen. It jingles so loudly that we could follow him with our eyes closed. We walk past rusty bicycles and several wooden sheds.

On the way up the stairs the man fills the entire space; I wouldn't be able to get past him if I tried. The stairwell smells of mouse droppings and meatballs. He stops in front of a wooden door with peeling green paint and knocks on it.

"The bathroom," he says. "You'll be sharing it with the man below you, old Nielsen. He's all right, nothing wrong with him." We continue up the stairs. "If you still want the apartment, that is."

He finds the key and unlocks the door.

The apartment looks like something that has been cut away, something that wasn't needed.

My dad beams as though he has been dreaming of a place like this his whole life. The small kitchen with windows facing the courtyard has just enough room for a narrow table, two chairs, and a wooden fold-out bed against the wall. When we eat our breakfast, we'll be able to see into the apartments opposite us. My dad reads my mind and waves at the dark windows across the courtyard.

"The bedroom is in here," the caretaker says, pulling in his stomach so he can squeeze past the small table. He opens the door to the only other room in the apartment, the room my dad has promised me will be mine. My very own. The room is tiny and has a single window so high up that

I can't look out of it. Once, when this apartment was a part of something bigger, a forgotten part, it must have been a broom cupboard. Shelves lined with yellowing paper. Tall glasses with preserved plums or apples. Now there's a bed where I'll be sleeping tonight. The smell is dirty in a dry, dusty way.

The caretaker's voice is no longer quite so confident when he says, "Eh, I thought the apartment was bigger than this. I've got another one if you want to..."

"It's excellent," my dad says. "I'm sure we'll be very happy here."

WE FOLLOW THE CARETAKER back to his workshop. There are oil stains on the floor and tools on the wide worktop under the window. Keys hang on one wall. Lots of keys, there must be one for each apartment. At night when people are asleep, he lets himself in and nibbles cold leftovers in their fridges. He takes a bit of chicken here and some meatloaf there. That's why he has grown so fat.

"You're paying cash?" he asks.

My dad nods.

They shake hands. This always makes me proud because I know that my dad has a good, firm handshake. I've heard people say so.

MY DAD AND I lug all our stuff from the car. My dad takes the bigger items, old suitcases close to bursting with his books. I fetch the carrier bags with our bed linen and towels. Finally, my dad picks up the wooden crate with his records; he holds it with great care and puts it down on the kitchen table. I can't see the record player. I don't ask where it is.

WE HAVE BACON AND eggs for supper. Bought from the farmer who lent us the car.

"This is going to be great, I just know it is," my dad says, while the bacon sizzles in the frying pan.

I can tell from his eyes that he isn't just talking about the food.

"This is going to be great," he says again.

THE DOOR TO MY new room refuses to shut properly. Every time we try, it squeaks and springs open. The building must have shifted since it was built; it has stretched and twisted, yawned and coughed. I can see my dad from my room, see his feet stick out over the wooden fold-out bed, see the toe that he stubbed against a door last week and which has now turned blue.

I listen to his heavy breathing. I've always fallen asleep to sounds. Often to the sound of cars. A car on the gravel road not far from my window. Cars on the motorway, from an apartment high above the ground. I've fallen asleep to the rustling of the wind in the tall trees outside. Whenever there was a storm, I would close my eyes and imagine the trees bowing down before straightening up again.

When we lived near the sea, the waves would lull me to sleep. They would roll further and further across the beach and over the coarse yellow grass before they would come through the bushes, into my room, and carry me off.

I'm in my new bed and the city has its own sounds.

MY DAD IS SITTING IN THE CAR NOW.

A moment ago I heard his footsteps on the stairs. His leather shoes tapped against the old boards. I heard the front door open. I saw him cross the courtyard, pass the low wooden bin shed. Walk across the paving stones and past the bicycle with the flat front tire.

My dad puts the key in the ignition. The car refuses to start. It wouldn't start when we picked it up yesterday, either. Not after the first or third go.

I'm in the kitchen. My dad has tidied away the bed linen and stowed it in the drawer under the fold-out bed which he has covered with cushions. "Our sofa," he said, and smiled.

Today I'm going to be home alone.

"Is that okay?" he asked, pointing to the food on the dining table. Bread left over from breakfast, a small packet of butter, and three bruised apples with gravel stuck to their skin. I nodded. I'd promised myself not to cry. I'm seven years old, so I don't cry.

I'd have liked to go with him, though the rattling of the car and the smell of gasoline made me carsick yesterday. We

had to pull over a couple of times so that I could throw up. Even so, I'd have liked another day of sitting next to my dad, listening to his stories.

"It's too far," he said. "All I'm doing is returning the car. I'll be back tonight. Late. I might wake you when I get back. Don't wait up."

He put a set of keys on the table.

I asked if I was allowed to go down to the courtyard. "Of course," he replied, and said that he wasn't going to tell me what to do. But I had to be careful and look after myself. Then he kissed my forehead and was out the door.

This time the car starts. The engine hums, backfires, and splutters. He drives down the street in the big city, surrounded by other cars. Everything moves quickly. I hope he's careful.

What if I never see him again? I think. What if he just disappears?

But I know that he'd never leave me.

I TAKE THE KEYS from the table. There is an owl on the key ring. It blinks with one eye as if it knows something I don't.

I open the door and walk down the back stairs.

My dad has told me that old maps of Africa and South America always had dark areas. Places whose secrets nobody knew. There might be vast treasures, gold and precious stones. There might be animals no one had ever seen, butterflies the size of seagulls. But there might also be monsters and cannibals. Things so dreadful you couldn't even imagine them. Every now and then an explorer would venture out to map some of the dark areas. Many explorers never returned.

I walk slowly down the stairs. Today I take every step with caution. I don't think there are any traps, but I don't want to risk it.

The courtyard has grown overnight. Last night when we followed the caretaker it was big; today it's enormous.

We've lived in towns that could easily fit in between its walls. Slowly, I move forward, one step at a time, and I pass two apple trees that have become entwined. I walk across the broken paving stones and along the small bushes that grow by the wall. My eyes are a camera and every time I blink, I take a picture. When I'm back in the apartment, I'll get out my pencils; I'll take the pictures from my head and put them down on the sketchbook my dad gave me a couple of weeks ago.

As I walk I keep thinking about how I arrived at this particular spot. How I turned right, how I turned left. I'd have made a good explorer. I clutch the little owl on the key ring in my pocket. I press its plastic beak into my thumb.

A CAT SITS IN the sunshine, licking its paws. Its fur is grey with white specks. I approach it slowly, trying not to scare it. I squat down close to it. Suddenly it looks up and disappears between the bushes. I hear the sound of keys; the caretaker is standing behind me.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I don't answer him.

"You've got no business being here."

Yesterday he was just a big man with keys and filthy trousers. Now I know that I don't like him and that I'll try to avoid him in future. I don't think that'll be difficult, all I have to do is listen for his keys; there must be lots of places to hide in the courtyard, places where he won't be able to get in.

I run back towards our stairwell. He has frightened me and I run home, that's how I want it to look. And perhaps I really am scared of the caretaker, but an explorer never runs away. Just before I reach the door, I turn right and race past the bike sheds. I stop and listen. I can hear cars in the street and a bird chirping in one of the trees in the courtyard, but no keys.

I stay there for a while just to be sure; I count inside my head, one Mississippi, two Mississippi, but still no keys. I'm

about to move. I plan to sneak along the wall when I suddenly feel a sharp pain in my neck like I'm being stung by a wasp. My eyes well up, mostly because it's taken me by surprise. I raise my hand to touch the spot where it hurts. Then I hear someone laugh; quietly, at first, as if he's trying to suppress it. The laughter grows louder, the bushes rustle, and a boy appears among the branches. He's a few years older than me; he has dark, shoulder-length hair and wears a denim jacket with fringes. In his hand he holds a white plastic peashooter wrapped in red and blue tape; it's the longest peashooter I've ever seen.

"Sorry," he says, but he doesn't stop laughing.

"That hurt," I tell him.

"You speak funny, what's your name?"

This is a question you should always respond to quickly, that much I've learned.

"Peter." I think it's a good name. I could easily be a Peter.

"Have you met the caretaker?"

"Yes."

"He eats little children. Smaller than you, I mean. He makes soup with them. He waits outside the hospital and when a baby is stillborn—do you know what that means?"

"Yes."

"Never mind. Where do you go to school?"

I don't want to tell him. I want to get away now, back to the apartment.

"I asked you where."

"We've just moved here."

"Which school did you use to go to?"

"I don't go to school," I say, and regret it instantly.

"How old are you?"

"Seven."

"Then you have to go to school—unless you're a retard. Then you go to a special school where they teach you to make clothes pegs. Are you a retard?"

I shake my head. I'm almost certain I'm not a retard.

“So which school do you go to?”

I make no reply.

“We’re going to be friends,” he says. “You and me.”

I walk back towards the apartment. I walk as slowly as I can, I don’t want to run. When I reach for the handle, I hear something hit the door right by my head.

When I lie in my bed that night, I miss the sound of my dad’s voice. I miss his fairy tales. My eyes are half-closed when he comes home. I don’t let my eyelids close fully until he has lit a cigarette and opened a beer.