

FUTURE MIRROR

a novel by
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**Sample translation from the Danish
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sverre jun meets love in two forms

he had nothing better to do. so he decided, sverre jun, to go to the movies, though the movie didn't really interest him. but he only made it to the ticket counter. the girl behind the glass gave him a look. one look, so warm, so penetrating that he forgot why he came. he regained his senses, asked for a ticket out of embarrassment. almost didn't dare to meet her gaze, but before he left, there it was again. like a blow. he left the theater feeling numb.

since he *had* bought the ticket, sverre jun went back. what would she say when she saw that he hadn't used the ticket? which she had handed to him with that intense look.

into the show. didn't dare go near the ticket counter again. the film ended up being as vapid and pointless as he had expected. but during it her gaze returned to him now and then. she was blonde, rather animated movements. opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something other than the price of the ticket. sverre jun wondered if he was taking this right. their meeting had only lasted a few seconds. the fluttering arm movement when she handed him the ticket. as if she would rather have shaken hands. and he would have preferred that.

seconds that wouldn't go away.

the next day he arrived a bit before the film started. maybe with a vague hope. that he was getting a head start. would this extend the time when that heartfelt look could penetrate him? it didn't happen. others were in line. the ticket was handed over without being accompanied by the look. he thought that maybe it came with the price.

but on the fourth day they were alone. she looked at him. her gaze rested on him a long while. "you must like this one," she said. "no, you," he blurted out before hurrying off. his unfortunate trouble with hiding the truth. hopefully it was sufficiently mumbled to leave her doubting what he actually had said.

the conversation continued. if you could call it that. the next time he came. "what was it you said?" "i... i wanted to ask if you work here every single day." "no. i have off tomorrow for example. mondays." "would you rather sit inside the theater?" "what do you mean?" "i have two tickets."

it wasn't completely true. he had figured on seeing the lousy film one more time. but the next day, monday, he got two tickets for the movie. crumpled them up, so she would think he'd had them for a while.

during the show his right hand got closer to her left hand. but it did not reach it.

he had done it again. saw it immediately! saw where he went wrong.

after the show they walked out to the lobby where there hung fifty dark jackets. all more or less alike. couldn't tell them from one another.

a month ago the same thing had happened to him. luckily he was alone then. that time he decided to stand in front of the mirror. intently combing his hair. while the fifty jackets were claimed. one by one. except his. then he recognized it.

he couldn't make her sit through that. until fifty jackets were removed and his appeared. would get impatient. would leave, her obliging gaze gone, shake her head, give up on him, abandoned.

in his coat pocket was a striped cap. he would recognize that. quickly he felt jacket after jacket, empty pocket, almost empty, also empty, empty. next one something hard, a pipe? almost empty. she waited patiently behind him. had already found her jacket, red, unique. easy to recognize. a while ago. waiting, but for how long?

finally, a pocket with a soft bulge the size of his cap. he quickly stuck his hand in.

"hey. you there. what are you doing with my wallet?"

a short, round older man. lifted hand.

"mistake."

"not just a mistake. a bad habit. a very bad habit."

"looking for my cap."

eventually most of the jackets were claimed. the irritated man tramped off with an indignant shake of his head. but the girl in the red jacket was still waiting patiently.

"what's wrong? you're pale, in shock? i'll have to buy you a cup of tea. not sending you out in traffic like this."

"i'm not like this," he said as they waited for their tea. in the cafe conveniently next door to the cinema.

"is it only when you don't have the money to invite a girl for a cup of tea?"

“right. i mean.”

he found himself in the middle of a long explanation. evasive explanation. which was getting longer. apology. about his upbringing. which he normally did not bring up. necessary in this case. explain the misunderstanding, the only way. that at home they tolerated things like this, his danish mother, sud’nly gawt ay bit lawng-n-drawn-owt, norwegian father, and soidinly it be-
caime lake dis, friends, guests spoke english. while in the streets and markets there were strange sounds, farsi, which he never learned to understand, attach any meaning to.

perplexing! amiably interested.

later, when he had exhausted the topic. out on the street long sleeves even though it was hot, all women covered up, in chadors. everything hidden. clothes no one must see. but at home people almost nude, wrong word, wrong thought, what do you call it? lightly dressed. that is what made him jacket-blind.

jacket-blind? yes, his private theory, others are color blind, word blind, number blind. he couldn’t tell the difference. that’s why he had his hand in the pocket of the wrong jacket. it turned out.

“farsi – is that iranian?”

“yes, from teheran. when i was ten i came here. went to school here. in møllevang. so you work with movies?”

change the subject. him. can’t talk about him. be interested, don’t monopolize, trifles about him.

“how did you know...?”

her name was juanna. she worked at the movie theater ticket counter. how could he not know? she told him that during breaks. there were long breaks where no one needed tickets. lots of time to sit and think. she had seen the films. just like him? sverreh. sverre jun.

a person who guarded the entrance to the movies must hold them in high esteem?

on the contrary. they’re awful, most of them. worthless. during breaks she always sat there improving them. found a better ending. for example the one he liked. instead of letting the guy meet the girl again on the train platform. let him get on the train. then he sees her standing on the platform, but too late, in vain, the train separates them relentlessly. split screen. his empty hand. her open mouth.

“beautiful,” said sverre jun impressed. her animated fingers painted the picture. “much better. when will they change it? adopt your ending? i would like to see that.”

juanna laughed. blonde, waving arm, both arms, vibrant, eager. her face, when he dared, to look, small, intense. the dancing eyes which had already captured him at their first meeting.

or the second one he saw. sentimental. which she couldn't stand. he made a mental note. the word new. keep away from sentimentality. for her sake.

she had found a much better opening scene. for the second one. the girl could be standing in a store. he comes in. again and again. she thinks he's coming to shop. actually it's to meet her.

or behind the glass of a ticket counter, he was just about to say. caught himself in time. avoid sentimentality. that she really wanted him to approach her?

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as if that wasn't enough.

because at the same time he was having another experience. something completely different. and yet still similar. so similar that he had to keep them separate, try to avoid mixing them up. juanna would have solved it by adding a split screen. he had to be satisfied with putting it in his split brain.

it happened the following day. not the day after the jacket and the tea and the conversation about jacket-blindness. it was the next day after meeting juanna for the first time, was struck by her penetrating eyes. on the way to the cinema, on the following day, early, he remembered that he was probably hungry. had completely forgotten to eat. because of thinking about her eyes. the first day eyes.

he entered the bakery diagonally across from the metropol. a couple of customers. but when he made it to the front he saw the girl behind the counter. she gave him a quiet smile as she handed him the bag with the truffle he had asked for. a calorie bomb.

calm, slightly sorrowful eyes, long brown hair, slightly dark complexion. he was so confused when he crossed the street that he couldn't even eat. enthralling, beautiful, and yet she had given him that reserved smile.

deep confusion. until then he had always lived with the conviction that hearts were like women's eggs. that the mind related to love like the egg to sperm cells. the moment a sperm entered, the shell became hard, keeping out any competition.

the previous day was those penetrating eyes, the bright intense face, which later would have the name juanna, pervading. but now the gentle, dark woman with the sad smile had also found a place in his heart. split heart. twin girlfriends? the second day smile.

when again on the third day, on the way to the cinema, he ordered another truffle, she asked in a dark, sonorous voice if he would like to take advantage of the sale. the sale? four truffles for the price of three. he wasn't interested. he avoided telling the truth: that one of those sweet sticky things was plenty for him. what was important for him day after day was to receive one of her shy smiles. for any price. in the store there were two chairs and a table for customers. he was tempted but didn't sit down. would reveal too clearly that he was only here to harvest reluctant smiles.

the next day he was alone with her in the shop. "you must like them," she said. "no, you," he replied, almost as if it had spilled over from the other scenario. the one running alongside. split. and he hurried out, left her puzzled about what he had actually said.

the next day: he had difficulty in getting yet another truffle down. a film that only flickered on the screen, while two young women competed for his attention. blonde, eager eyes, demonstrative hands. and dark features, with a smile that barely made it over her lips, but made an impact.

when he left the cinema he noticed her, diagonally across the street, her smile, or in any case her hair as her back was facing him, as she closed up the bakery. turned out lights, closed the curtain, locked up. until she glanced across the street, through the rain, quiet rain over trøjborg. some people said trøjborg. her glance at the cinema. at him, who quickly stopped staring at her, hurried to his little red car, key in the door.

HONK... HONK ... HONK ... HONK...

startled. a policeman who had been in the cinema, or a guard, in a uniform anyway, rushed over and grabbed his shoulder.

"hey, what are you doing with that car?"

"something's not right. i have never..."

“it’s called an alarm. it’s to stop thieves.”

“but it’s mine.”

more guests streamed from the theater, despite the rain, gathered around him and the authoritative man. who had his hand on his shoulder. the girl with the smile came walking over too, crossing the street from the bakery.

“he just made a mistake,” she said. “his car is parked right there. behind the black one.”

his car was two cars down from the one wailing. he proved that his key fit the door lock, no alarm went off. the uniform grumbled, people started to disperse. the gruff man was last. collar up against the rain. since it was raining the man let him go.

“you must be disoriented. you can’t drive like that,” she said with a hint of a smile. like the gentle rain. “you had better brace yourself with a truffle.”

she tried to support him as they crossed the street. he showed that he could make it on his own. she opened up, turned on the light in the store.

“i’m not like this,” he said.

she had set a truffle down in front of him. sat in the other chair after having placed a glass of juice in his hand.

“is it only when you want to impress the girl across the street with your fancy car? that one must cost five times as much as yours.”

“right. i mean.”

another example of finding himself in a replica of the other experience.

took a bite of the truffle. remember to pay for it. she watched him closely. he had to resort to his own explanation.

“i’m car-blind.”

“what?”

“just like someone else can be tone deaf or number blind.”

he elaborated on his story. which felt like the one he had already started. about his jacket-blindness. had he already told her? about the river of cars when he arrived to this country. unable to differentiate, which colors set them apart. not the brand, not the size. metal boxes on wheels.

grew up in a world where you had to hide. if there was a knock on the door you ran to the window or the peephole. if it was family that was fine. if it was a stranger, the women had to cover themselves, disappear into themselves, before you could open the door.

kept talking because she listened so intently. almost pulled the words out of him. how did he get to school? here in this country. the liberation of being able to study what interested him. about the teacher with the same name as him, and who took him under his wing, pumped him with physics which filled him up like... like..."

"truffles," the girl whose name was irene suggested.

so that is probably why he was studying physics. chronophysics, inspired by sverresen, the teacher.

she placed another glass of juice in front of him. should have been a beer, but couldn't serve alcohol.

"i'm not an ale-coholic," he said. quickly covered it up. another evasive explanation. it was not allowed where he grew up. at home they might have had one glass in secret. anxious panic not to be found out, or to have drunk too much. a family friend got something like prison for life. really? really. he knew. everything was dangerous. his mother was a singer, excellent. in a country where women were not permitted to sing. afraid, even at home, if his mother crooned an aria.

talked more than he wanted. maybe because she talked more. about a customer she had helped, gotten to eat more healthy. grateful. and then a couple she got to diverge from their fast ritual, half of a particular streudel every day. try something else. to the point that they were almost euphoric about it. she talked, he noticed, it calmed him, the car theft was still buzzing inside him, the blame. took care of him. guided by that discrete smile.

grew up in nøjrup, where people looked out for each other. as she said, irene, as she pressed a batard into his hand as he was leaving. wanted to pay. was going to be thrown out tomorrow anyway. she insisted, genuinely curious about the big world he had opened.

juanna? irene?

once early in his studies sverre jun had to take a class in astronomy. during a break the teacher, old adam d'eden, told him that in his youth he had been passionately in love with brigitte bardot. ready to sacrifice half his life for spending the other half of it with her.

and when he saw her today. dear god. the old astronomer shook his head. would give his right arm in thanks for never having won her over.

it wasn't until much later that sverre jun understood that adam's meeting with the woman never would have happened in reality. the old man had only seen movies with her in them in his youth. isn't that why he went to the movies? still the story made a big impression on sverre jun. the danger of making a mistake, wasting half your life.

always think something through: that he, sverre jun, later would have to realize that old adam, when he met viveca in the garden of eden, became father to no less than sverresen. the advantage of choosing correctly, ushering life further. this thought made him take action.

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because one day sverre jun withdrew a pile of money.

while his mother was a singer who wasn't allowed to sing, his straight-shooting father had accumulated a considerable amount of money. maybe there was a connection to why they had to leave iran suddenly, move to denmark. where some of it ended up in his, sverre jun's account. before his father disappeared, presumably with another woman.

and drove to nøjrup which was still an open city, but had other plans.

couldn't stay in this duality. strung between irene's quiet, nearly sedating smile and juanna's sparkling eyes. he had to find a solution. split his mind.

went to generos near nøjrup. not dilapidated, as irene had suggested. after the catastrophe, therefore big rooms, lots of space for rent. spoke with an older man, the bankruptcy manager.

sverre jun needed a lot of room, but first and foremost computation capacity, a lot of computation capacity. which this place could provide.

he tried to get his hands on the algorithm that dmi used to calculate seven day forecasts. he wasn't able to, but his attempt revealed a profusion of prediction algorithms, and not just the european ifs-model. also the danish model, whose name harmony seemed promising to him.

sverre jun created a sleeping area in the little office where he could crash. and otherwise work nearly around the clock. all he brought with him were a few reference books, change of clothes and his trusty computer. in which he had a few photos of irene, which she reluctantly let him take. one behind the counter where he was able to get her to make that slight smile. a couple in front of the bakery, somewhat uncomfortable with the situation. also a few selfies of juanna and him where she was an eager participant in a couple of inventive poses. invented by her. in addition to these he had persuaded them each to give him a couple of recent portraits.

finally, and most importantly, he had the two small glasses. the one contained a bit of dna, left on a glass by the blonde, enthusiastic one, who had magically attracted him to the ticket window. the other glass had a tissue sample from the girl who saved him from life imprisonment for car theft.

of course it had to be possible to choose between them.

Original Danish Text by Svend Åge Madsen ©2020

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