



A MINOR DISORDER

Vicky Grut

They had been driving all day and by now they were in an endless, undulating sort of chicken-scratching landscape. There was so much space with so little in it that Stefan became afraid. ‘We must get more water and a can of petrol in the next town,’ he said to Jonas, ‘in case the car breaks down.’

Jonas did not respond. Since their last argument it seemed he was pretending to be travelling alone. Suddenly he pulled the car over to the side of the road, switched off the engine, got out and began to walk away.

‘Where are you going?’ Stefan called.

‘For a walk.’

Stefan watched him stride away across the dry, flat land. They had never really got along, not even at school.

Stefan, too, got out and walked some way in the other direction. He squatted down on a low rock and looked about. What at first appeared to be a pathetic, poverty-stricken emptiness grew more

complex when you studied it for a while. A stream of fat red ants passed close to his shoe. He became aware of the high, machine-like singing of a thousand insects. Bees. Crickets. Something glinted briefly in the scrub about a metre away from him and he wondered whether it might be a snake. He wasn't at all afraid. How far we have come in these past eight weeks, he said to himself, much further than just the distance between Sweden and Africa.

Sitting here on the rock in the middle of the veldt, he began to feel glad for the first time. He felt a star-burst of happiness in his chest. Ten days into a new continent, two weeks short of twenty-one. What a life there was to be lived in such a brilliant light.

Something made him turn and glance back at the car. He saw Jonas climbing in at the driver's side. A moment later the engine coughed into life. In his mind, like a snapshot, Stefan saw that copy of *L'Etranger* sticking out of Jonas's bag, and the hunting knife he carried in his coat. Then he stopped thinking and began to run. He'd been a champion cross-country runner at school. He reached the car and tumbled in just as Jonas began to accelerate.

'You swine, Larsson!' he panted, forcing a laugh.

Jonas said nothing, just swung the car back into the middle of the road. The sky above them burned.

By nightfall they were in the Karroo proper: a dry, secretive place. They stopped in one of the larger towns where there was a hotel with a bar full of white farmers, red-faced and roaring. There was a little hatch at one the side where the barman stuck his head out to sell bottles to the black labourers in the street. The hotel owner's daughter showed them to their room, unlocking the door and snapping on the light so that the moths and mosquitoes shot about crazily in the air.

There was a huge speckled tile floor with four beds ranged against the walls like a school dormitory, each one covered in a pastel-shaded bedspread with tassels (sick-pink, blue and green). It was like a hospital or a prison, Stefan thought, with a wave of despair. It was hideous.

Jonas went off to have a shower. Stefan chose one of the beds and sat down with his suitcase, close to tears. He longed with an almost physical pain for his mother's high-ceilinged Stockholm flat with its beautiful parquet floors and Kelim mats, the elegant chairs, the black and gold lacquer cabinet that Uncle Sven had brought back from China, the silk curtains that had once hung in their house in Malaya.

Stefan opened his suitcase, lifting out the stacks of neatly folded shirts and trousers till he came to his books: a French novel, a couple of English sheep farming texts, an account of Linnaeus's botanical expedition to the Cape in the 1700s — new books for the future, old ones to remind him of home. The one he wanted was right at the bottom of the case: a battered medical encyclopaedia that his mother had given him as a parting gift, *The Universal Home Doctor (Illustrated)*. She herself had been given this book by an Englishwoman in Malaya before he was even born, and she had consulted it faithfully about all their childhood ailments till he and Harald were old enough to go away to school. Now she had handed it on to him, her only surviving child. Stefan touched the worn cover with the tips of his fingers.

'You will not find a book like this today,' his mother had said. 'People will tell you that there is such a thing as progress, mon cher, but I'm not sure I agree: dances are shorter, men are less handsome, encyclopaedias have fewer entries. Let this book be your guide, my dear; it will keep you safe.'

It was as close to an expression of tenderness as she would ever get.

Dinner was served from half past six in the dining room behind the bar. A few minutes after they'd sat down a small yellow-skinned woman in a pale pink cotton uniform and matching headcloth appeared from the kitchens. She carried a tray with two platefuls of food which she set in front of them without a word: thick slices of meat in gravy, fat grey peas, carrots, roast potatoes and a sweet sticky root that Stefan couldn't identify.

'Thank you,' Jonas said in his careful English, smiling.

The woman looked startled and scuttled back to the kitchens.

'They've probably never seen foreigners in this town,' Jonas said.

Stefan thought of the light, clean tastes of his mother's table — potatoes with dill, grilled white fish, ham baked in pale cream sauce. He forced a cheerful smile and loaded his fork. 'I'm starving!'

'Again? Have you got worms?'

Stefan pretended not to hear. He'd decided it was the best strategy.

The kitchen doors opened again and the little woman appeared with a bottle of chutney, which she put on the very furthest edge of their table. Then she was gone again. Jonas followed her wistfully with his eyes.

'Perhaps she speaks only Afrikaans,' he murmured.

'Perhaps.'

In fact, if he was honest, Stefan was finding the whole business of servants more discomfiting than he'd anticipated. Almost everywhere you went in his aunt and uncle's house in Cape Town you bumped into a retainer of some sort: two maids in the house, a gardener outside.

No doubt on his uncle's farm it would be even worse.

When the woman brought them their dessert — thick peach halves swimming in a single great clot of cream — Jonas addressed her haltingly in Afrikaans.

'Wat is jou naam? Your name? Jou naam?'

The woman backed away from their table with an expression of fascinated horror, like someone confronted by a freak-show creature in the wrong context.

'My naam is Jonas, en dit is Stefan. En jy?' Jonas pointed. *'Jy? You?'*

'Regina, baas,' she whispered.

Jonas flinched. *'Baas?!'*

Stefan closed his eyes. They'd been through all this already in Cape Town with his aunt and uncle's maid.

'I am not your baas, Regina...' Jonas was saying. *'My name is Jonas Larsson. Just plain Jonas Larsson.'*

'Ja baas.' The woman glanced back at the kitchen doors.

'For God's sakes, Jonas. You're embarrassing the poor woman.' Stefan muttered.

Jonas threw him a slaughtering look.

That night a vague ache in his stomach kept Stefan awake. Hour after hour he lay there listening to the gentle roar of the white farmers, and then, when the bar closed, to the sound of Jonas snoring. For some reason, he was haunted by the memory of his uncle's gardener in Cape Town: a tall and melancholy man with clothes that flapped against his bony frame. He saw the gardener reaching out to skim leaves from the glasslike expanse of the swimming pool, his frame bent in two like a croquet hook by the nature of his work, his skin both leathery and

soft, burnished by all weathers, his hat, pulled down over his eyes. When he smiled, his mouth was cavernous, surprising. What kind of a house did he live in? How far did he travel on that rusty old bike of his? Did he have children?

After a while Stefan rose and went to the toilet at the end of the corridor, but he produced nothing. Back in the room he stood at the window to catch the light of the streetlamp and read the entry for Parasites (worms) in *The Universal Home Doctor (Illustrated)*. His skin turned cool: round and flat worms, thread and jointed, burrowing, drilling, microscopic — the number and variety of intestinal parasites was beyond belief.

In the morning he went down to the desk to pay for their room while Jonas packed the car. Stefan leaned against the desk, feeling strained and exhausted. The owner's daughter took his money almost without counting it. She was around eighteen years old and very strong. He'd heard her in full throat that very morning, tearing into one of the women in the kitchen. But in his company she was reigned in and tremulous, as if he sapped her strength.

She leaned forward on the desk, her forearms squeezing against her breasts, and asked if he thought they'd come back. Stefan said he thought not. The girl sighed and stared as if she was pressing him into an image that she'd keep for another time. Her mouth hung open a little. Stefan could see little flecks of her breakfast caught in her teeth, something red and not quite cooked.

From the road outside Stefan heard the first rough cough and stutter of the car's engine.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'Goodbye.'

How would he know if he had worms? Stefan leaned his head against the metal rim of the window on the passenger's side, feeling it jouncing his brain as they drove. Would he actually feel the creatures quickening and wriggling in his gut, sucking and whirling, draining his life's blood?

Beside him, in the driver's seat, Jonas whistled softly between his teeth. Suddenly he began to recite in his stilted sing-song English: ' "We the people of South Africa declare for all our country and the world to know that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all people ... that our country will never be prosperous or free until all people live in brotherhood, enjoying equal rights"...' he broke off and looked at Stefan. 'Do you know where that comes from?'

'No.'

'It's the preface to what they call the Freedom Charter.'

Stefan adopted a strained, enquiring expression.

'I see.'

Stefan thought of the worms, making highways in the heart of him and he felt faint. His head was like ice.

'Do you think we could stop in the next town and see if there's a pharmacy?'

'What is it now?'

'Nothing serious. I'd just like advice about something.'

'From these ignorant sods?' Jonas snorted. 'On your own head be it, my friend.'

The grey-green landscape unrolled itself on either side of the road. There was a hawk or some other bird of prey circling on the horizon. Stefan thought of the hotel owner's daughter in the place they

had just left and he sighed.

‘Perhaps I’ll wait until we get to a bigger town.’

At midday they stopped the car and got out to eat the sandwiches the hotel had provided. It was another burning day. They had a bottle of water and two packs of sandwiches wrapped in wax-paper: meat with sweating daubs of butter breaking through the bread.

Jonas took a square and examined it before he took the first bite.

‘Even their bread is white.’

‘No need to go on about it all the time.’

Jonas stopped perfectly still. Then he leaned in and stared at Stefan, his jaw working as he ate. It seemed to Stefan that Africa was doing Jonas no good.

‘You find all this quite normal, do you?’

Stefan shrugged his shoulders. ‘We knew what we were coming to. It’s not a secret. You talk as if you’d only just found out about the situation here.’

‘To know and to understand are two very different things. Didn’t you hear that woman last night? Didn’t you hear what she called me? "Master". Doesn’t that frighten you?’

Stefan sighed. In Sweden now, he thought, his breath would leave a white smudge on the air, here it was dispersed into the sweetness without a trace.

‘Jonas,’ he said, ‘we are new to this place. We may not really understand all the things we see and hear. There are customs, rituals, there’s a history to all of this. It may be feudal but so was Sweden once. Things will change, but it requires some patience. Until then, there is at least security of some kind here, order.’

Jonas laughed. ‘Order? Hah! Where have we heard that word

before?’

Stefan flushed irritably. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Jonas was on his feet. ‘Ordnung! Ordnung!’ he shouted, ‘Die neue Ordnung meine Damen und Herren!’ punching out a salute, laughing wildly.

Stefan’s cheeks burned. ‘I’m no Nazi. My family worked with the Danish Resistance right through the war...’

‘Of course they did. Nazis probably wouldn’t be well-bred enough for your family.’

‘My Uncle Sven was tortured for ferrying Jews across to Sweden, you know...’

‘Oh, why don’t you just shut up. I’m sick of hearing about your family.’

Jonas walked a little way away, then squatted down to finish the last of his sandwich. Stefan sat folding and refolding the waxy sandwich paper, squashing it between his thumb and forefinger till his nails went white.

‘Why have you come here, Jonas?’ he said loudly. ‘To atone for the sins of the world? To bring revolution? To bring salvation? Are there not enough poor people for you in Sweden?’

Jonas shook his head and looked away, a sarcastic smile on his lips.

Stefan was boiling now.

‘D’you know what you are Jonas? Wait! Wait a moment, I’ll read it out to you!’

Stefan ran back to the car and dragged the medical encyclopaedia from his suitcase. He went back to where Jonas squatted in the middle of nowhere.

“Megalomania”,’ Stefan read. He was trembling with this

unaccustomed rage, "insane conceit the exaggerated belief in one's own power or ability" ... "The person who suffers from megalomania in a mild form is the typical 'reformer', who sets out to put the world to rights, according to his own point of view ... Before the real nature of his trouble is realized, he may have recruited an army to rescue an oppressed nation, or"... Here he had to stop because Jonas was laughing too loudly to hear him any more.

'Insane conceit, eh?' Jonas wiped his eyes. 'And what do you propose instead? Eh?'

Stefan shrugged. 'Abiding by the law, working hard, being kind and courteous wherever you can to everyone regardless of their colour or nationality or class. Living your life as well as you can in your own small way...'

'How charming,' Jonas said abruptly. 'And how many people must die, quietly and politely out of sight, before you abandon this genteel and gentlemanly niceness?'

'It's not niceness its...' he was about to say 'decency', but Jonas cut him short.

'Nice, nice, nice!'

'Stop it!' Stefan found himself shouting, although the emptiness around them seemed to swallow the sound at once. 'It's what I believe!'

'Ah-ha! Of course you do!' Jonas yelled. 'How charmingly, uselessly nice of you!'

Stefan lashed out blindly.

'Shut up!'

His fist connected with Jonas's shoulder and, to his surprise, Jonas toppled back without resistance. There was a crack as his head hit against a small stone. Then silence.

'I'm sorry,' Stefan whispered.

Jonas didn't move, just lay there with his eyes closed.

'I don't know why I did that. It must be the heat. I must be out of my mind. Please forgive me, Jonas. I didn't mean to hurt you.'

Jonas didn't stir.

The sun was blasting down on them, but Stefan felt frozen inside. Could this be death? Did it come as easily as this, from one careless gesture? He thought of everything that must surely follow now: grim officials, handcuffs and rough words. His mind buckled. He breath sobbed in his throat. Oh god! In my heart I didn't imagine anything like this! I'm not a bad person. I'm not a criminal. This was not what I meant at all! But how could he explain that in a strange, wild place where no one knew him? Mamma! Merete, save me! Tell them who I am. Don't let them take me away! Mamma and Merete were far away from him now.

Stefan forced himself to be calm. He felt for a pulse in Jonas's wrist and found it after all, blood knocking against his fingertips. This was not death, though it was bad enough — Jonas stayed so very still. Hours seemed to pass. Stefan kept his fingers stubbornly on his companion's pulse until, without warning, Jonas's hand snapped round and caught Stefan's wrist in a ferocious grip. He jerked and Stefan found himself half-lying across Jonas's chest.

'Idiot!' Jonas hissed, his eyes glittering with an unnatural light. A piece of spittle struck Stefan on the cheek. Jonas wouldn't let him draw away. One hand held his wrist while the other had him by his shirt collar, almost strangling him. His eyes looked crazy. Sunstroke, thought Stefan, or some kind of swamp fever? From the corner of his eye he glimpsed The Universal Home Doctor lying open in the sand, just out of reach.

‘When are you going to open your gummy little eyes and see how it is here? Do you know how many people die every year of TB and dysentery in this orderly paradise?’

‘I ... I don’t know,’ Stefan stammered.

Jonas stared at him; then he smiled and said in a closer more confiding tone. ‘I could very easily kill you now, you know. I could make it look like an accident. I could say you slipped and hit your head. Think of it. They would never suspect me. What would be my motive?’

‘Jonas,’ Stefan croaked hoarsely. His brain was all disordered; thoughts came and went quite inappropriately. He saw in great detail the windowsill in Aunt Merete’s room, with all those the unpleasantly hairy-leafed violets in their Chinese pots. He thought of the girl who’d put her tongue into his mouth when he kissed her at one of his farewell parties in Stockholm — he couldn’t even remember her name. He saw the picture of his father in British Army uniform, the last one before he died. He thought of the gardener at his uncle’s house in Cape Town who took nine spoons of sugar in his tea.

‘Jonas,’ he wheezed, ‘why would you want to kill me? What would it achieve? How could you go and teach in a mission school with blood on your hands?’

Jonas stared, then abruptly shrugged Stefan off him and got to his feet. ‘You’re right.’ He began dusting down his clothes. ‘Your death would serve no useful purpose — there would only be ten more self-deluding little men like you to flood in and take your place. That’s the trouble with the world.’

Stefan lay back against the hot earth, weak with relief. How good of Jonas to spare him, how beautiful that he was not going to end here, crushed in the sand like a snake or a rat. I must see all of this

clearly, he said to himself. I must remember this day. This is the beginning of my new life.

‘You know, Stefan,’ Jonas said.

‘What?’ Stefan whispered, still lying on the sand. Jonas turned to look over at the car that stood like a lump of burning tin on the road. Stefan followed his gaze. He felt an irrational weakness almost like love flooding through his limbs.

‘You know you have a choice. You can think for yourself. You have a brain. You can get involved, take action. But your trouble...’ Jonas sighed. ‘Your trouble... your trouble... Do you know... what... your trouble... is, Stefan?’

There were birds singing in the distance, and a high buzz of cicadas and crickets in the clumps of dead yellow grass. The sun shone on their white-blond heads while the pages of *The Universal Home Doctor* rose and fell uncertainly in the breeze (Megalomania, Melancholia, Memory). It had never occurred to Stefan that Jonas might have any medical knowledge, but why not? Perhaps you needed to know the basics in order to teach in a mission school. (Mesmerism, Mercurial Poisoning). Stefan felt suddenly alert and hopeful, almost excited to hear the diagnosis.

‘What?’ he murmured. (Monomania, Mountain Sickness, Myopia). ‘What’s my trouble?’

And the wild flowers trembled against the dryness of the veldt.

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