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Written by Jonas Jonasson

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HITMAN ANDERS AND THE MEANING OF IT ALL

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JONASSON

Translated from the Swedish
by Rachel Willson-Broyles

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'I rörelse' by Karin Boye, translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles

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The scripture quotation 'Drink thou also, and let thy foreskin be uncovered. The cup of the Lord's right hand shall be turned unto thee' on pp. 213–14 is from the authorised King James Version.

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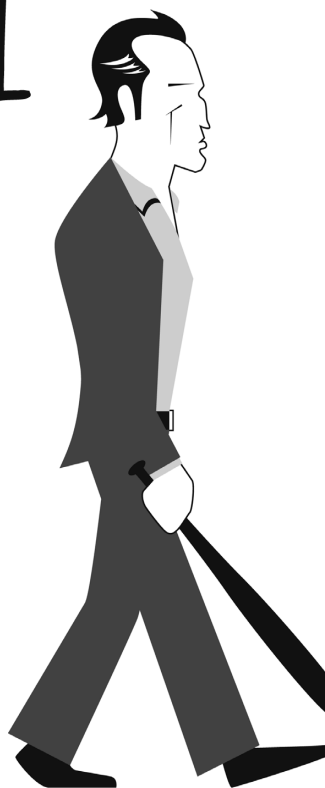


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HITMAN ANDERS AND THE MEANING OF IT ALL



You would have liked this one, Dad.
So it's for you.

PART ONE

AN UNUSUAL BUSINESS STRATEGY

CHAPTER 1

Daydreaming in the reception area of one of Sweden's most wretched hotels stood a man whose life would soon come to be filled with death and bodily harm, thieves and bandits.

The only grandchild of horse-dealer Henrik Bergman was, as always, channelling his paternal grandfather's shortcomings. The old man had been foremost in his field in southern Sweden; he never sold fewer than seven thousand animals per year, and each was first-class.

But from 1955, the traitorous farmers began to exchange Grandfather's cold- and warmbloods for tractors at a rate that Grandfather refused to comprehend. Seven thousand transactions became seven hundred, which became seventy, which became seven. Within five years, the family's multi-million-krona fortune had gone up in a cloud of diesel smoke. In 1960, the as-yet-unborn grandson's dad tried to save what he could by travelling around to all the farmers in the region and preaching on the curse of mechanization. After all, there were so many rumours flying about. Such as how diesel fuel would cause cancer if it got on your skin and, of course, get on your skin it did.

And then Dad added that studies showed diesel could cause sterility in men. But he really shouldn't have

mentioned that. For one thing, it wasn't true, and for another, it sounded perfectly lovely to breadwinning but continuously horny farmers with three to eight children each. It was embarrassing to try to get your hands on condoms, not so for a Massey Ferguson or John Deere.

His grandfather had died not only destitute but kicked to death by his last horse. His grieving, horseless son took up the reins, completed some sort of course, and was soon employed by Facit AB, one of the world's leading companies in the production of typewriters and mechanical calculators. Thus he succeeded in being trampled by the future not once but twice in his lifetime, because suddenly the electronic calculator popped up on the market. As if to poke fun at Facit's brick of a product, the Japanese version fitted the inner pocket of a jacket.

The Facit group's machines didn't shrink (at least, not fast enough), but the firm itself did, until it shrivelled up into absolutely nothing.

The son of the horse dealer was laid off. To repress the fact that he had been twice cheated by life, he took to the bottle. Unemployed, bitter, always unbathed and never sober, he soon lost all his power of attraction in the eyes of his twenty-years-younger wife, who managed to stick it out for a little while, then another little while. But eventually it occurred to the patient young woman that the mistake of marrying the wrong man was possible to undo. 'I want a divorce,' she said one morning, to her husband, as he walked around their apartment, looking for something while clad in white underpants covered with dark stains.

‘Have you seen the bottle of cognac?’ said her husband.

‘No. But I want a divorce.’

‘I put it on the counter last night. You must have moved it.’

‘It’s possible it ended up in the drinks cabinet when I was cleaning the kitchen, I don’t remember, but I’m trying to tell you I want a divorce.’

‘In the drinks cabinet? Of course, I should have looked there first. How silly of me. So are you moving out? And you’re going to take the thing that just craps its pants with you, right?’

Yes, she took the baby. A boy with pale blond hair and kind blue eyes. The boy who would, much later, be a receptionist.

For her part, the boy’s mother had imagined a career as a language teacher, but the baby happened to arrive fifteen minutes before her final exam. Now she moved to Stockholm with her little one, plus her belongings and the signed divorce papers. She went back to using her maiden name, Persson, without reflecting upon the consequences for the boy, who had already been given the name Per (not that it’s impossible to be named Per Persson or, for that matter, Jonas Jonasson, but some might find it monotonous).

Awaiting her in the capital city was a job as a traffic warden. Per Persson’s mom walked up one street and down the next, receiving near-daily harangues from illegally parked men, primarily those who could easily afford the fines they had just been saddled with. Her dream of being a teacher – of imparting the knowledge

of which German prepositions governed the accusative or dative to students who couldn't care less – was interrupted.

But after his mom had spent half an eternity in a career that was meant to be temporary, it so happened that one of the many haranguing illegally parked men lost his train of thought in the midst of his complaint when he discovered that the person inside the traffic warden's uniform was a woman. One thing led to another, and they found themselves having dinner at a fancy restaurant, where the parking ticket was ripped in two around the time they partook of their coffee with a little something on the side. By the time the second thing had led to a third, the illegal parker had proposed to Per Persson's mom.

The suitor happened to be an Icelandic banker about to move home to Reykjavik. He promised his wife-to-be the moon and the stars if she followed him there. He would offer an Icelandic arm to welcome her son as well. But time had passed to such an extent that the little blond boy had become a legal adult and could make his own decisions. He counted on a brighter future in Sweden, and since no one can compare what happened after that with what might have happened instead, it is impossible to determine how right or wrong the son was in his calculations.

*

At just sixteen years old, Per Persson got himself a job alongside the studies he wasn't very engaged in. He never told his mother in detail what his work consisted of. And for that he had his reasons.

'Where you going now, boy?' his mom might ask.

'To work, Mom.'

'So late?'

'Yes, we're open for business most of the time.'

'What is it you do again?'

'I've told you a thousand times. I'm an assistant in ... the entertainment industry. Where people have meetings and stuff like that.'

'What kind of assistant? And what is the name of—'

'Have to run now, Mom. See you later.'

Per Persson slipped away yet again. Of course he didn't want to share any details, such as the fact that his employer packaged and sold temporary love in a large shabby yellow wooden building in Huddinge, south of Stockholm. Or that the establishment went by the name Club Amore. Or that the boy's work involved handling logistics as well as acting as an attendant and inspector. It was important that each individual visitor find his way to the right room for the right sort of love for the right amount of time. The boy made up the schedule, timed the visits and listened through the doors (and let his imagination run free). If something seemed about to go awry, he sounded the alarm.

Around the time his mom emigrated and Per Persson finished his studies – in the formal sense as well – his employer chose to start a new line of business. Club

Amore became Pensionat Sjöudden: the Sea Point Hotel. It was not by the sea, or on any point. But as the owner of the hotel said, 'I gotta call this shithole something.'

Fourteen rooms. Two hundred and twenty-five kronor per night. Shared toilet and shower. New sheets and towels once a week, but only if the used ones looked used enough. Going from running a love nest to running a third-class hotel was not something the hotel owner truly desired. He had earned significantly more money when the guests had had company in their beds. And if any free time popped up in the girls' schedules, he himself could cuddle up with one for a while.

The only advantage of the Sea Point Hotel was that it was less illegal. The former sex-club owner had spent eight months in the slammer; he thought that was more than enough.

Per Persson, who had demonstrated his talent for logistics, was offered the job of receptionist, and he thought things could be worse (even if the salary couldn't). He was to check people in and out, make sure the guests paid, and keep an eye on bookings and cancellations. He was even permitted to be a bit pleasant, as long as his attitude didn't have a negative influence on the results.

It was a new business under a new name, and Per Persson's duties were different and more laden with responsibility than before. This prompted him to approach the boss and humbly suggest an adjustment to his salary.

'Up or down?' the boss wondered.

Per Persson responded that up would be preferable. The conversation had not taken the turn he desired. Now he was hoping at least to keep what he already had.

And so he did. The boss had, however, been generous enough to make a suggestion: ‘Hell, move into the room behind the reception desk, and you won’t have to pay rent on the apartment you took over after your mom left.’

Well, Per Persson agreed that this was one way to save a little money. And since his salary was paid under the table, he could also try to get social-welfare and unemployment benefits on the side.

Thus it happened that the young receptionist became one with his work. He roomed and lived in his reception area. One year passed, two years passed, five years passed and, to all intents and purposes, things did not go better for the boy than they had for his dad and grandfather before him. And the blame lay squarely with his late grandfather. The old man had been a millionaire several times over. Now the third generation of his own flesh and blood was standing at a reception desk, welcoming foul-smelling hotel guests, who answered to names like Hitman Anders and other horrid things.

This very Hitman Anders happened to be one of the long-term residents of Sea Point Hotel. His real name was Johan Andersson, and he had spent his entire adult life inside. He had never had an easy time with words or expressions, but early on in life he had realized that you could be very convincing by walloping anyone who disagreed with you, or appeared to be considering doing so. And walloping them again if necessary.

In time, this sort of conversation led to young Johan ending up in bad company. His new acquaintances urged him to blend his already violent argumentation techniques with alcohol and pills, and with that he was more or less done for. The alcohol and pills brought him twelve years in prison at the age of twenty, after he was unable to explain how his axe had ended up in the back of the region's leading distributor of amphetamines.

Eight years later, Hitman Anders was out again, and he celebrated his release with such fervour that he'd barely had time to sober up before he received fourteen more years on top of his previous eight. This time a shotgun had been involved. At close range. Right into the face of the person who had taken over from the guy with the axe in his back. An extraordinarily unpleasant sight for those who were called in to clean up.

In court, Hitman Anders maintained that he hadn't meant to do it. He didn't think he had, anyway. He didn't remember very much of the incident. Which was pretty much like his next stay in jail, after he'd cut the throat of a third pill entrepreneur because said entrepreneur happened to accuse him of being in a bad mood. The man with the soon-to-be-cut throat had essentially been correct, but this was of no help to him.

At the age of fifty-six, Hitman Anders was free again. In contrast to the earlier times, this was not a question of a temporary visit to the outside: this time it was permanent. That was the plan. He just had to avoid alcohol. And pills. And everything and everyone who had anything to do with alcohol and pills.

Beer wasn't so bad; it mostly made him happy. Or semi-happy. Or, at least, not crazy.

He had found his way to the Sea Point Hotel in the belief that the place still offered experiences of the sort one might have found lacking during a decade or three in prison. Once he'd got over his disappointment that this was not the case, he decided to check in instead. He needed somewhere to stay, after all, and just over two hundred kronor per night was nothing to argue about, especially given what arguing had often led to in the past.

Even before he collected his room key for the first time, Hitman Anders had managed to tell his life story to the receptionist who happened to land in his path. It included his childhood, even though the murderer didn't think it had any bearing on what had followed. His early years had mostly involved his dad getting drunk after work in order to tolerate his job, and his mom doing the same in order to tolerate his dad. This led to his dad being unable to tolerate his mom, which he demonstrated by beating her up at regular intervals, usually while their son watched.

After hearing the whole story, the receptionist didn't dare to do anything but welcome Hitman Anders with a handshake and an introduction. 'Per Persson,' he said.

'Johan Andersson,' said the murderer, promising to try to commit murder as little as possible in the future. Then he asked the receptionist whether he might have a pilsner to spare. After seventeen years without, it was no wonder his throat was a bit dry.

Per Persson had no intention of beginning his relationship with Hitman Anders by refusing him a beer. But as

he poured it, he asked if Mr Andersson might consider keeping away from alcohol and pills.

‘That would probably lead to the least trouble,’ said Johan Andersson. ‘But listen, call me Hitman Anders. Everyone else does.’