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Where Roses Never Die

Written by Gunnar Staalesen

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

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Where Roses Never Die

GUNNAR STAALESEN

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett



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To our good friend, Gary Pulsifer (1957–2016). We miss him already. This English edition of *Where the Roses Never Die* is dedicated to his memory. Thanks for everything, Gary!

Don, Gunnar and Karen


VÅGEN
TORGALLMENNINGEN
STRANDGATEN
Fiskehavnen
(Fish Harbour)
BRYGGEN
TATTERSMADGET

1

There are days in your life when you are barely present, and today was one of those. I was sitting behind my desk, half-cut and half-asleep, when I heard a shot from the other side of Vågen, the bay in Bergen. Not long afterwards I heard the first police sirens, although there was no reason to assume this would ever be a case that might involve me. By the time I had eventually staggered to my feet and made it to the window, it was all over.

Reading the newspapers the following day, I found out most of what had gone on, the rest I learned in dribs and drabs.

Afterwards they were universally referred to as the *Shell Suit Robbers*. There were just two customers in the exclusive jewellery shop in Bryggen when, at 15.23 on Friday, 7th December 2001, the door swung open and three heavily armed individuals, wearing balaclavas and dressed in what are informally known as BBQ suits, burst into the premises.

The two customers, an older woman and a younger one, cowered in the corner. In addition to the customers there were two female assistants in the shop. The owner was in the back room. He'd hardly had time to look up before one robber was standing in the doorway and pointing a sawn-off shotgun at him. He said in what was supposed to be English: 'Don't move yourself! The first person who presses an alarm button are shot!'

One of the robbers took up a position by the front door with an automatic weapon hanging down at thigh-height and kept lookout. The third opened a big bag, gave it to the assistant in front of the display cabinets and pointed a gun at her. He spoke in English too: 'Fill up!'

The assistant objected: 'They're locked!'

'Unlock!'

'But I'll have to get …' She motioned to the counter.

'Move, move, move!'

She cast a glance at the other assistant, who nodded resigned agreement. Then she opened a drawer behind the counter, took out a bunch of keys and went back to the display cabinets.

The robber in front of her directed a glance at the door: 'Everything OK?'

The robber posted there nodded mutely.

The robber by the office door intoned the same message: 'Move!'

The jewellery-shop owner shouted: 'You have no idea what you're doing! All our items are registered internationally. No one will buy the most expensive pieces.'

'Shut up!' The robber pointed to a safe in the wall. 'Open.'

'I haven't got …'

The robber rushed forward and held the rifle to his head. 'Open. If you …'

Sweat poured from the jeweller's forehead. 'Yes, alright … Don't …' He swivelled the office chair and rolled it towards the safe. 'I just have to … the code.' He put a finger to his brow to show how hard he was trying to remember.

'You know. Don't make me to laugh.'

'Yes, but when I'm nervous …'

'You soon have even more reason to be nervous if you …'

The robber tapped the safe door with the weapon, and the owner stretched out his right hand and with trembling fingers started to turn the lock and enter the code.

Inside the shop the older of the two assistants opened a display cabinet. She took out the watches one by one and carefully placed them in the bag, so slowly that the robber impatiently pushed her aside and began to scoop watches of all price ranges into the bag while shouting orders: 'Open the other cabinets! And you …' He looked at the assistant by the counter. 'All the drawers! At the bottom also.'

In the back room, the safe was open. The robber brutally shoved the jeweller out of the way and emptied the safe contents on to the work

table. Papers and documents were sent flying to the floor. With a triumphant flourish, he held up a box of eight diamond-studded watches. The owner eyed him with an expression of despair.

The robber stuffed the box into a shoulder bag. Then he grabbed a wad of notes from the back of the safe and in they went too. 'Black money, eh?'

'Cash reserves,' the jeweller mumbled bitterly.

The robber backed towards the door and glanced out into the shop. 'Everything OK?'

The robber by the front door nodded. The other one was busy emptying the drawers from the counter. 'Just a moment.'

The robber who had been in the back room swung the sawn-off shotgun from the jeweller, to the two customers and finally to the older of the two assistants. 'Don't you move yourselves. The first person who presses the alarm button are shot.' He was still standing in the doorway with a view of the back room. 'Finished?' he said to the man behind the counter.

'That's it now.'

'Good.'

The robber by the front door leaned on the handle and glanced across the shop for instructions. The robber in the back room nodded, the front door was opened and with their weapons at the ready they dashed out.

That was when it happened.

None of the four women saw what went wrong. Other witnesses, on the pavement and around the quay on the other side of the street, could only relay fragments of what they thought they had observed. A passing motorist was convinced he had seen everything, 'from the corner of his eye', as he later put it.

As the robbers were making their getaway they must have collided with a man on the pavement. The man yelled, there was a second or two of silence, then further words were exchanged and a shot was fired, the man was hurled backwards and crashed on to the pavement, blood spurting from his chest, near his heart.

The three robbers hotfooted it across the street, sprinted along the harbour front and threw the bags into a small, white plastic boat waiting for them by the quay. An engine roared and the little boat, foam spraying over its bows, hurtled across Vågen, where eye-witnesses saw it disappear around the tip of Nordnes peninsula soon afterwards.

In the shop, the owner appeared from the back-room door. With sagging shoulders he said: 'I've rung the alarm.'

The younger of the two customers was the next to speak.

'That one by the door … I'm pretty sure … that one was a woman.'

Five minutes later the first police officers arrived, alerted by radio that a full-scale search was under way in the whole district.

The case was to become something of a mystery. I followed it only desultorily in the newspapers, and on radio and TV; first of all it was breaking news, then it was relegated to the back pages. There was more interest locally than nationally, but here too it wound up in semi-obscurity, as do most unsolved crimes, until something new is revealed and they become front-page news again.

The greatest mystery was how the robbers could have vanished. After the boat had powered round Nordnes peninsula it was never seen again. At the time in question, on a cold, blustery December day, there were not many people out walking in Nordnes Park, and no witnesses came forward, either from there or anywhere else along Puddefjorden. It did seem as if the thieves had literally vanished into thin air.

The police searched all the quays from Georgenes Verft, the shipyard, and beyond, past Nøstet, Dokken and Møhlenpris, as far as Solheimsviken and from there to the Lyreneset promontory in Laksevåg, without turning up anything of any value. They went through the list of stolen boats in the region with a toothcomb. The ones they eventually found, they crossed off the list, but as late as March, three months after the robbery, there were still some that had not been located. It was the same story with the list of stolen cars. The general assumption was that the robbers must have come ashore somewhere in Nordnes or Laksevåg, transferred the booty to a car and driven off. Under such

circumstances thieves often used a stolen vehicle and later set fire to it, after switching to their own cars. But no cars had been torched, to the police's knowledge, during that period – neither on the 7th December nor the following days.

What made the case especially serious was the murder. After a couple of days the dead man's name was released. Nils Bringeland was my age, fifty-nine years old, ran a little company in Bryggen and from all the indications seemed to have been no more than a casual passer-by. He left behind a partner and three children, two of them from an earlier marriage.

The case received broad media coverage, locally and nationally, for the first few days after the robbery. The shop owner, Bernhard Schmidt, was interviewed widely. He said his business had been run on the same premises for three generations since his grandfather, Wilhelm Schmidt, set it up from scratch in 1912. Bernhard Schmidt took the shop over from his father in 1965. There had been minor thefts, and in 1973 there was an attempted break-in through the backyard, but this was the first time in the company's history that they had experienced anything as dramatic as a robbery. He wouldn't divulge to the press the value of the items that had been stolen, but other sources speculated the figure lay somewhere between five hundred thousand and a million Norwegian kroner, perhaps even more. Neither the police nor the insurance company wished to comment on this aspect of the case.

The two female shop assistants were also interviewed, anonymously, but they had nothing of any importance to add, apart from the trauma of the experience. The younger of the two customers, Liv Grethe Heggvoll, appeared in the press with her full name. She and her mother had been in the shop looking for a fiftieth-birthday present, and they were as shocked as the shop employees by what they had witnessed. Asked by journalists whether she had noticed anything special about the robbers, she answered they had spoken English with what she considered was a Norwegian, or maybe an Eastern European, accent. 'What's more,' she added, 'I'm positive one of them was a woman.'

This information was later taken up by the police. They said it was

too early to know whether this might have been an itinerant gang of professional robbers, but they were keeping all their avenues of inquiry open. As for the possibility of a woman being involved, they had no comment to make. The conspicuous get-ups – the so-called 'BBQ shell suits' – were discussed in several newspapers. The three suits were identical in colour and design: dark green with white stripes down the sleeves. Pictures of a similar style were everywhere, although the police refused to comment on whether they'd had any response from the general public.

As the investigation ground to a halt there was less and less to read about the case. There was no reason for me to give it a moment's thought. I had my own daily demons to fight at that time. I was on the longest and darkest marathon of my life, and it was still a long way to the tape.

2

The assignment I received on that Monday in March would perhaps turn out to be the most important I'd ever had, not least for my own sake. It was the first sign of light at the end of a tunnel that was much longer than I cared to admit.

The three years that had passed since Karin died had been like an endless wandering on the seabed. I had seen the most incredible creatures, some of them so frightening I had woken up bathed in sweat every time one appeared in my dreams. Enormous octopuses stretched out their long tentacles towards me, but they never managed to hold on to me. Monstrous monkfish forced me into jagged nooks and crannies, placed a knee on my crotch and emptied my pockets of valuables. Tiny fish floated by enticingly, their tails in the air, but were gone before I had managed to reach out a hand to grab them. A rare sea rose opened for me, drew me in and afterwards extracted its levy in the form of unpleasant after-effects and dwindling self-respect.

It was a life in darkness; I had difficulty seeing clearly down there. The only thing that kept me going was the consolation I found in all the bottles I stumbled over. None of them lay around long enough for green algae to form.

The millennium had passed and Doomsday had not arrived. Nostradamus had been wrong; so had St John and those who still believed in his revelations. Not even the IT experts who had prophesied the Y2K crisis had been proved right. No computer systems collapsed, the world continued on its wayward course with no further changes to our everyday lives, except that we had to write a '2' at the beginning of the year.

As for me, I spent the last days of 1999 delving into a hundred-year-old

murder mystery, and when New Year's Eve came, like so many other Bergensians, I walked half-way up a mountain in pouring rain and watched the New Year rockets disappear from sight in the low cloud cover, never, it seemed, to return to earth again. Afterwards I trudged down to my flat in Telthussmauet, where I celebrated the arrival of a new millennium in the company of a bottle of aquavit.

The first two years of the new century passed more or less unnoticed, apart from the dramatic events of 11th September 2001 on the eastern seaboard of America. New Year 2002 didn't seem to be ringing in any great changes either, not in my life nor in the world beyond. It had just become even more burdensome to fly. An old lady with a heart defect and a tube of ointment in her hand luggage would create longer queues at the security check, and if she couldn't produce ID she was denied access to her plane. Apart from that, most things were the same.

The woman who came to see me that Monday in March was of the gentle sort. She tapped several times on the waiting-room door, then I heard her open it and venture in. I had plenty of time to screw on the top, put the bottle into a desk drawer, drain the glass, rinse it in the sink and place it tidily on the shelf under the mirror, before turning, walking to the door between the waiting room and the office, opening it wide, swaying in the doorway and saying, 'Yes?'

She met my eyes with trepidation. 'Are you … Veum?'

I nodded, stepped aside and ushered her in: 'This way.'

She was about my age, perhaps a bit younger, but I definitely put her in the late fifties. Her hair was lank, and it was some weeks since she had been to the hairdresser's. The grey was clearly visible at the roots of her hair, in the parting on the left of her head. Her choice of clothing didn't suggest she was out to make a winning first impression, either. She was wearing a classic, moss-green windproof jacket, brown trousers and flat shoes. The red in her scarf was the only colour to brighten her appearance. In her hand she was carrying a suede bag big enough to contain whatever she might need in terms of everyday accessories. Her skin was pale, her nose small, across the bridge a patch of freckles was just visible, and her face had a sad air about it, which immediately revealed she was

struggling with a problem, perhaps several. But most of the people who came to visit me were. Why else would they come?

She glanced around shyly as she stepped into the office. I held out my hand and introduced myself properly. She told me her name: Maja Misvær.

I directed her to the client's chair. No one else apart from me had sat there for many weeks. I walked round the desk, slumped down into the swivel chair, unfurled the gentlest expression I could muster and asked: 'How can I help you?'

She looked at me gloomily, as if the word *help* didn't exist in her world. I could see my own face in hers, as though I was gazing into a mirror, the way it must have appeared to others over the last three years. Six months after Karin's death I had walked in the funeral cortege for my old school friend, Paul Finckel. One of my oldest friends, and best sources of information in Bergen's newspaper world, he had switched off his computer for good, without saving the contents for posterity. A newly employed colleague had taken it over before the corpse was cold. I felt my own demise had edged a step closer, like autumn announcing its arrival one frosty night in September. One by one they were leaving us, my old classmates. Soon there would only be a handful of us left. In the end, there would be none.

'D-do you remember a little girl called Mette?'

At first I didn't understand what she was talking about. 'Mette? I don't know that I…'

'She went missing in September 1977.'

Then a light came on. 'Ah, you mean *that* Mette.'

Two Bergen children had gone missing in the 1970s. Both disappearances had shaken the local community and had initially kept the media busy, before being put on a back burner. In fact, I had helped to solve one of the cases, the 1979 one, some eight years later. The other case had never, to my knowledge, been cleared up. It became known as 'The Mette Case'.

She nodded.

'But I don't quite remember … when was it you said?'

'17th September 1977.'

I did some swift mental arithmetic: 1987, 1997, 2002. In six months the case would be time-barred, if someone had killed her, that is, and anything else was barely conceivable, bearing in mind how thorough the investigation had been. 'And Mette, she was … ?'

'Yes, she is my daughter.'

I noted the change of tense. 'Could you … It's so long ago … Could you refresh my memory about … the details?'

She heaved a sigh, but nodded assent. 'I can try. What I remember of it and what … I know.'

3

The barely three-year-old Mette Misvær disappeared from her home in Solstølvegen in Nordås on Saturday 17th September, in the short space of time between twelve o'clock and a quarter past.

'I was at home, busy with housework. Mette was sitting in a sandpit right outside the kitchen window. I kept peering out at regular intervals, but when she disappeared I was busy taking clothes out of the washing machine and putting them in the tumble dryer. As soon as I emerged from the laundry room I went to the window to check on Mette …'

When she didn't see her, at first she wasn't initially that concerned. The house they lived in formed part of a yard with four other houses, and it was not at all unusual for children to move around this protected area, where cars only came in on very special occasions.

'I thought that … perhaps some of the children from the other houses were outside playing and Mette had toddled over to join them …'

She leaned over towards the window, but still couldn't see Mette anywhere. Then she went from the kitchen to the front door and into the yard. She looked everywhere. 'No children anywhere, neither Mette nor anyone else.'

Then she went to the gate in the wooden fence on to Solstølvegen. The gate was closed. She opened it and walked out. Nothing. In the estate further to the west there were some adults walking around and pointing, and in the street below there were a couple of cars parked. There was nothing else to see.

Then she began to get seriously worried. She ran back into the yard, went to the first house on the left and rang the bell. The husband, Tor Fylling, came to the door. He was on his own. His wife and children had

gone to town. He hadn't seen Mette. 'She must be at Else and Eivind's place,' he added. 'Try there.'

She nodded and hurried over to the neighbours' house. She rang the bell several times, but no one answered. 'It turned out later that the family had been away for the whole weekend, in their cabin on Holsnøy.'

She ran past the next house. They didn't have any children. Now there was only one house left, wall to wall with their own. 'I said to myself – why hadn't I gone there first? They had Janne, who was the same age as Mette.'

But when the mother opened the door she had Janne in her arms. She listened to Maja with alarm. 'Mette? No. Yes, I saw her half an hour ago, from the window, she was sitting outside and playing. But … can't you find her?'

Maja's neighbour, Randi Hagenberg, became more and more agitated with every question she asked. 'Have you looked in the garages?'

'No. I didn't think of that.'

'Let's look now then. I'll come with you!' She called to her husband: 'Nils, can you take Janne?'

Together, they dashed over to the garages, which faced Solstøvegen, east of the five houses. One garage door was open. It belonged to the family who had gone to town. They went inside and scoured the area, but Mette was nowhere to be seen. The other four garage doors were locked. They tried all four handles, but none of them budged.

Now Maja Misvær could feel panic seizing her. Without thinking she ran twenty to thirty metres down the road in one direction, shouting her daughter's name, stopped to listen, and when she heard nothing, turned round and ran in the opposite direction and repeated the action. 'All at once I couldn't breathe. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel my pulse up here, in my throat, and I could hear blood rushing through my body like a … like an echo in my eardrums.'

'We've got to phone the police,' Randi Hagenberg said.

'Yes,' Maja answered as tears flickered in front of her eyes, so suddenly that her vision was affected and she almost lost her balance. She took a few quick steps to the side and supported herself on the fence.

'But when I looked at the sandpit again … it was then I realised. There was her teddy bear, abandoned in the sand, and, deep down, I knew … she took it everywhere. She would never have left it behind!'

'No?'

'No…'

While they waited for the police they ran around the district, calling Mette's name. Many of the other neighbours came out and assisted with the search. Some went to talk to people on the estate, but no one had seen a little girl.

Someone had contacted Mette's father, Truls Misvær, who was at a football training session with the older of their two children, six-year-old Håkon. He drove back home as fast as he could. Soon he had joined the others in their increasingly larger circles around the hilly area, looking for the missing girl.

When the police arrived they immediately set up an organised search and radioed information to their colleagues. Not long afterwards the story was on the news: *Small girl missing from her home in Solstøvegen in Nordås.*

The police drew a blank. Tiny Mette Misvær was never found.

The investigation escalated over the first few days. From being a straightforward missing-person case it was quickly upgraded to a potential crime. With none of the enquiries bearing fruit and Mette still missing the day after, the system went into overdrive.

All the neighbours were summoned to interviews. None of them had observed anything at all, except for Randi Hagenberg, who was able to confirm that she had seen Mette sitting and playing in the sandpit immediately before she disappeared.

Adults from the estate were also brought in for questioning. A couple of them thought they had seen a car stop outside the gate. But it had been too far away for them to say anything definite about the make of car or any distinguishing characteristics. One of them thought it had been black, another dark grey. A four-door, dark-grey or black saloon was what the police had to go on when they alerted all the patrol cars and gave a description. Nothing came of this search either.

According to the press, everyone on the child sex offender register in Bergen, later in the whole country, had their movements on the day in question charted and recorded, but the results were as unproductive as everything else. The case remained unsolved.

Now that was almost twenty-five years ago. If Mette Misvær had been allowed to grow up she would be a woman of twenty-eight. The likelihood was she was lying in an unmarked grave somewhere, gone for ever.

After Maja had finished talking she sat staring despondently at her lap. She mumbled a word I didn't catch.

'What was that?' I asked carefully.

'Rose. She was my little rose. But I didn't pay enough attention and someone picked her.'

'And now you'd like to… ?'

She raised her face and looked me in the eye. 'I'd like you to find her. I want you to find out what happened. Before it's too late. Before everyone who might know anything has also gone.'