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Opening Extract from...

Faithless

Written by Kjell Ola Dahl

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

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FAITHLESS

KJELL OLA DAHL

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1

He had to inhale some fresh air, but to buzz down the electric windows he would first have to switch on the ignition. If he switched on the ignition, the headlamps would come on automatically and most probably ruin everything.

He raised his arm and placed the back of his hand against the car window. Rested his head on it. Shot a look at his watch. Still not two o'clock. Studied the detached house at the end of the street for the nth time. The windows shone yellow. No sign of activity.

The phone in his breast pocket vibrated.

He straightened up. Heard the sound of heels clicking on tarmac. In the wing mirror a woman appeared. She was wearing a short jacket and tight jeans. Carrying a shoulder bag. Her shadow shrank as she passed under the street lamp. She was focused on her bag, lifted it to her chest and opened it while walking.

With his eyes fixed on his mirror he sank down in the seat. Trying to make himself small.

When she was level with the car, she stopped.

He slumped down further.

She took something from her bag.

He leaned back so as not to be caught in the mirror.

She crouched down. Looked at her reflection in the mirror. Ran a lipstick over her lips, pressed them together and checked the result. Raised her little finger and removed a smudge in the corner. Stood up.

An eternity passed.

At long last she set off for the house at the end of the street.

She stopped in front of it. Looked around. There was a clang of metal on metal as she opened the wrought-iron gate. The hinges screamed as she closed it behind her.

Slowly, the figure moved towards the front door, which opened as she reached the steps.

Frank Frølich checked his watch. 02.08.

Immediately the door closed behind her, Rindal's voice was in his earpiece.

'What was that?'

'Don't ask me.'

'Did she see you?'

'No idea.'

'If she saw you, he knows we're here.'

'He's known all the time.'

Silence. Frølich quietly counted to ten.

'It can't be a coincidence that she stopped right by your car.'

'It could be. She checked her appearance and put on lipstick.'

'Did you get an ID?'

'Only saw her from the side. Fringe, red hair, thirty plus.'

'Stay where you are. We'll contact you.'

The earpiece died. The night was silent again, and the ache in his body returned. All he could do was find a more comfortable position.

*

He woke up to his phone vibrating. It was light outside. His watch showed six o'clock. He had slept for about four hours.

Rindal was in a good mood. The voice in his ear was singing 'Frère Jacques'.

'Sorry,' Frølich yawned, 'I fell asleep.'

'We gathered that.'

'Have I missed anything?'

'Not a scooby, but things are happening now. You can atone for your sins.'

Offside mirror. A taxi. The car passed, drove to the turnaround, did a U-turn and came back and stopped outside the end house. A white Mercedes. Diesel engine ticking over. The front door opened. The woman rushed towards the car.

The voice in his ear said: 'Ready, steady, go!'

Frank Frølich waited until the Mercedes had driven away before starting up. Tyres screamed as he swept into the turnaround and did the same U-turn as the taxi. He glanced to the right as he passed the house. A familiar silhouette stood in the window following events. It was Zahid.

He caught up with the taxi and stayed a few metres behind. There was hardly any traffic so early in the morning. The odd lorry, occasional taxis, a few vans.

They went onto the E6, down towards Oslo Centre. The taxi was doing a hundred and twenty.

The phone vibrated again. 'What's happening?'

He straightened the mike as he headed into Vålerenga Tunnel. 'I'm behind him.'

'Find out who she is and where she lives. No reason to keep a low profile if Zahid saw you.'

Frølich pressed *Off*. The taxi took the exit in the gap between the two tunnels. He followed suit. As the cars raced side by side in the hairpin bend he could see her profile. Attractive woman. She was chewing gum.

The taxi turned off again, heading up into the tunnel towards Ryenberg and Simensbråten.

It slowed as it entered a residential district, but not by much. A sprightly jogger crossed the road. A girl with wet hair from a morning shower was sauntering along the pavement.

The taxi braked before the speed bumps.

When it finally pulled into the kerb Frølich activated the blue light on the grille of the car. The driver sat stiffly staring in the rearview mirror, panic-stricken. This guy knew he had broken the speed limit.

Frølich let him suffer in uncertainty while the woman paid for the ride. When she opened the door he also got out.

'Would you mind coming with me?'

She stared at him in bemusement.

She was shorter than he had at first thought. An oval face, regular features. Full lips, eyebrows like two brackets resting face down, a little kink a third of the way along. Her expression, because of the gum-chewing, was provocative. She looked from the unmarked car with the blue light to him and back to the car. He opened the rear door. The taxi driver was quick on the uptake and had gone before she reached it.

Her jacket had no pockets and her jeans were so tight that she certainly didn't have anything in them.

She got in, shoes, no socks. Slim ankles.

Frølich held out an authoritative hand. She looked up at him, still questioningly. 'Bag,' he said.

She hesitated at first, as though considering a discussion. She seemed calm, no noticeable nerves. In the end, she took the bag from her shoulder and passed it to him.

He got in behind the wheel. A scent of perfume mixed with chewing gum filled the car.

'Would you mind showing me some ID?' Her voice was deep, a little husky.

He flashed the card he had hanging around his neck. 'Frank Frølich, Violent Crime and Sexual Offences.'

He opened her bag.

'Would you mind switching off the blue light?'

'Would you mind being silent until you're spoken to?' he retorted.

'As this is where I live,' she continued, warily.

He left the light on. The blue flashes rebounded off the brick walls. He emptied the bag's contents onto the seat beside him. There was mascara and a lipstick, a packet of cigarettes, Kent. A gold lighter.

He found a wallet. Gold Euro card and silver Visa card. They told him she was Veronika Undset, born in 1973. In the photo she had staring eyes and a perm. Her present hairstyle suited her better, unruly with a

fringe. Otherwise, the wallet contained a customer loyalty card, a gym membership, two hundred-krone notes and one two-hundred note. No driving licence.

'What do you do, Veronika?'

'This and that. Sit in police cars, as you can see.'

He met her eyes in the rearview mirror. Colour: green. She blinked.

'What do you do for a living?'

'Businesswoman.'

'What's the business?'

'I run a home-help service.'

'At night?'

She sighed heavily and looked away. 'During the day. I've been visiting an old friend.'

He tried to catch her eye again, but she wasn't playing ball.

Two brown pills wrapped in cellophane were under a bunch of keys. 'What's this, Veronika?'

'Voltaren, for muscle pain. I bought it on prescription. I pulled a muscle in the dance class a few weeks ago.'

On prescription. She hadn't needed to say that.

A bottle of perfume, orange, Lancôme; a packet of chewing gum, recently opened. Extra. On top of a flat restaurant matchbook. The last object was a packet of panty liners – unopened. Once again they exchanged glances in the mirror, and he put the packet back. 'Sorry,' she said with a feisty smile. The gooseberry irises flashed beneath the dishevelled fringe.

He flicked up the cover of the matches; several were used. He opened the packet of cigarettes. She had smoked three. If she used matches, why did she walk around with a lighter in her bag?

It was a Zippo. He opened the lid. Flicked it. The flint wheel didn't spark at all. He smelled the lighter. Not a drop of petrol in it.

But Veronika had stopped chewing. Frølich thought, *Getting warmer*.

The felt pad that was supposed to cover the petrol case was missing. The cotton that should have been under the pad was also missing. Instead there was crumpled-up greaseproof paper.

Veronika swallowed.

He took his time. Turned around slowly. The glint in her green eyes was gone. She seemed confused.

'Would you like to tell me what you've concealed in the lighter?'

'No idea.' She looked away, through the window.

He pressed the switch that locked the doors and there was a dull click. She gave a start and looked up: 'Please,' she said with a heavy sigh. 'I'm tired and want to go home. It's not my lighter.'

'Not your lighter?' He raised both eyebrows.

She was silent.

'Whose is it?'

Another resigned sigh.

He repeated the question.

'Would you believe me if I told you? Would you open the door, let me get out and go home? Would you then go to the house of the relevant person and do the same as you've done to me?' She shook her head in desperation. 'You're playing a game I don't understand, but there's nothing I can do anyway.'

He coaxed out the greaseproof paper and carefully opened it. It contained several doses.

'Where did you buy this, Veronika?'

She was silent. Sat with her face averted, her eyes on the street. She didn't even react when he turned the ignition key.

*

It was ten in the morning when Veronika was summoned once again from her cell. Frølich was standing beside Rindal and watching the TV screen in the interview room. She had been through the mill now: no previous convictions, but thoroughly humiliated anyway. Stand on the line, off with your shoes, list personal possessions and hand them over. Afterwards: sit on the floor of the cell for a few hours, answer questions in the interview room and go back. A minor hell for someone who had been up all night. She must have been absolutely exhausted.

Frølich took a deep breath and strode towards the interview room. He entered.

She was saying nothing. Her face drawn, she stared at the wall.

'It's five minutes past ten and Frank Frølich is continuing to interview Veronika Undset,' he said to the recorder.

Slowly, she lifted her head and met his gaze.

'You were arrested because you were in possession of several doses of cocaine after leaving Kadir Zahid's house at 0550 hours. You were observed as you arrived at Zahid's house at 0208 hours. Did you buy the drugs off Zahid?'

She shook her head.

He raised both eyebrows.

She cleared her throat and said, 'No.'

'Who did you buy them off?'

She took a deep breath and grimaced at the very idea that he could even ask the question.

'The witness didn't answer the question. You left Zahid's house at 05.50—'

'I've never bought drugs from anyone,' she interrupted him angrily. 'The lighter isn't mine. I have no idea how it got into my bag and I've told you this many times.'

'Do you really believe this story yourself, deep down?'

'Why are you tormenting me with this? I haven't slept for twenty-four hours. I'm worn out. If it's illegal to walk around with a line of cocaine in your bag, then fine me. You can have the money right now. Just let me go. What you're doing is utterly out of proportion.'

'What were you doing at Zahid's last night?'

She pinched her mouth shut. Made an impatient movement with her body. A lock of hair fell forward creating a dramatic line across her face. He found her good looks unsettling.

'The witness didn't answer the question. Veronika Undset, aren't you going to tell us what you were doing at Zahid's?'

'We were talking.'

'Who was in the house?'

'Kadir and I.'

'How long have you known Kadir Zahid?'

'Many years. We went to school together.'

'Kadir Zahid usually has a couple of bodyguards around. Weren't they there?'

She shook her head.

He tilted his head again to provoke a response.

She said: 'No, we were alone.'

'Why was he alone, without any bodyguards?'

'You'll have to ask him. I have no idea.'

'But you must have wondered yourself?'

'No, I didn't, not then and not now. He and I chatted.'

'Chatted about what?'

'That's private.'

'Private? You're aware you're being questioned by the police, aren't you?'

'It was a confidential conversation, and I won't say a word about it, however much pressure you apply.'

'You went to see him for a chat at two in the morning?'

'That's what I said.'

'Did you and Zahid go to bed together?'

Her full lips stretched in a caustic smile.

'Are you going to answer the question?'

'It's my business who I go – or don't go – to bed with.'

'Could Zahid have put the lighter in your bag without your knowledge?'

She sat looking at him without saying a word.

'Would you please answer.'

'The answer's no. Kadir's fanatical about drugs and alcohol. He doesn't even drink beer.'

'Did you intend to sell on the drugs?'

She bristled with annoyance. 'No. Can't you make this easy and say what it is you want? Why are we here?'

'You were in possession of five grams of cocaine. That's illegal.'

'You must have more urgent cases to spend your time on. Go online and you'll see what the police should be doing now.'

She shifted position and crossed her legs. 'Have we finished if I admit to having the drugs?'

He trod water. They exchanged glances, and he knew she knew. She sent him a wry smile, and he couldn't help but admire her style.

The door opened. Emil Yttergjerde poked his head in.

Frølich said: 'It's 10.14 and Frølich's leaving the interview room.'

He walked out.

'It's true what she says,' Yttergjerde said. 'She runs a firm called Undset AS. Something to do with cleaning. The manager's called Veronika Undset. Registered in Brønnøysund. She keeps tidy accounts, pays tax, nothing dodgy there.'

'What the heck's she doing at Zahid's in the middle of the night, then?'

Rindal came out of the TV room.

Frølich heaved another sigh and said aloud what they were all thinking: 'I can't see the point of this. She knows we're going to let her go any moment. She's just biding her time.'

The three of them looked at each other. Yttergjerde said: 'So what are we going to do?'

Rindal, hands upturned, smiled and said: 'Let her go.'

2

Frank Frølich stopped in the corridor and yawned. A whole night on his backside in the car had made him stiff and sore. He started at the sight of Lena Stigersand. She had a nasty swelling under her left eye.

'New missing-persons case,' she said, passing him a report.

He flicked through the papers. 'And what about you?' he said. 'Fall off your bike or have you got a new boyfriend?'

'Girl gone missing,' she continued undeterred, 'or to be more precise, a young woman from Uganda, the university in Kampala, Makerere. Her name's Rosalind M'Taya. That's an M followed by a T, like in Mt Everest. A student at the university's international summer school. So, smart. It's probably hard to get in. She checked into the student hall of residence on Wednesday and stayed there two nights. But when her room-mate arrived yesterday, a girl from Pakistan, sorry, young woman, she wasn't there and she hasn't been seen since.'

Frank Frølich studied her in silence. 'Lena,' he said.

'The point is she's missed loads of events on the programme without informing anyone. What I did find out was that she arrived on Tuesday morning on a flight from London, which coincided with a flight from Kampala.'

'You look dreadful. What happened to your eye?'

'Eye?' Lena said in the same casual tone. 'There's nothing wrong with my eye. Perhaps you need to go to the optician? You're the right age.'

Frølich carried on walking to his door. Here he met Emil Yttergjerde. Frankie nodded in the direction of Lena's erect back. 'Seen her black eye?'

Emil nodded.

'She doesn't want to talk about it.'

Emil grinned. 'Spanking overload, maybe?'

Frølich mounted a doubtful expression. 'Lena?'

'Haven't you heard? Last Friday. She and Ståle Sender left the pub – together. According to the rumour mill, it's "absolutely true".'

'Lena and Ståle?' Frølich found that hard to believe, at first anyway.

'Steely Ståle, you know. Probably warmed up with *Blue Velvet*. With or without laughing gas.' Emil grinned and walked on.

Frølich went to his desk. Lena and Ståle Sender? Ståle had been moved – how many times? Now he was checking passports at Gardermoen Airport when he wasn't harassing asylum-seekers.

An odd couple: Lena was an only child and a Bærum girl who would return bottles of wine at a restaurant if they weren't the right temperature. Lena spoke refined Norwegian; she was 'exhausted' when others were 'knackered'. Ståle was a working-class boy from Furuset with three interests: cars, watches and cognac – in that order. In his wallet he had a photo of the seventies' Ford Mustang he kept under a tarpaulin every winter. Twice Ståle had been investigated for violence by the special unit, not including the many other cases that had been hushed up or conveniently forgotten.

Frølich looked down at the report. It was stapled to a pile of photocopies. The missing woman's application papers to ISS – the international summer school. Rosalind M'Taya studied sciences at the University of Makerere and – as far as he could see – had received impressive grades. Glowing character references from two professors. Letters of invitation from the University of Oslo to a six-week stay at the international school, which boasted extremely competent lecturers. The photo revealed that Rosalind M'Taya was very attractive. She had her hair pinned up on the crown and stylish Afro braids across her scalp. Full lips. Her eyes were doe-like, lashes curled upwards.

A couple of days in Norway and then gone? This was *not* trafficking. Rosalind was a serious student, not brought in by dubious Eastern Europeans to serve men from a flat in Bygdøy allé.

She lands at Gardermoen. She goes through passport control and customs. Takes either the express train or the airport bus. Definitely not a taxi. She must have received instructions from the summer school. The train is the easiest option. Then she changes to the Metro at the National Theatre and carries on to Blindern. Nice-looking girl and most likely poor, rewarded with an overseas stay. Unsure of herself, maybe abroad for the first time. Clever – no doubt careful too, thorough. What sort of people would she trust? Other Africans? Students on the course?

Rosalind M'Taya disappeared two days after she checked into her hall of residence.

In Oslo there are plenty of Norwegians who have worked in East Africa with Norad and the UN. Perhaps Rosalind had an address with her from home, perhaps she visited someone. Perhaps she was still with them. Perhaps a former missionary was driving her around, showing her the Viking boats or the Vigeland Sculpture Park right now. Perhaps these speculations were simply a waste of time.

Lena with Ståle Sender!

Could that be possible? The posh girl from Bærum in bed with the missing link, a primitive, racist street urchin who got an erection from using live ammo on jobs?

It had been a long night. *Should go home*, Frølich thought.

*

An hour and a half later he was in Rosalind M'Taya's student room. Her Pakistani roommate reached up to his chest. Her plait was a work of art, thick and long and black and with a pattern like the climbing rope in the gym. When she smiled she revealed long and irregular teeth. She told him she had never met Rosalind, but the things in the suitcase were hers.

Frølich opened the suitcase. And had his assumptions about her background confirmed. She was poor. Most of the clothes seemed to be home-made. Right at the bottom: some kangas and batik materials. Her jewellery was typically African: big shapes and bright colours.

He could feel the Pakistani woman was ill at ease. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I can manage on my own.'

She left.

He emptied the contents of the suitcase onto the bed. And two objects gave him cause for alarm. A full billfold wallet and a well-equipped toiletry bag. She had gone without taking toiletries or hiding her money. The suitcase was full. It was unlikely she had taken a change of clothing with her. The possibility that Rosalind had disappeared of her own free will had shrunk considerably.

He stood by the window. Looking out on the paths and grass between the tall trees in the park. Saw groups of students of various nationalities. One large group sat in a circle on the grass. An open-air class.

Suddenly a chill went down his spine and he turned back to the room. It was as though someone had touched his shoulder. There was a loud whining noise. The next second it was gone, and the room filled with sound again: someone was cooking in the student kitchen. A man called something from far away behind a wall and pipes gurgled.

He shook off the feeling he'd had.

Outside, he admired the beautiful gardens. When he was a student it was generally assumed that people in the hall of residence had got their rooms by underhand means. Those who lived in what resembled a manor house only a stone's throw from the university complex were extremely lucky.

The problem is, he mused, Rosalind M'Taya could have bumped into anyone at all when she went out on Friday. Perhaps she caught the tram to the centre. It was more likely though that she stuck together with students she *barely* knew – colleagues. So they would have to go around with a photo asking in shops and cafés …

He wasn't up to that now. He had to go home and sleep.