



Kennedy sailing on the Ionian Sea.
Photo by Alice Maud Guldbrandsen.

LET EVERYONE FORGET EVERYONE

by Thomas E. Kennedy

The au pair was sick again. Frantically, Vita phoned her mother, but she would not be able to get there for an hour. So, if the day was going to hang together, Vita had to get the girls ready for kindergarten herself. Already dressed in her golfing tweeds, she smoked a cigarette at the bathroom window, gazing down to the tight-cropped grass of the back garden while the girls splashed and giggled in the tub. The grass was impeccable. It made her think of the green where she was due for a lesson in less than two hours. The day was perfect for it. Crisp and sunny. Vita would never have believed what pleasure it gave her to be out on the golf course.

All her life she had despised golf as the snobby, snooty activity of people spoiled by privilege, born to money in their big villas, the type that went skiing in winter and to the sunny south islands for spring break and who got a brand new Volvo or Mercedes sports car for their high school graduation, never having to earn anything for themselves.

To them, she was an *upcomling*. But her father's success had come from his sweat and was new enough that she remembered life in the poorest streets of North Bridge, growing

Returning here was always like a dream fragment for him, the unreal real.

up in a two-room flat with no shower and a shared toilet—the very street that Harald lived on now. Her lips tightened at the thought of her ex. A cheat and a liar and a lech. They could have had a good life together. He'd had promise and he earned enough and had a good background and

he was not bad looking. When they moved into this house, she truly believed they would be able to have a viable marriage. With two beautiful little girls to be proud of and so much that life could offer each of them within reach. But she had been blind to what her father had seen right from the start.

"You sure he's not a skirt-chaser, honey?"

She just hadn't seen it. But...But what? She could no longer remember whatever in the world she had ever seen in him. Sweetness. He had seemed *sweet*. There was where she had gone wrong. To be attracted to a man who was sweet. What kind of a man was that? *Sweet*. A cotton-prick was what he was. Now it pained her to have to turn the girls over to him every other weekend. The mere *thought* of him got her piss cooking. An image of his mealy-mouthed face surfaced in her mind: *I want you to have the house, Vita, and I will voluntarily pay triple support for the girls and whatever you need for yourself*. You bet your butt I'll have the house! And there will be nothing *voluntary* about it, she thought. You will pay, and I will have it on paper with the seal of the courts.

He would pay plenty, the *cheat*. And everyone *knew*. He had *humiliated* her.

She drew fiercely on her cigarette, inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, chasing his image with a picture of herself on the green, driving from that fine third hole, the joy of her muscles in full flex, grace of swing, shock of impact—*thwack!*—follow-through, slice of the ball arcing up into the sky. Exhaling the smoke from her cigarette, she could *see* it.

She yearned to be out there.

“Pee-yew!” said Amalie from the tub, and Elisabeth giggled, picking up on it as she did on everything her older sister did. Amalie was six, Elisabeth four. “Yeah, Pee-yew, mommy! That cigarette *stinks!* The two of them were giggling now, egging each other on.

Vita ran the cigarette under the cold water tap and flushed the butt down the toilet. “Ok, ok,” she said. “That’s more than enough. Are you all clean now, girls? We have got to hurry if Mommy is going to be on time.”

“You got to wash me unner here like Dad does,” Elisabeth said, pointing beneath her arm. “It tiggles.”

Vita paused, considering. “Did your father give you a bath?”

“We were all mud,” said Amalie. “From the Deer Park. The daddy deers were ready to make the lady deers into mommies.”

“Yeah!” Elisabeth chipped in. “And Birgitte was there. She’s *nice!*”

Vita’s eyes narrowed. “*Ob?* Who is Birgitte? Did Dad bring a friend along?”

“Yeah, she’s *nice*. And she’s pretty.”

“But not as pretty as you, Mom.”

Vita watched the girls’ slippery wet sleek bodies and thought of this new woman —*Birgitte*. She dug her nails into her palms at the thought of this faceless woman named Birgitte meeting her girls, of her girls being included in some secret *assignation*. Then she remembered. Birgitte. It must have been the Birgitte from Harald’s office. Vita’s breath was ragged in her lungs. She looked at the girls again, at their bodies, and something occurred to her.

“Where did Dad wash you?” she asked. “In the bathtub? Was he in the tub with you?”

“Uhn uhn, he just has one of those hose-telephone things,” said Amalie. “We were in his shower.”

“Was Daddy in the shower with you?”

“Uhn uhn. He stood outside and sprayed us. With the hose-telephone thing.”

“Where on your bodies?”

“Unner here,” Elisabeth said again. “And back here!” She burst out giggling as she pointed behind her, but Amalie snapped, “He did not!”

“Did, too!”

“He *never* did! He said *you* should!”

“Why are you objecting so strongly, Amalie? Did your father say you shouldn’t tell?”

The girl blinked, gazing at her mother, her mouth open as she shook her head no. “It was because we were all mud. From the Deer Park.”

Vita pointed at Elisabeth’s vagina. “Did he wash you there?”

“No, he told *me* to,” she said and started giggling again. “He said, ‘You got to wash everything you own when you take a bath!’”

While the girls towelled themselves, Vita stepped into the hall with her cell phone, keying in her parent’s number: “Mom, it’s Vita. Would you ask Daddy if he could come by with you, too? It’s rather important.”

Harald Jaeger opened the white, wrought-iron gate and stepped into the little front garden of the house he had owned for ten years and to which he no longer even possessed a key. The grass, front and back, was still green and tight as a golf course. Vita's pride. She practised her putting here. *Galf*, she called it, a parody of the snobby upper-class accent which to Jaeger was beginning to sound less like a parody than an assimilation. Let her. She had taken up golf after their split. He pictured himself telling her, "Well some people work and some play golf." Or, "The end is here, but golf goes on." But he quickly dismissed the thought. Nothing but trouble in that direction.

Beneath his arm he had a little gift for her, a book of golf cartoons wrapped in silver paper and tied with a dark-green ribbon. Last time he came he'd got the idea of bringing a little present as a surprise and saw that the gesture had startled and moved her, and he was eager to repeat that success.

He gazed from the grass to the agreeably uneven assortment of trees—larch, lilac, pine, the brittle rose vines which in spring and summer blossomed with fat blooms of red, yellow, white. The forsythia hedge was nearly bald now in the grey, darkening afternoon, but in the eye of memory he saw it as an explosion of bright-yellow late-April blossoms, his two yellow-haired baby girls standing before it with their big, sweet smiles. Returning here was always like a dream fragment for him, the unreal real. A return to the life he had always assumed temporary until it took roots, grew clinging vines he had to hack away, and somehow he had managed not to realize the result would be pain, blood. Yet had he not decided—*Now! Quick!*—he was certain they all would have died slowly and with a greater, all-consuming pain.

I feel so guilty, he had told his psychologist.

So feel guilty for a moment, then move on. The guilt helps no one. Learn from it.

But I did a terrible thing. To marry a woman I didn't love was....

The mistake of a confused man. Move on.

But the babies....

As a very wise man once said, Harald: Shit happens. Move on.

Now he moved on down the garden path to the neat, white front door with its neat rectangle of little, square, white-curtained windows. He pressed the bell and listened to its pleasant chime.

Vita opened the door wide and looked at him. Then she closed it halfway and kept staring. She wore tailored jeans and a tailored tweed jacket. She looked terrific. He held out the gift. "Hi," he said. "How are you? How are the girls? Here's a little present for you."

She did not take the package and she did not speak, only stared at him, and she did not step aside to let him enter.

"You look great," he said. "Have you lost weight?" Vita was slim as an eel with close-cropped yellow hair that glittered silver. She was eight years older than Jaeger, though she looked five years younger. She let the question hang in the air.

Then she said, "What have you been up to? Who is she? I can see you've met someone. Again."

It did not occur to Jaeger that he did not have to answer. "Do you remember Birgitte Sommer?"

"From your office? She's married."

"We, well, it just kind of happened, I...."

"Oh I know all about you and things that *just kind of happen*. You really take the bloody biscuit. You desert one wife, then steal one from another man. Do they have children, too?"

"No, I..."

"Because I ought to warn her not to let you be alone with them."

"What?"

"I have to ask you straight out now, and I want an honest answer."

"What?"

"Did you bathe the girls last time you had them?"

It took a moment for the question to make sense to him. Was she complaining that they were dirty when he returned them to her? Then he remembered he had taken them to the deer park and it was muddy so he washed them under the telephone shower back at his place. "Well, yes, I..."

She stared at him, lips slightly parted with distaste, eyes narrowed, and she whispered, "How could you do that? To your own daughters."

"What? They're my daughters. They needed a bath."

"They do *not* need to have you undressing them and... You disgust me."

"Where are they? It's my weekend to..."

"You will *not* see them. I have to consider what to do about this now."

"You can't do this. I'll complain to the..."

"Go ahead. And I will tell them what you did."

"What I did? I didn't do anything. I gave them a bath because they were muddy. I sprayed them with the telephone shower. There was nothing."

"I knew you were sick, but I really never expected *this*. Now get out of here." And she closed the door.

Jaeger was trembling. He rang the bell, knocked. "Vita you can't do..."

The door opened again, and Jaeger started. It was not Vita but her father, Frank, a short muscular man with kinky, yellow hair and a broad, porcine face. He stepped close, and Jaeger could smell coffee on his breath.

"What do *you* want?" he demanded.

Jaeger was less afraid of the man than of what he himself might do to him. He felt his right fist ball up. His breath was ragged, and he saw the bulky little man as a door behind a door blocking him from his daughters. He wanted to bury his fist right dead in the middle of the piggy face. Words rasped from his throat in a grating whisper.

"I want to see my daughters!"

"You can get the hell out of here," Frank snapped. "We know what went on. It's not going to happen again."

"That's a fucking lie, Frank. Repeat it, and I'll smash your face in!"

Frank spoke over his shoulder as he shoved the door between them. "Call the police, Vita! He's violent!"

Jaeger put his shoulder to the door, and they struggled from each side of it. Moving his foot for traction he lost balance and the door slammed on his little finger. He yelled out with pain. The door opened a crack, and Frank muttered, "Sorry," then slammed it again and the finger was caught once more. Jaeger bellowed, and the door opened a crack so he could pull his finger free. "Sorry," Frank muttered again and shut the door. Jaeger

heard the deadbolt mesh shut, and he stood there on the little brick stoop, cradling his injured finger, muttering, “Fuck fuck fuck fuck,” and felt the shame of tears rolling from his eyes.



He went directly from Vita's to the emergency room at the local hospital where he was received by a nurse in her hospital whites and a young doctor. Jaeger was directed to lay his hand on the table while the two of them touched and poked at it. “That’s a nasty finger all right,” the doctor said. “How’d it happen?”

“Ex-wife,” said Jaeger.

The doctor looked startled. “Did she *bite* you?”

“No, actually, it was her father.”

“Her *father* bit you?”

“No no no, he slammed the door on my finger. *Twice*.”

“Did he do it on purpose?” the nurse asked, and there was such a willing eagerness to condemn such barbarism evident in her pale blue eyes that Jaeger nearly lied to her.

Instead, he said, “On purpose or not, he *did* it. *Twice*.” He thought they might suggest a police report, but they went straight to work on him, disinfecting the finger with swabs beneath his already blackening nail. He winced, grinding his teeth, feeling fury rise within him, but the fury was alleviated by the gentle touch of the nurse as she applied the clamp and padded the cut with gauze, wrapping it several times around the finger, securing it with bits of white tape she had cut in advance and stuck along the edge of the metal table. Then she began to pack the whole thing in some kind of perforated condom-looking thing of black latex.

He thought again they might suggest a police report, but they were finished with him.

In the hall outside the treatment room, he heard the nurse laugh at something the doctor said to her, and indignation flared in his heart. He fished out his cell phone with his unbandaged hand and awkwardly dialed the police alarm number with his left thumb.

“I’m calling from the emergency room at Gentofte,” he said. “I’d like to report an act of violence.”

“Is someone in danger now?” the policeman or whatever he was on the line asked.

“No, but someone, my father-in-law, slammed the door on my finger. *Twice*.”

“Has it been treated?”

“Yes.”

“Are you ambulatory?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suggest you come into the station if you think you want to report that, sir. This is the alarm central. It’s for emergencies.”

The line went dead.

Jaeger didn’t know if he was more ashamed or furious. He recognized, though, that the pain in his finger was buoying him. As long as his finger hurt, he was angry, and as long as he was angry, he could keep afloat. He didn’t dare begin to speculate about what might be waiting for him when the anger abandoned him to his feeble intellectual devices. *I’m not stupid! Why am I so stupid?* And he could not bear to think about what Vita had

implied—no, accused him of!

Then he remembered a man he knew named Elsnab who had a legal practice not far from the hospital. He got the number from information and called, and Elsnab agreed to see him if he could be there before 4:30.



The lawyer's office was on the second floor, above a candy shop and a butcher. The reception desk was not manned, or womanned, and Elsnab sat in the empty waiting area with him. Elsnab had a whiskered, receding chin, bulbous nose, and protruding eyes.

"What the hell'd you do to your finger?" he asked.

Jaeger told him the story.

"So you want to sue your ex's old man?"

"I want to assert my right to see my little girls."

Elsnab touched the sparse salt-and-pepper whiskers on his inward slanting chin.

"How old're they?"

"Four and six."

"You love 'em, huh?"

"Love 'em to death."

Elsnab looked alarmed. "How's that?!"

"It's an expression. It means I love them a lot."

"I'd lose that expression if I was you. You love them enough to leave them in peace?"

"What! You mean just give them up?"

"They're young enough to forget you."

"I could never do that, *never*. My father left me and my mother alone when I was thirteen, and I swore I'd never do that to my children."

"But that's it. You were thirteen so you remember him still. If you were four or six, you'd have forgot him. His face would just disappear from your memory. There've been studies. You'd have forgotten him and he'd have forgotten you. And probably when you were four or six, he wanted to leave anyway but he couldn't get himself to do it, thought he could make it work, tried but just kept sinking deeper in hell until finally it was so hot he had to escape clean. He should've done it earlier. You could learn from your father's mistakes. Let everyone forget everyone. Let the mother get on with a new life, let the kids have a new father. Let the father start again."

"I could never do that."

"Because you think you're afraid of hurting them, but what you're really afraid of is hurting yourself. Look, you feel terrible right now, right? And you're afraid that it's always gonna be this way, that it'll get even worse, but it will only get worse if you keep tramping around in it. You got the door slammed on your finger. What do you think that did to your little girls? They're not getting better off by you staying around to get doors slammed on your fingers. They'll get worse, and the ones who suffer most are the little girls. In ten years time you'll be dealing with drug problems, alcohol problems, pregnancies, abortions, piercings. Who knows? Even sex films—who knows? Prostitution! You want to see your little girls in sex films? I mean, when they're older. Leave them in peace now, and you avoid all that. They forget you, you forget them, their mom meets a new guy, and inside

of two years they'll be calling him daddy, and you're free to make a new life for yourself. Kindest thing all around. Believe me. I been there."

"Never could," Jaeger said.

"Think about it, Harald. Give yourself a break."

"You left *your* kids?"

"Hard choices. Man's got to rise to them. Think about it."



Jaeger sat in the dark, staring at the illuminated face of his cell phone. Birgitte was not answering. Long overdue, and not answering. Everytime he used his thumb to jab the key for the repeat call, his little finger, swathed in bandages to a bulbous girth, throbbed with pain. He could not stand it. He tried the phone again, but only got the message service. If she looked at her call register, she would see that he'd called ten, fifteen times. Why didn't she at least phone back? It was 9:00 p.m. She should have been here three hours ago. Did she love him or not? Had it meant nothing to her after all – the beautiful night they spent together? He pictured her face beneath him in the dim light of the bedroom, the way her eyes blazed into his. He remembered the things she had told him, how all her husband thought about was making money, about their big house in the suburbs, about how materialistic he was. Was it just talk?

Abruptly he rose and flicked on the light, paced the wood floor. Seven steps from end to end. Five steps from wall to wall. The light hurt his eyes. He switched it off again and put his good hand over his face, turning his head from side to side, leaned on the window ledge and gazed down at the windows of the building across the narrow street. There were five storeys of windows down beneath him, studded with light. He could see a man and woman seated at a table by one window. The woman raised a coffee cup to her lips. The man was smoking a cigarette. He could not see the man's face, but the woman was smiling, and an agony of loss opened and grew within him. That no woman was here to smile at him, to want him to want her.

He imagined a little Elsnab alongside him, behind him, on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, *Forget her, Harald. Forget everybody. Let everyone forget everyone. Think about it, Harald.*

But what he thought about, now, in the dark of his apartment, were the faces of his little girls lying in their beds with the blankets up to their chins smiling up at him as he sang them to sleep at night.

"Sing com-doobie, daddy!"

"Yeah, sing com-doobie!"

And he sang it now, for himself, for them:

*Com doobie do,
Come softly, darling.
Hear what I sa-ay.
I'll love you always,
Always, al-al-always.
Com doobie do.*



Kennedy in Copenhagen. The figures beside Kennedy are a 1990 bench sculpture by Hanne Varming (1939-) entitled “The Elder Tree Mother,” inspired by Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of the same title. The sculpture is placed on Copenhagen’s Coal Square.

Photo by Alice Maud Guldbrandsen.



Kennedy in Brussels.

Photo by Alice Maud Guldbrandsen.