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ALSO BY JONAS JONASSON

*The Accidental Further Adventures of the
Hundred-Year-Old Man*

Hitman Anders and the Meaning of It All

The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden

*The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out
of the Window and Disappeared*

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Translated from the Swedish
by Rachel Willson-Broyles



HARPERVIA

HarperVia
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.4thEstate.co.uk

HarperCollinsPublishers
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by HarperVia

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

B-format paperback ISBN 978-0-00-840758-2

ZA trade paperback ISBN 978-0-00-840755-1

ANZ trade paperback ISBN 978-0-00-846532-2

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Typeset in Sabon LT Std
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon



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Patriotism is the virtue of the vicious.
Oscar Wilde

Tell Oscar I said he shouldn't think so much.
Aunt Klara

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PROLOGUE

Once upon a time, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was a moderately successful artist. His first name was Adolf, and he would eventually be famous the world over for other reasons.

Young Adolf was of the opinion that true art depicted reality as it was, as the eye perceived it. More or less like a photograph, but in colour. ‘Beauty is truth,’ he said, quoting a Frenchman he otherwise wanted nothing to do with.

Much later in life, when Adolf was not quite so young, he saw to it that books, art, and even people went up in flames, in the name of the correct worldview. This eventually led to the biggest war the world had thus far seen. Adolf both lost and perished.

And his worldview went into hiding.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

He had no idea who Adolf was and had never heard of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Nor did he have any need to know. He was a medicine man in a remote village on the Kenyan savanna. He left so few impressions in the iron-rich red soil that his name is no longer remembered.

He was skilled in the art of healing, but his good reputation reached beyond his valley just as little as the events of the world outside reached in. He lived an unassuming life. Died too soon. Despite his great skill, he was unable to cure himself when he needed it the most. He was grieved and missed by a small but faithful assortment of patients.

His oldest son was rather too young to take over, but that was how it worked, that was how it had been throughout the ages, and so it would remain.

At just twenty years old, the successor had an even more negligible reputation. He inherited his father's relative competence but none of his good-naturedness. Being satisfied with small mercies for the rest of his life was not for him.

His transformation into something else began when the young man built a new hut in which to receive patients, one that had a separate waiting room. It progressed with his exchanging his *shúkà* for a white coat and was fully realized when he changed both his name and his title. The son of the medicine man whose name no one remembers any longer began to call himself Dr Ole Mbatian after that fabled man of the

same name, the greatest Maasai of them all, the leader and visionary. The original was long dead and offered no protest from the other side.

Tossed out along with all the old ways was his father's price list for treatments. The son drafted his own, one that did the great warrior justice. It would no longer do to drop by with a bag of tea leaves or a piece of dried meat as payment, not if you expected the doctor to have time for you. These days a simple matter cost one hen to treat; the more complicated ones required a goat. For truly serious cases, the doctor demanded a cow. If it wasn't *too* serious, that is; a patient who died got to do so for free.

Time passed. The medicine men of the nearby villages closed down their clinics, driven out by the competition on account of the fact that they still went by the same old names they always had and insisted that a true Maasai did not dress himself in white. As Dr Ole Mbatian's list of patients grew, so did his reputation. His paddock of cows and goats needed constant expanding. The clientele on whom he could test his decoctions was so large that Ole became as skilled as people were starting to say he was.

The medicine man with the stolen name was already wealthy by the time he celebrated the arrival of his first son. The baby survived those critical first years and was, in accordance with tradition, trained in his father's work. Ole the Second spent many years alongside his father before the latter passed away. When the day arrived, he kept his father's stolen name but did away with the title of 'Doctor' and burned the white coat, since patients who had come from far away had testified that doctors, in contrast to medicine men, might be associated with witchcraft. A medicine man who developed the reputation of being a witch would not enjoy many more days in his career, or even his life.

Thus, after Dr Ole Mbatian came Ole Mbatian the Elder. His firstborn son, who grew up and took over from his father and grandfather, was, in turn, Ole Mbatian the Younger.

And it is with him that this tale begins.

CHAPTER 2

Ole Mbatian the Younger, then, had inherited his name, wealth, reputation and talents from his father and grandfather. In another part of the world, this would have been called being born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

His educational journey was overseen with care and, along with friends in his age set, he also got to take a detour through warrior training. He was thus not only a medicine man but also a highly esteemed Maasai warrior. No one knew more about the healing powers of roots and herbs, and only a very few could measure up to Ole when it came to spears, throwing clubs, and knives.

His medical speciality was the prevention of more children than a family wished to have. Unhappy women flocked his way from Migori in the west to Maji Moto in the east, several days' travel away. To have time to see them all he had an admission policy of at least five previously delivered children per applying woman, of which at least two must be boys. The medicine man never revealed his formulas, but it was easy to tell that bitter melon was an active ingredient in the cloudy liquid the woman must drink each time she ovulated. Those with extra-sensitive tastebuds could also detect a hint of the root of Indian cotton.

Ole Mbatian the Younger was richer than everyone else, including Chief Olemeeli the Well-Traveller. Besides all his cows he had three huts and two wives. It was the other way

around for the chief: two huts and three wives. Ole never understood how he made that work.

Incidentally, the medicine man had never liked his chief. They were the same age and even as children they knew which roles they would one day shoulder.

‘My dad rules over your dad,’ Olemeeli might say to tease him.

He wasn’t wrong, even as Ole Jr preferred not to lose in an argument against him. Instead he solved the issue by whacking the future chief in the face with his throwing club, leaving Ole Mbatian the Elder no choice but to vociferously give his son a licking even as he whispered words of praise in the boy’s ear.

Back then, it was Kakenya the Handsome who ruled the valley. He was secretly plagued by the realization that his epithet was not only accurate but in every meaningful way the sole admirable trait he possessed. He was no less concerned that the son who would one day take over appeared to have inherited his father’s shortcomings, but not exactly his physical beauty. And it didn’t help young Olemeeli’s appearance that the medicine man’s boy had knocked out two of his front teeth.

Kakenya the Handsome had an endlessly difficult time making decisions. He even let his wives decide for him now and then, but unfortunately he had an even number of them. Each time they were unable to agree on an issue (which was almost every time) he stood there with his tie-breaking vote and no idea what to do with it.

Yet in the autumn of his old age, and with the support of his whole family, Kakenya managed to accomplish something he could be proud of. He would send his oldest son on journeys; he would go much further than anyone had done before. He would, as a result, become well-travelled and return home full of impressions from the outside world. The wisdom he gathered on his journey would be a help to him when it became time for him to take over. Olemeeli would never be as handsome as his

father, but he could become a resolute and forward-looking chief.

That was the plan.

Now, things don't always turn out the way one intends. Olemeeli's first and last long journey was to Loiyangalani, on his father's orders. The destination was chosen not only because it was almost further away than what was reasonably possible, but also because there were rumours that people had discovered, way up there in the north, a new way to filter lake water. Heated sand and herbs rich in vitamin C mixed with root of water lily had long been the known methods. But apparently, in Loiyangalani, they had come up with some new way that was both simpler and more effective.

'Go there, my son,' said Kakenya the Handsome. 'Gain knowledge from all the new things you encounter along the way. Then come home and prepare yourself. I feel that I don't have much time left.'

'But Dad,' said Olemeeli.

He couldn't think of anything else to say. He seldom found the right words. Or the right thought.

His journey took half an eternity. Or a whole week. Once he arrived at his destination, Olemeeli discovered that the people in Loiyangalani were advanced in many ways. Water purification was one of them. But they'd also installed something called electricity, and the mayor used a machine, rather than a pen or piece of chalk, to write letters.

Olemeeli really just wanted to go back home, but his father's words echoed in his mind. So he made a careful study of one thing and the next; he owed his father at least that much. Unfortunately, he tried out the electricity to such an extent that he got a shock and passed out.

When he regained consciousness, he took a few minutes to recover before tackling the typewriter. But there Olemeeli fared

so poorly as to get his left index finger stuck between the *d* and *r* keys, frightening him so badly that he yanked his hand away with such force that his finger broke in two places.

Enough was enough. Olemeeli ordered his assistants to pack their bags for the arduous journey home. He already knew what he would say in his report to his father Kakenya: it was bad enough that electricity could bite you just because you stuck a nail into a hole in the wall. But the writing machine was downright lethal.

Kakenya the Handsome had seldom been accurate in his prophecies. But the suspicion that he didn't have much time left turned out to be correct. His terrified and partially toothless son took over.

Newly minted Chief Olemeeli passed down three decrees on the very first day after his father's burial.

One: the thing called electricity must never, ever be installed in the valley over which Olemeeli ruled.

Two: machines for writing were not to be transported over the border, and

Three: the village would be investing in a brand-new water purification system.

So it came to be that for almost four decades, Olemeeli had been ruling over the only valley in Maasai Mara where electricity, typewriters, and by extension, computers, did not exist. It became the valley where not a single one of the six billion cell phone owners on earth happened to live.

He called himself Olemeeli the Well-Travelled. He was as unpopular as his father had once been. Behind his back he had a number of less flattering names. Ole Mbatian the Younger's favourite was 'Chief Toothless'.

*

The not-at-all-well-liked chief and the admittedly skilful medicine man may have been the same age, but that didn't mean they were of the same mind. Yet, given that they were the two most important men in the village, it wouldn't do for them to quarrel as they had when they were younger. Ole Mbatian had to come to terms with the fact that the greatest Luddite of them all was also the one in charge. In return, Olemeeli the Well-Travelled pretended not to hear when the medicine man pointed out which of them had the most teeth left in his mouth.

The chief was a constant but tolerable concern for Ole Mbatian. His only true sorrow in life lay elsewhere: namely in the fact that he had had four children with his first wife and four with his second – eight daughters and no sons. After the fourth girl he began to experiment with his herbs and roots to make sure the next baby was a boy. But this was one medical challenge that proved beyond his capabilities. The daughters kept coming until they didn't come at all. His wives stopped delivering, even without any bitter melon or Indian cotton figured into the mixtures Ole Mbatian had tried.

After five generations of medicine men, the next man in line would be someone other than a Mbatian, or whatever they had been called before. Female medicine men didn't exist in the Maasai world. It's all in the name.

For a long time, Ole was able to find solace in the fact that Chief Toothless fared no better in the production of children. Olemeeli had six daughters right alongside Ole's eight.

But then there was this part where the chief had an extra wife to turn to. Before the youngest wife got too old, she produced a son and the heir to her husband and chief. Great celebration in the village! The proud father announced that the festivities would last all night. And so they did. Everyone partied until dawn, except for the medicine man, who had a headache and retired early.

*

That was many years ago now. Many more than what Ole expected he had left. But he wasn't ready to meet the Supreme God yet. He still had more to give. He didn't know exactly how old he had become, but he noticed he wasn't quite as good with a bow and arrow as he had once been and couldn't hit a target quite as accurately with his spear, throwing club, or knife. Maybe with the throwing club, now that he thought about it. After all, he was the reigning village champion.

There wasn't anything much wrong with his agility either. He moved with nearly as much confidence as always. If not as willingly. He was getting lazy. Had toothaches. And cures for toothaches. His vision was cloudier than it had been in his youth, but that didn't seem like a problem. Ole had already seen everything worth seeing and he could find his way to wherever he needed to go.

All in all, there were indications that one stage of life had made way for another. Or, alternately, that Ole Mbatian was depressed. When his sorrow over the son that never was got too tight a grip on him, he mixed himself up some St John's wort and roseroot in sunflower oil. That usually helped.

Or he took an extra walk in the savanna. He was out early each morning, thanks to his constant search for fresh roots and herbs for his medicine cabinet. He worked before the sun got too hot, beginning his walks while it was still dark. Alert to any noises from nearly silent lions that might be out hunting.

Was his stride getting shorter, perhaps? Ole had once gone as far as Nanyki. Another time he'd made it all the way to Kilimanjaro and on up the mountain. Now it felt as if the neighbouring villages were far away. There was nothing to suggest that Ole Mbatian the Younger would one day, in the not-too-distant future, cause a considerable uproar in Stockholm, Europe and the world. The Maasai who knew so much about how to distil the healing powers of the savanna knew nothing of the Swedish capital city or the continent to which it belonged. And

of the world he knew nothing beyond that it had been created by En-Kai, the Supreme God, who lived in the mountain Kirinyaga. Ole Mbatian called himself a Christian, but there were some truths the Bible couldn't change. One of them was the story of creation.

'Oh well,' he said to himself.

The upshot of all of this was simply that he had to fight a little longer. And in good spirits, all things considered.

CHAPTER 3

Just over ten thousand kilometres north of the Maasai lands, in a suburb of the Swedish capital city of Stockholm, Lasse handed the keys over to the buyer of his life's work. It was time to retire.

This was no big deal for the former hot-dog stand owner. You were born, you pulled your weight, you retired, you died, you were buried. That was all there was to it.

But it was a big deal – and a terrible one at that – for one of his regulars. Just think, Lasse had sold his stand to an Arab. One who didn't know what Västervik mustard was. Or that the hot dogs go *on top* of the mashed potatoes. One who added kebab to the menu.

That sort of change would leave its mark on anyone. Victor was only fifteen when it happened. Hanging around outside the hot-dog stand with his moped was no longer what it had been.

His friends designated the new pizzeria across the square their new hangout spot, but of course that was run by another Arab.

There was something about those Arabs. And the Iranians. The Iraqis. The Yugoslavians. None of them knew what Västervik mustard was. They dressed weird. Talked weird. Couldn't they learn proper Swedish?

That was his first problem. The second was that his friends didn't see what he saw. They switched to the pizzeria from the hot-dog stand not because hot dogs had become kebab, but

because it was so much warmer indoors. When Victor tried to make them see that Sweden was about to be transformed, they sneered at him. Wasn't life simply more interesting with a Yugoslavian or Iranian here and there?

Victor was alone in his ponderings. When his friends went to a disco, he sat home alone in his childhood room. When his friends played football on the weekends, he went to the museum. There he found comfort in what was authentically Swedish, like French Rococo and the Neoclassicism King Gustav III had brought to Sweden from Italy. But above all, he loved national romanticism: nothing could be more beautiful than Anders Zorn's *Midsummer Dance*; nothing more tinged with solemnity than the funeral procession of King Karl XII as depicted by Gustaf Cederström.

The opposite of kebab.

His upper-secondary school years were torture. The boys in his class thought he was strange for learning the succession of Swedish monarchs by heart, from the eighth century onward. For his part, he thought those boys were uninteresting. And the girls ... well, there was something wrong with them. Some had a cloth wrapped around their heads; he wanted nothing to do with those ones. But even the ones who were real Swedes ... it was hard to talk to them. What were they supposed to talk about? How did you get close to someone without necessarily letting her get close to you?

His military service came as something of a relief. Twelve months of rules and regulations in service to the nation. But not even the Swedish armed forces were spared from the foreigners. Or the women.

As a young adult, Victor considered a career in politics. He subscribed to *Folktribunen*, a newspaper published by Nazis that essentially clung to the same truths he did. He went to a meeting or two with what he assumed were like-minded people but didn't feel comfortable there. They wanted to bring about

change with violence, but that presupposed that you were prepared to fight, which in turn might hurt. Victor had been quite familiar with the concept of pain ever since the time three hundred kronor went missing from his father's wallet. His father had no proof Victor had taken it, but he gave the fifteen-year-old a proper thrashing anyway. The point at issue was not something the son wished to rehash with himself afterwards.

The party Victor considered joining had both leaders and vice-leaders, but he himself was on the bottom rung. Within the group you were expected to obey and cooperate. Not just other men, but women too. How could you work with those? And how could you obey them?

His conclusion was that Sweden was lost, unless his temporary friends in the resistance movement succeeded in their revolution. Or unless he himself took charge of things – without getting beaten up or thrown in jail along the way. Although Sweden was in a state of general decay, it was still possible to find success in the country, unlike in the party, where you had to show *consideration*. That was just about Victor's least favourite word. *Consideration* for the party leader, his vice-leader, his wife and his cat. It was with determination, not consideration, that one would protect Sweden from the parasites.

The single twenty-year-old did not owe anything to anyone. He planned to fight his way to the top, whence he could allow his lack of consideration to blossom.

It could take time if it must, and it didn't matter a whit if it happened at the expense of other people. Precisely which top he fought to didn't matter either, as long as it was sufficiently high.

His climb began with getting a job with the most respectable art gallery in Stockholm. After all, he knew quite a bit about real art, and during his interview he managed to pepper art dealer Alderheim with lies about how much he appreciated the abominable modernism. To be on the safe side, he studied up on the

topic before the interview, so he could say things like:

‘It’s not easy to sit here before the city’s greatest art dealer and express the true function of thought.’

Here he was alluding to the founder of surrealism, about whom his intended employer luckily inquired no further since Victor had forgotten his name. What he did recall was that he had been a leftist poet and the founder of an anti-fascist group. In short, an idiot.

His art-world plan was not a random one. Victor had thought this out carefully: Anyone who wanted to enact change needed a *position*. Beating up a homosexual or scaring the daylights out of a foreigner might be a worthy act, but it wouldn’t lead to any change to speak of. Except for that particular homosexual or foreigner.

And the way to rise to a position was to move in the right circles. Thus Victor needed to seek out money and power. Starting from the bottom rungs of industry would be as hopeless as doing so in politics.

The art gallery was a perfect springboard, for if there was one thing that united the members of the social-liberal power elite it was opera, theatre – and art. And especially the modernist claptrap Alderheim sold. Victor would get to know the clientele, and it would only be a matter of time before he was offered something better.

The work itself involved taking on most of the client-facing responsibilities. Victor negotiated the right to call himself the manager. Alderheim had originally imagined more of an assistant, but the fellow was old, tired, and easily swayed. The manager’s most important duty was to make the client like the art by liking him.

‘I’m really a Cézanne deep down inside,’ he might say with a smile that was confident and yet bashful. ‘But I must confess that I find myself drawn to Matisse.’

And he would fill in a little nonsense, such as:

‘Good old Matisse ...’

He kept the rest of the sentence to himself (‘... may he burn in hell’).

Perhaps the clientele imagined that the manager was caught somewhere between impressionism and expressionism, when in fact he was simply sticking to his plan.

Alderheim was dazzled by the manager’s charm. This new guy was starting to feel more and more like the son he’d never had.

In those days, Victor’s last name was still the extremely ordinary Svensson. Even so, a customer might occasionally invite him to a gallery opening or something else as exruciating as it was crucial. He made sure to be where he was meant to be when he was meant to be there. Biding his time, alert to every key that would lead him ever upwards.

He gave himself two years. If he didn’t get a bite before then he would simply quit and reconsider. He never would have imagined that everything was going to work out on its own. The future came to him, no need to track it down. Her name was Jenny.

Woman was everything Victor despised. She was incomprehensible, weak, and emotional. He availed himself of what few advantages she did possess by visiting a high-end prostitute at one of Stockholm’s finer hotels once a week. The benefit of high-end service was that he could pay by invoice. And that ‘sex’ could be termed ‘frames’, ‘oil cloth’, or some other suitable item. He did not consider the opposite sex able to provide any other sort of happiness. Except ...

Victor noticed that when it came to his daughter, Old Man Alderheim had got a notion in his head early on. She had hardly accomplished more than learning to walk when Victor arrived on the scene. He was nineteen years and nine months older than

her. It would take patience on his part. And continued support from the old man, who was himself twenty-five years older than his own suspicious witch of a wife. Who might eventually have turned out to be a spanner in the works of this arrangement, if she hadn't removed herself from the equation along the way.

Jenny grew up, which is not to say she became attractive in the least. She crept along the walls. Radiated nothing. Dressed badly.

But she was an Alderheim. And one day she would inherit the place. A relationship between her and Victor could bring him both a distinguished surname and, eventually, the whole business.

Yet there was the problem with the old witch. Victor suspected she was a member of the Left Party, because she believed it was up to Jenny herself to seek and find love. And she questioned the manager's emotional engagement and loyalty. She wasn't wrong, so it was a good thing she kicked the bucket.

It only took a few days. Cancer riddled her body. She hadn't said a word about being in pain, just stopped getting out of bed on Monday. Was carried off on Wednesday. Buried a week later.

Once the old witch was gone, the ageing proprietor spent his days up in the apartment, grieving for days gone by. In the evenings he had Jenny light a fire in the library with its leather armchairs, his favourite works of art on the wall, and the big aquarium.

There he invited his intended son-in-law to share some cognac. It sometimes turned into quite a few snifters each week, but the drink was good and so was his objective. During the day, Victor dealt with the clientele, his lies and elegance ever increasing, as he bossed little Jenny around a sufficient amount.

*

Alderheim's daughter turned twelve, fourteen, and fifteen. She never complained and didn't seem to hang out with anyone at all. She approached new tasks with the same neutral expression as always. In time, she took over all the cleaning both in the apartment and the store. This way, Victor was spared from paying the wages of a part-time job. He used the savings to buy a little more sex without creating an obvious difference in the final expense tally. He also put Jenny to work in the boring archives in the cellar, which was where she preferred to spend time anyway. She even *smelled* like an archive.

Just as everything seemed to be smooth sailing, he was struck by a bolt of lightning in the form of one of the prostitutes from his past! All of a sudden she appeared in the store with a teenage boy at her side.

'His name is Kevin,' she said.

'So?' said Victor.

The woman asked the boy to go wait for her on the sidewalk. Once he was out of earshot, she said:

'He's your son.'

'My son? He's fucking black.'

'Perhaps if you take a closer look at me you'll understand how such a thing could happen.'

The woman didn't blame herself. It wasn't in her job description to assess the character of an individual client before doing business with him. And there was only one rule beyond that: anyone who hit her was not allowed back; anyone who didn't hit her was welcome as long as they paid up. The man across from her had belonged to the latter category.

Victor had to close the store and get the lying woman and her son out of there before Jenny emerged from the archives. The old man was, as usual, up in his six-bedroom apartment and could neither see nor hear them.

With brand-new yet extremely debatable knowledge of his fatherhood, Victor herded mother and child to a café a

few blocks away (it was ridiculous how much she'd gone downhill in just a few years). He asked what she wanted from him.

She wanted the worst thing of all. For him to take responsibility as a father. She hadn't said a word about Kevin's existence for all these years, but a hard life had taken its toll on her and now she needed help. Plus, the boy deserved a dad.

If only it had been about money.

'What do you mean, help?' he asked.

'I'm sick.'

'What do you mean?'

The woman fell silent. Kevin's ears were full of music, but to be safe she sent him to the stand across the street to buy some candy. And said:

'I'm going to die.'

'Everyone is.'

More silence at the table, before the woman spoke again.

'I've got AIDS.'

Victor shoved his chair back.

'Oh, shit!'

He wanted to deny it all, but it was possible that the plague-stricken woman had circumstances on her side. And she had shown up at the precise moment she shouldn't have, in regards to Victor's life plan.

He couldn't simply chase her off. For as long as she lived, she might pop up in the shop unannounced to spit blood or talk fatherhood with anyone at all.

As long as she lived, that is. Which, happily, seemed like it might not be very long at all.

Therefore, the key concepts would be 'buying time' and 'harm reduction'.

In the ensuing negotiations with the dying mother, Victor promised to take responsibility for the kid until he was of age,

given that the mother promised never to use the word ‘father’ in earshot of the kid. Or any other time, either.

‘The kid?’ said the woman. ‘He has a name. Kevin.’

‘Don’t split hairs.’