

# SALINGER LETTERS

'An absorbing, artfully crafted novel!'

PAUL ALEXANDER, author of  
*SALINGER, A BIOGRAPHY*

# LETTERS

NILS SCHOU



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**Nils Schou** is a television writer and novelist based in his native Denmark. Born in Copenhagen in 1942 he is the author of many books. He really did correspond with Salinger and this is the origin point for his funny and wise novel, *Salinger's Letters*.

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# SALINGER'S LETTERS

*Nils Schou*

Translated by

Joan Høberg



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*To Timme, William and Lillus*

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# ONE

## *The Quest Begins*

The call came at 9 p.m. It was April 17th, 1987.

A man's voice speaking with an American accent asked if I was Mr. Moller, Mr. Dan Moller.

I replied that I was.

'My name's Goldman, Arthur Goldman from New York,' he said. His voice was slightly nasal, low pitched.

He said he was a lawyer and mentioned the name of a firm consisting of a long list of names. Goldman, his own name, was the last one on the list. He would be in Copenhagen in five days, he said and he would be staying at the Hotel d'Angleterre at Kongens Nytorv Square. Would I do him the honour of meeting him at the hotel on the day of his arrival? I asked what it was all about.

Something that could be of great benefit to both of us, was his reply.

'What kind of something?' I asked.

He would prefer to discuss it with me when we met, he said.

I asked him if he was sure he had reached the right Dan Moller.

As a young man did I go to dental school and live at Nordisk Kollegium in the Osterbro section of Copenhagen, he inquired.

I did, I replied.

Then you're the right Dan Moller, he said.

We fixed the time for our meeting and then he breathed into the receiver, 'I think you should be there, this could really be to your advantage', and hung up.

Although I had racked my brains trying to guess what this could be about, I still had no clue when 10.30 on a Thursday morning I walked into the lobby of the Hotel d'Angleterre.

Before I had made it over to the reception desk a small man wearing a light coloured suit approached me and smilingly exclaimed, you must be Dan, the writer, Dan Moller.

I asked him how he could tell.

'The way you're dressed,' he said and laughed aloud.

Before I had time to wonder whether there was a dress code for writers the man was shaking my hand and clapping me heartily on the shoulder with the other hand. 'I'm really glad to meet you, Dan. Really glad!' he said.

As to why he should be so glad to meet me I still had no idea.

He looked very young, very energetic, very Jewish-American. He was in his early thirties at the most, with close-cropped curly black hair that had begun to grey at the temples. He radiated a vitality and exuberance that made me like him at once. Everything was 'wonderful, just great, fabulous'.

A blonde woman in a red dress appeared behind him. The man introduced her as his wife, Rose. She

acted as his travelling companion and secretary, he informed me.

Rose shook my hand and assured me she was very glad to meet me, too. Would I care to join them in the restaurant for a late breakfast?

‘That would make us both extremely happy,’ she said.

So much good will combined with the prospect of a breakfast at the window looking out on Kongens Nytorv Square was an offer I couldn’t refuse.

I took the seat by the window in the vague hope that someone I knew would pass by and see me there. Like that woman from the Tax Collector’s Office I met with the day before who had asked if writing was a hobby. Or the artistic director at the Royal Theatre who would never buy my plays because she only wanted to produce young playwrights. Or one of the critics that had panned my late novel. I would nod to them pleasantly and they would be wondering how the hell I could afford to have breakfast at the d’Angleterre.

Arthur Goldman, who asked me to call him Art or Artie, and his wife Rose, who was charming and beautiful, spoke of the flight from New York to Copenhagen and about Scandinavia where they had spent their honeymoon a few years ago.

It was an excellent breakfast. I relished having a waiter by my side refilling my coffee cup whenever it was empty; nor was it an everyday occurrence, a waiter asking me at regular intervals if everything was ok, if the food was to my liking and if there was anything else he could get me.

The conversation drifted pleasantly across the table. Art and Rose mentioned that their good friend from the Upper East Side, Woody Allen, had stayed at the hotel 10 years before when he and Mia Farrow and a number of their children had been on a tour of Scandinavia. Among the children was Soon, the adopted daughter, who later became Woody’s girlfriend and wife.

Art and Rose described the house Woody and his young wife were renovating on 85th Street.

I nodded, enjoying every minute of the breakfast and the pleasant company. The misunderstanding that undoubtedly was at the root of the situation would have to hold until the truth came out, at which point the breakfast would necessarily draw to a natural close.

In a sense this was a perfectly normal situation for me. I had no idea what I was doing here, no idea who these people were, and all I could feel was myself, whom I wasn’t too comfortable with.

I was on my fifth cup of coffee, served by a solicitous waiter, when Art changed the course of the conversation and without preamble started talking business.

‘Dan, good buddy’, he said, ‘A number of years ago you entered into correspondence with a famous American author.’

At that moment, at that very second, I caught sight of my wife on the other side of the window. She was walking her bike on the sidewalk in front of the d’Angleterre, smiling sweetly at me, with a mocking look that clearly said, ‘There goes a man with a huge bank overdraft bumming a cup of coffee.’ She mounted her bike and rode off quickly down the sidewalk.

My first thought was, ‘Oh no, they’re going to give her a ticket for riding a bike illegally on the sidewalk. A ticket is just what we don’t need given the current state of our finances.’

Art and his wife were taking some papers out of a briefcase. Rose pushed one of the papers over to me and said, ‘To our knowledge you have received between 50 and 70 letters from J.D. Salinger over



the years, maybe more.'

I was 45 years old. I had always told my children I would live to be 90. In other words I had reached the halfway mark. For the most part I groped around in the dark without much direction. I'd been doing that all my life though. I'd got used to it.

In a fraction of a second all the pieces fell into place. This was no mistake.

Yes, I had been in correspondence with J.D. Salinger since the late 1960s although I wasn't sure about the number of letters. J.D. Salinger, the world-famous author, the recluse who had never given a proper interview in his life except to a schoolgirl writing for a local school newspaper in Cornish, New Hampshire, had written back when I wrote to him for the first time.

His novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which was published in 1951, had won him international acclaim. But I hadn't written to him about that. I had written about something else and anyway his later work, particularly *Frannie and Zooey*, interested me more.

The reason he had answered me was without a doubt due to his interest in Soren Kierkegaard; he even quotes him in the foreword to one of his books.

We had kept up the correspondence for a number of years. Mostly the letters were about Kierkegaard. The tone of his letters was like the tone of his books, personal, friendly, and between the lines you could sense the underlying humor and a certain desperation.

I got the impression of a tormented man who often felt lonely. I suspected I had caught him at a time in his life when he was glad to hear from an admirer who not only lived at a safe distance, but who cycled daily through streets formerly trodden by Soren Kierkegaard.

Salinger wanted to know if any descendants of Kierkegaard's brothers and sisters were still alive. He also hoped I could do him a big favour. Was a certain book about Kierkegaard by one of Kierkegaard's contemporaries, a book containing every bit of contemporary gossip about him, to be found in any of the second-hand bookstores of Copenhagen? I found the book and Salinger thanked me profusely. I wondered how he could understand what was in it.

Salinger was a great writer, no doubt about it. But part of his fascination was the fact that he had rejected what all other writers lap up. He refused to make any kind of comment or statement; he refused to give interviews. As it turned out, the myth of the Greta Garbo of literature, the media-shy poet, had made him a legendary celebrity. I was fascinated by the myth myself.

Over the years I had collected all the bits and pieces of information about him that occasionally dribbled down the wall he had erected between himself and the rest of the world. I was sure no one else in Europe knew as much about Salinger as I did, at least not in Denmark.

'Are you still in possession of those letters?' asked Art and Rose in unison.

'Yes,' I replied without hesitation. At the back of my mind though, I was wondering where the letters could be after so much moving from one house to another. Were they stashed away in a box in the attic? I recalled the shared attic in the commune where we used to live in the 70s; whenever people moved out, whether in anger or because they had got divorced or fallen in love or for any other reason, they would freely help themselves. Were my letters from J.D. Salinger languishing in a cardboard box somewhere, yellowed with age, in a damp basement of some unknown fellow commune dweller?

Hell with that, I thought, letters are supposed to be read when you get them. They're personal and

the only person they should concern is the recipient.

At this point Art told me how much he was prepared to pay for the letters and I changed my mind.

Rose repeated the amount.

The two Americans stared at me fixedly. I must have looked as if I had gone into shock because Rose wrote down the amount in large figures on a napkin and pushed the napkin towards me.

My initial reaction was that this was some kind of sick joke. Somebody wanted to make fun of me, humiliate me. Or maybe this was some kind of Candid Camera stunt and hidden photographers were filming my facial expression. 'Hungry author offered bone.'

I stared at the amount jotted on the napkin and kept on staring until my eyelids got so heavy I thought I was going to lose consciousness or simply fall asleep and continue dreaming sweet dreams.

Rose and Art Goldman repeated the amount. When I still didn't react Rose pointed to the napkin where the amount was written.

This was unnecessary; I had understood it first time round.

I had no idea what to say.

Art and Rose looked as though they were prepared for this. They explained they were acting on behalf of an anonymous buyer. The market for letters written by celebrities had exploded in recent years. At the top of the list of letters by literary figures was J.D. Salinger. Number two was Hitler, which surprised me until Art explained that Hitler appeared in several categories including as the author of 'Mein Kampf'. This information made me feel better. Salinger would enjoy hearing he had beaten the author, Adolf Hitler, when it came to the value of celebrity letters.

I tried to collect my thoughts. Unfortunately they tend to run off in all directions, which is how I earn my living. That's how all writers earn their living so I wouldn't want to change it.

I needed to talk to my wife.

Apart from decisions such as what to have for dinner I talk all decisions over with my wife.

I promised Art and Rose I would get in touch with them as soon as I had consulted my wife.

I biked around town trying to locate her. As far as I could remember she had a workout class and a hairdresser's appointment before going to work. She's a dentist and works on the third floor in a building on the corner of Borbergade and Gothersgade. She was in the middle of a root canal treatment when I burst in.

One of the things she finds most irritating about me is that when I want to talk to her it has to be *now*. She thinks that must be one of the reasons I chose my profession. Writers by definition have to be childish, otherwise they couldn't be writers.

When I told her what had happened though, she pushed her irritation aside. What should I do? I demanded.

'Nothing,' she replied. 'Absolutely nothing. If they're interested now they'll be interested tomorrow and in a month from now.'

She went back to her patient and her root canal treatment.

I followed her advice. I biked back to Kongens Nytorv Square and met with Rose and Art at the d'Angleterre. I needed more time to think things over, I said.

They were courtesy itself. They had apparently been prepared for my reaction. What if they invited

my wife and me and any of our children who cared to come to New York for a little vacation, they suggested, all expenses paid. We could discuss the situation more thoroughly at our leisure. 'No obligations,' they emphasized. No matter what I decided regarding the letters the trip would be free.

'What does your wife say?' asked Rose.

'It's not so much what she says. It's more what she doesn't say,' I replied.

Rose nodded knowingly. 'That's what most marriages are like, Dan'.

'Yes, I'm beginning to think so too.'

'What about taking her on a little trip?' Rose suggested.

Art Goldman took an envelope out of his jacket pocket and waved it in front of me.

'Dan, here's a tailor-made credit card just for you issued to my law firm. Buy any kind of plane ticket you like and stay at any hotel you want in New York.'

I opened the envelope. At the top of the credit card stood my name. The card looked as if it was made of pure gold. In the glow of the golden card my thoughts exploded in all directions. I had a vision of myself showing the gold card to my wife and daughters. They couldn't believe it. I saw us walking down the street to the ATM on the corner. Money would pour out of the ATM until we were swimming in it until finally I couldn't swim anymore, I would be drowning in money. In short my brain was behaving like any normal writer's brain; it started working overtime.

When I had come to myself, standing there in the lobby of the d'Angleterre, I hastened to accept. Yes, please.

So that's what we did. I hoped I wouldn't suddenly wake up and realise the whole thing was just a daydream.

My wife accepted. She would find a substitute at the dental clinic. Our two daughters had just got new boyfriends and didn't want to go anywhere. My parents promised to look after them.

I knew which hotel to stay at, too: the Hotel Pioneer on the corner of Broome Street and the Bowery, the place where poor Danish writers stay these days when they're in New York.

Art and Rose assured me that staying somewhere more upmarket was no problem.

There was no reason to explain the feeling of sinfulness that keeps me from staying at anything but the lousiest hotels, preferably with cockroaches and where the plumbing doesn't work. A week in luxury at the Plaza would bring me to the brink of despair. I wanted to tell them that J.D. Salinger would *never* stay at the Plaza. It would be *phony*!

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## TWO

### *The Quest Continues*

We stayed at the Pioneer the last week in April. Double room, no bath, no cockroaches. I had brought the bundle of letters with me, the cause of it all.

Our only luxury was a taxi from 42nd Street down to the hotel. The driver was from the Dominican Republic and the whole time he kept nodding his head to the beat of 'You Can't Hurry Love', sung by the Supremes. It was a song of the 60s and I had heard it the year I began writing to Salinger.

The letters were in a plastic folder and I hadn't let them out of my sight the whole trip across the Atlantic. They were our meal ticket, they were paying for our hotel, our meals, our Metro cards for the bus and the subway. At night I slept with them under my pillow. The letters were our justification for being in New York.

I was terrified someone would break into the Hotel Pioneer and steal the letters. The rumor they were worth a fortune would have preceded us to New York. I lay awake at night listening to the traffic noises down in the street. The door would be smashed in. Masked robbers armed with revolvers would burst into the room and order me to hand over the letters without a struggle, or else. 'Hand over the Salinger letters. Now, motherfucker!' My inveterate writer's brain was hard at work.

A trip to NY was an offer that I couldn't bring myself to refuse. However, that was as far as I could go. I was determined not to sell the letters.

This decision didn't make me feel I was conning Art. There was a poetic justice in the idea that my former correspondence with Salinger was paying for our stay in the city Salinger had lived in as a young man and where the action of his classic novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, unfolds.

The rules of the game demanded that I meet with Arthur Goldman and his wife at a lawyer's office on 57th Street. My wife came too. I placed the letters on the table in front of the Goldman couple. They pored over them, studying them carefully for a long time. A respectful silence reigned in the room.

When they had finished reading they asked if they could take a photocopy.

No, I said.

They then increased the amount of their original offer. This time they didn't say the amount aloud, they wrote it on a piece of paper which they pushed over the table to us. My wife read it and said, 'My God, Dan, that's your pension.'

'What are you talking about, pension? I'm young!'

'You're not young, you're just childish.'

'I'll be childish till I die.'

'Hey, listen, there are writers out there who aren't childish.'

'Who? Name me one. Just one!'

'Dan, calm down. Take it easy.'

'I'm not selling those letters.'

'For Chrissake. You're acting like the hero of one of your own sentimental stories.'

'I'm not selling'

'So don't sell, Asshole!'

We were speaking Danish so we could talk freely. We tried to make our voices sound as neutral as possible. I kept my hands under the table so Rose and Art couldn't see how much they were shaking.

'Who's the buyer?' I asked Art.

Unfortunately, he said, he was bound by client confidentiality not to reveal his client's identity.

'Is it Salinger?' I asked.

Art's face was expressionless. 'Let's just say it's someone who feels close to Salinger.'

'Have you met Salinger?' I asked.

Art hesitated. 'I'm in correspondence with him.'

'Can you call him now?'

Art smiled broadly as though he was enjoying this game of ping-pong.

'Possibly,' he said.

Now my hands and feet both were shaking under the table. I girded my loins and came out with the phrases I had rehearsed so carefully.

I said, 'If the party who wishes to purchase the letters is either Salinger himself or a member of his immediate family, he can have them for free. On one condition.'

Art didn't look at all surprised. 'What's the condition?'

'That I get to meet Salinger and get to have the first ever interview with him.'

Art was an experienced negotiator. He didn't bat an eye. His hands on the table in front of him were absolutely still. He fixed me with an unwavering gaze for a long time.

The seconds crawled by and became minutes without his saying a word. His eyes still fixed on me, he made a sign with the index finger of his left hand to Rose, who was sitting next to him. Rose took a diminutive cell phone out of her jacket pocket. She entered a number and handed the phone to Art.

Art waited 20 seconds before the phone was answered.

'Mr. Salinger?' said Art in his low-key, nasal New York voice. 'Art Goldman in New York. I'm sitting here with your Danish friend and his lovely wife. Here's the deal they propose. You get the letters free and he gets to meet you and get an interview.'

Art listened to what was said on the other end. It was a short message. Then he stood up, held out his hand and said, 'You'll hear from us by evening. Mr. Salinger wants to think over the offer.'

When we were down on 57th Street again my wife exploded. 'Why the hell don't you just sell him the damned letters so we can have some money for once?'

'It's a long story,' I said. 'But all my life I've dreamed of meeting the man, just once.'

'Can't you just meet him, give him the letters and dash over to the bank with the money. We need a new kitchen and a new bathroom and a new floor in the living room.'

'I know. Let me think. I'm kind of confused right now.'

'You're *always* confused and you *never* think!'

'You know that isn't true. I'm always thinking, just not the way you think.'

‘Listen Dan, don’t give me that bit about how I’m that boring little dentist who somehow or other just happens to pay all the bills.’

‘You knew perfectly well what you were getting yourself into.’

‘That excuse wore pretty thin a long time ago.’

The telephone in our room rang the same evening.

‘It’s Art’, said the low, self-contained voice. ‘You’ll be picked up outside your hotel tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. Mr. Salinger will be waiting in Cornish, New Hampshire. He will give you the first and last interview of his life. In return you will give him the letters.’

I couldn’t sleep all night, naturally. The idea appealed to me. When my wife had fallen asleep I left the hotel and wandered the streets of New York until the sun came up. I walked and walked. I was troubled. Being troubled is good for me. I was upset. That’s good too, and so is being uneasy, nervous and confused. I didn’t want to miss one second of what was going on in the city around me or what was happening inside me.

As a writer my sole material is what’s happening inside me. I keep track of every single thought. Actually I would rather have been a dentist. That’s what I was trained for and that’s what I did until a woman I had never seen before came into my life. Without that woman I would still be a dentist. But instead I found myself committed to a childish, self-absorbed and somewhat ridiculous line of work. I was a writer, a writer without the least bit of imagination. I don’t invent anything. The material comes to me. I am merely the attentive observer. What’s going on? What’s passing through my mind? That’s what I was eager to discover as I walked the streets of New York that night in April, 1987.

Of course what came to me was what was bound to come. As Tove Ditlevsen said, ‘You open the closet and your childhood comes tumbling out.’

My youth, my childhood and my entire life basically consist of just one thing: depression. Out of the closet tumbled depression.

If I didn’t suffer from depression we wouldn’t be in New York now.

Depression was the reason why Salinger and I had been in correspondence for all those years. His depression and mine.

The streets of New York that night in April were the perfect setting for letting my thoughts drift back in time, back to all the people that had led to Salinger and our trip to New York.

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# *THREE*

## *Back Into the Shadows*

I have depressive personality disorder. I've had it all my life.

I was quite young when I learned I had to hide my depression; no one wants to hang out with someone with depression. Depression is contagious. One of the first things I mastered when I was at school was how you're supposed to look when you're happy.

Another thing I understood at an early age was that there's not just one kind of depression; no two depressions are alike. Depressions keep changing, they develop. You have to find out for yourself what your depression consists of, what it looks like. You scrutinize yourself, well aware you could be wrong. You examine your own reactions, you're your own doctor. It's unremitting, hard work and in all probability doomed to failure; most people give up in advance.

Some people compare having depression to having cancer. They wish there was some kind of chemotherapy for depression, and there is. Antidepressants are pretty much the only treatment for depression. In many cases the medication works and the patient and their families are duly grateful. But if they don't work you have to be your own doctor. You have to figure out for yourself what people, what places, what situations have an antidepressant effect on you.

When I was a child I thought everybody was like me. Later I realised that most children are happy, full of a zest for life.

I wasn't just an unhappy child. I was depressed. I was suffering from an illness.

My parents tried to find someone who could cure me. They took me to specialists. A number of people tried to help. All kinds of approaches were tried: medication, electroshock therapy, talk therapy. It seemed I was resistant to all of them. Many of the people I met while we were undergoing treatment committed suicide. When I was fifteen I contemplated different methods of committing suicide. I carefully studied all the different ways you could take your own life. My choice fell on hanging. Two of my friends had hanged themselves, one from a chandelier hook in his room, the other out in the woods one night.

I discovered that for me the best antidepressant was to carefully observe my inner processes and write them down.

From the age of fifteen I've treated myself 24 hours a day. I kept it to myself, but the girls I fell for fled as soon as they realised. I wanted to tell them everything, but of course none of them wanted to listen.

I was a compulsive talker. When I was a child I talked so much that my parents and family would say, 'Would you please just shut up for a minute, Dan. You're driving me crazy talking all the time.'

I talked incessantly until I was six. I would say the first thing that came into my mind. Then from my first day at school it became an inner monologue in my head, not a word would escape my lips.

From that day on I've talked continuously, unceasingly, but only as an interior monologue. I discovered other people don't do that. I yearned for the day when I would stop talking all the time.

I was filled with excessive longing for other people to like me. At the boy scout summer camp I went to, one of the boys was selected as Scout of the Year. I spent every second I was in that camp running back and forth in front of the scoutmaster busily performing chores. My deepest wish was to be recognised as the most popular boy scout of the summer. It never happened.

My friends could experience things without having to talk about it with other people. I couldn't enjoy it if I hadn't told someone. In High School I often heard a classmate say, 'He's just like a three-year-old who hurts his knee and doesn't cry until he's run home and told his mother.'

I dreamed of the day when I would be able to experience something without having to tell anyone.

I didn't know whether this was a symptom of depression, but I did know that it was what made me different from other people.

They had eyes to see with; I had no eyes. I always saw everything through other people's eyes. I dreamed of having my own eyes one day.

Certain situations can have an antidepressant effect, certain people, objects, colours, sounds. Most of the time you don't know why.

I am, and have always been, a large-scale consumer of medication and pills. I'll try just about anything. I would visit people and go to the bathroom looking for the medicine chest. I would steal medication for arthritis, sleeping pills, painkillers, anti-epileptic drugs, stimulants, whatever. In my experience just about any pill has a mild antidepressant effect.

I've tried all the hard drugs; they all have an antidepressant effect.

Liquor is good for depression. So is rain, a good fight, coffee, cigarettes, and bad sex.

Just about anything can have an antidepressant effect, but only on a superficial level. The depression always returns when the drug wears off.

I've filled piles of yellowing notebooks with good advice over the years. I've collected advice from any number of sources. Useful advice can be found anywhere; user's guides are particularly helpful. At a paint store I found a booklet on anti-rat pest control, figuring that rats were comparable to depression. That booklet was one of the most effective introductions to depression I've ever encountered.

Nobody really knows what depression is or where it comes from. This is a fact that many people find difficult to accept. You have to write your own user's guide. It's hard, time-consuming work and will most likely end in failure and defeat.

During one period of my life when I was particularly depressed I tried rat poison as an antidepressant. Afterwards I thought it might have been an unconscious wish to commit suicide. But the fact was that rat poison proved to be one of the most effective antidepressants I had ever tried. For days I walked around in a mild daze, close to feeling something approaching happiness or joy. I daily increased my dose of rat poison until I ended up collapsing in the street and was rushed to the hospital to have my stomach pumped. That was my last experiment with rat poison.

Over the years I've been examined regularly to determine whether I'm autistic, schizophrenic, psychotic or paranoid. Every time the answer is the same: I just have ordinary, run-of-the-mill



depression.

When I was a child one of my therapists was an old lady who lived in an apartment on Valby Langgade, Mrs. Magnussen. She suffered from depression herself and experimented with alternative treatments. We played music together. Music had proved to have an excellent effect on certain forms of depression. On me it had the opposite effect; music, especially beautiful classical music, made me even sadder.

Mrs. Magnussen tried to devise a therapy tailored to my case. She knew I was a compulsive talker without ever opening my mouth. She told me I should try letting the words come out. She didn't have to say it twice. I opened my mouth and let everything I was saying to myself pour out. She listened patiently to all the murders, mutilations, blood and destruction that gushed from my lips. I could have kept it up for hours, days, weeks. Mrs. Magnussen was the only therapist who had seemed to like me.

When I was in High School I was an in-patient at a psychiatric hospital on several occasions. They gave me antidepressants and talk therapy.

Since nothing seemed to help, my parents tried a number of alternative therapies. There was primal scream therapy. I was supposed to yell as loud as I could while beating a pillow that I was supposed to imagine was my mother and father. But I've always been very fond of my parents and even though I tried hard to mobilise the hidden anger I was supposed to feel against them, I never could.

There lived a woman in Birkerød who did fairytale therapy. Her name was Ulla Ladegaard, and I liked her from the start.

She looked as though she had just stepped out of a fairy tale herself. She didn't look like a witch, she looked like a princess. Even though she was old she dressed like a girl. She dyed her hair red and wore rings on all her fingers. Ulla Ladegaard taught me how to step into a fairy tale and seek out someone wicked to slay later on. This could also be an evil beast or an impersonal force. Anyone could do this exercise or therapy. We went through Grimm's fairy tales and Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales and obscure Croatian, Italian and German fairy tales that Ulla had collected. I chopped the heads off trolls, off death, off the devil, off black dogs. They all symbolised my depression.

I really liked Ulla but no matter how many dragons I slew it didn't make my depression go away or even grow any less.

The last time I saw Ulla she had called in her sister, who was a fortune teller, a clairvoyant. She pored over my palm and then burst into tears.

Ulla apologised, but there was no need. You didn't need a fortune teller to know that things would not go well for me.

Ulla from Birkerød taught me how to give my depression faces. Faces, adventures, quests. Depression was not just an impersonal grey rot engulfing me; it had evil-looking avatars beckoning me into their universe.

I invented long tales in which I was lured into dark forests. Deep in the forest, in the dark, a huge hound would be lying in wait, or a troll or a lion. This creature was the depression. If I vanquished the monster either by force or by cunning the depression would disappear.

The tales filled my life when I was in High School. On the outside I was a normal student. No one

suspected the orgies of violence and bloodshed raging within me. Not until I graduated from High School and started dental school did my depression stop having different faces; the faces merged into one face and only one face.

As soon as the face emerged I immediately called Ulla to thank her. Without her help, the face would never have come to light.

She laughed when I told her. 'Dan, you have no idea how happy that makes me. It was bound to happen.'

'Why was it bound to happen?'

'Because you try so hard. You expend more strength than you have. But remember, my dear, life is and will always be a quest. We're all of us a little lost out there in the dark woods, you're not the only one. We're all seeking the love that moves the sun and the stars.'

'What does that mean?'

'Oh, you'll find out some day. When you do, think of me, Dan.'

The road that led to all the different monstrous faces merging into just one face went past a professor at the School of Dentistry.

Professor Ib Schroder, Dr. Odont, was my teacher of pharmacology and corrective jaw surgery during my fourth year. He was an ugly little man with a pockmarked face that made him look like a frog. He had been tortured during the war and for many years had been an alcoholic and a manic depressive. When I met him he hadn't touched a drop for several years and was no longer manic depressive; he was only depressive. He knew I was depressive too because we had often been patients together in the psychiatric ward at Rigshospitalet. We had spent hours and days together in the corridor comparing notes on our depression.

As a pharmacologist at the School of Dentistry he had access to all kinds of drugs and pills. He had a friend, a fellow professor, who was experimenting with LSD as a treatment for depression. Schroder invited me to join them.

The session took place at his friend's apartment on Strandboulevarden, the same building Georg Brandes used to live in. There was a plaque on the wall commemorating it. By chance the building was only a stone's throw from Nordisk Kollegium, the residence hall I was living in.

On a Wednesday evening at the end of November 1966, six of us lay down on mats in the professor's living room. He gave us each a thin piece of paper on which he had placed a small dose of LSD. We were instructed to keep the paper under our tongue until it dissolved.

We each had a different reaction. Two had anxiety attacks, one remained lying down shaking with laughter, one felt sick and had to make a mad dash for the bathroom to vomit. In my case everything grew quiet and peaceful, with music and colours that seemed to last forever. I was greeted by schoolmates I hadn't seen for years. None of them said anything, they just waved at me and disappeared. I took the train to Birkerød in my imagination. Ulla Ladegaard was waiting for me at the station. This was something that had never happened in reality. We walked through the town to her house. We sang together, something we had never done either. We sang tunes by the Mamas and the Papas with homemade Danish texts. The songs were about autumn, leaves falling from branches and bare trees against an autumn sky.

Ulla and I passed her house and went into the woods. In my LSD high the woods were just behind her house. In real life there was a school there and a ball field. In the LSD woods we met some of the fairy tale figures she and I had invented together and that I had slain with my sword, one by one. This time I was content to greet them as we went deeper and deeper into the woods and it grew darker and darker. We were deep in the woods when I realised that Ulla had fallen behind. I turned around and saw she was standing completely still.

‘Ulla?’ I called to her.

‘Keep going, Dan’, she said.

‘Aren’t you coming?’

‘No, there’s someone you have to meet and you have to go alone.’

I called to Ulla but she answered, ‘I’m going home to die.’

‘Die?’ I cried and started towards her.

She stretched out both hands towards me and told me to stay where I was.

‘My time has come Dan, and it’s time you met the most important person in your life from now on.’

‘Ulla! Come back! Stay here!’ She had disappeared into the dark and I was alone. It was completely quiet in the woods. The only thing I could hear was my own breathing.

I heard footsteps somewhere but I couldn’t see anything. The sound was being made by twigs snapping on the forest floor.

I could hear someone else breathing somewhere, someone humming. Was this someone I had met one of my fairy tale adventures?

‘Welcome, Dan’, said a voice. ‘Finally we meet.’

‘Who are you?’

‘You know who I am.’

‘No.’

‘I am someone you *have* to meet, someone you invented yourself.’

‘A beast? A troll? Some creature I tried to slay?’

‘No, you can never kill me.’

‘Why not?’

There was the sound of laughter. ‘Because if you kill me, you also kill yourself.’

‘Is this some kind of guessing game?’

‘I’m your own invention.’

‘When did I invent you?’

‘Just now.’

‘Are you a man or a woman?’

‘Can’t you tell?’

‘How old are you?’

‘How old are *you*?’

‘Are you my age?’

‘Born the same year, the same month, the same week, the same time, the same place.’

‘And I invented you myself?’

‘You’re inventing me as we speak, Dan Moller, student of dentistry.’

‘Have you been following me?’

‘Always, every day, all your life.’

There was a peal of thunder and a flash of lightning lit up the woods. Standing in a group of trees I saw a figure. It was a woman, a woman I didn’t know, whom I had never seen before.

Lightning struck again twice and I got a good look at her.

She was slender with short hair and her eyes were hostile. She was dressed completely in black.

Another bolt of lightning lit up the woods.

She sneered, ‘Bit melodramatic, don’t you think, all that thunder and lightning?’

‘Did you order it? Is it you that’s being melodramatic?’

‘Dear little Dan, you still don’t seem to understand.’

‘What don’t I understand? That you’re a monster in a fairy tale like all the others and I have to kill you now?’

‘Do you want to commit suicide?’

‘I don’t want to, but I’ve thought about it a lot.’

She walked over to me and handed me a sword that she had been hiding behind her back. I took it.

‘Where did you get that sword?’ I asked.

‘You gave it to me yourself. Now decide if you want to cut off my head or stab me in the heart.’

‘Who are you?’ I asked

‘I’m Amanda.’

‘Amanda?’

‘Yes, that’s the name you’ve given me.’

‘When?’

‘Now.’

‘Amanda who?’

‘Just Amanda.’

‘What does Amanda mean?’

‘It means ‘She who shall be loved’.’

‘Should I love you?’

‘It’s up to you. You created me.’

‘Why should I love someone I don’t know?’

‘You know me. You know me as well as you know yourself.’

‘How well do I know myself?’

She laughed. ‘Only on a very superficial level. Like a stranger passing in the street.’

I felt I was being weighed down by a burden so heavy that I was brought to my knees on the forest floor.

Amanda quickly took two steps backwards.

‘Stop being so pathetic, Dan. Kneeling down before me? That’s really not my style.’

‘You were the one that made me kneel,’ I protested.

The pressure increased, forcing me down even further. I heard myself uttering words I hadn’t

actually thought of. 'Hey! I know who you are. You're Depression. You're my Depression.'

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'With a capital D, I believe?'

'You're the depression in one of Ulla Ladegaard's fairy tales.'

'No, I'm the depression in one of Dan Thorvald Moller's fairy tales.'

'Welcome,' I said.

'Thank you.'

'What can you tell me about myself?'

'Only what you invent yourself, Dan.'

'Are you related to Ulla Ladegaard?'

'Ulla is dead, Dan.'

'Of course she's not dead. She took me into the woods to find you.'

I heard the sound of footsteps running over the twigs on the forest floor. Amanda was gone.

Amanda's disappearance coincided with my coming out of the acid trip. I was back in the apartment on Strandboulevarden in Osterbro.

My sense of time seemed to be out of whack. It felt like the trip had lasted for months. How long it had really lasted I didn't know.

On the way down the stairs Schroder wanted to know if the LSD had had any effect on my depression. I told him about Amanda.

It was dark and windy outside when we reached the street. I walked him to his bus stop on Claessensgade.

Four days later I read in the paper that Ulla was dead.

Four months later Schroder committed suicide by checking into a hotel on Vendersgade and emptying two bottles of pills. He left letters to his family, friends and colleagues. To my surprise he had also written me a letter even though I was only a student lab assistant in his department at the Faculty of Dentistry.

He told me he had been studying depression for many years, his own and others'. If I was interested in reading his handwritten notes I should contact his daughter, Beate. He had left instructions as to where the notes were to be found, and had authorised her to let me read them. At the end of the letter he signed off: 'All the best, yours devotedly, Ib Schroder. P.S. Say hello to Amanda! Give her the attention and love she deserves. She's the way forward for you.'

The letter was in my mailbox at the ground floor entrance to Nordisk Kollegium on Strandboulevarden. I read it on the way up the stairs to my room, South Wing, nr 42.

The phrase 'yours devotedly' and especially the word 'devotedly' struck me with an almost physical force. No one had ever written 'yours devotedly' to me. It seemed a highly emotional way to close a letter. Later I found out it was how men of Schroder's generation usually signed off.

The fact that he asked me to say hello to Amanda didn't interest me much. After Amanda had entered my life as a permanent fixture, another woman had turned up who changed my life in ways I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams.

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## *FOUR*

### *The Feather Factory*

Nordisk Kollegium residence hall was for male students only. It was sponsored by Nordisk Fjerfabrik. The feather factory itself was across the railroad tracks out by the harbour.

Living at Nordisk Kollegium was a scholarship; you had to get high scores on your initial exams to qualify. The residence hall consisted of two wings. The third wing housed the factory's administrative building, with the dormitory's dining hall and student lounge on the ground floor. One of the provisions of the scholarship was that we were given two meals a day, served by women dressed in black with white aprons. Our beloved Mrs. Filt was in charge of the whole thing.

In the basement beneath the south wing was an indoor soccer facility. Every evening after dinner there were soccer tournaments. I was the regular defender on a team consisting of two dental students and three medical students. Not a talented soccer player, my only claim to fame was that I could keep going indefinitely. One Sunday I played 10 hours at a stretch. Soccer did not have an anti-depressive effect on me, but it did let me enter into my exhaustion and fatigue and come out the other side struggling into more fatigue and more exhaustion until on the verge of collapse.

I often kept going past the point of collapse and I would keel over on the playing field. Very few of my fellow players knew I suffered from depression.

One of those who did know was a medical student called Michael Bonnesen. He was doing a psychiatry internship at Rigshospitalet and had read my medical journal without knowing it was mine. We ran into each other in the hall.

I was sitting in the corridor nodding drowsily as I had been heavily sedated.

He sat down next to me. 'Hi, I didn't know you had depression.'

'Well, I do.'

'Couldn't tell by looking at you. You hide it really well.'

'Thanks.'

'I'll keep it to myself, of course.'

'Thanks, Michael.'

Michael Bonnesen was the natural centre of attention wherever he went. The residence hall was full of people studying history and literature, and Michael's friends seemed to have stepped right out of Danish history or Danish literature. He knew everyone worth knowing among the trendsetting, intellectual elite of the time: politicians, authors, resistance fighters, philosophers, university professors. He had sat on P.H.'s lap at the age of seven and smoked a cigar. He invited Mogens Fog and Elias Bredsdorff to the lectures and debates he organised in the passageway between the student lounge and the dining hall. Klaus Rifbjerg and Villy Sorensen often came and gave readings. Michael was on first name terms with all of them.

Now he was sitting next to me in the corridor of the Psychiatric Ward at Rigshospitalet. He was an eager sportsman with a talent for any sport he touched. Beside me he looked like a vitamin commercial. As for me I just sat there with my shoulders hanging. I could barely keep my head up. I looked and felt like a decrepit old man.

We had never talked alone before. Our relationship was limited to playing soccer, but you get to know people on the soccer field too. Michael was the same friendly, energetic guy playing soccer as he was at meals, parties, and debates, always well-mannered and considerate.

He was no different the day we met in the hospital corridor. I didn't know whether his friendly interest was simply because he was being polite or because he was genuinely interested, but he had a way of asking questions that made me tell him everything he wanted to know about my depression. I was so heavily medicated I could hardly talk straight. Was it the medical student, the future neurologist questioning me, or was it my soccer buddy from the dorm? I didn't care, I'd talk to anyone willing to listen.

When I told him about Amanda he jumped up so suddenly he spilled coffee all over his pants.

'Amanda? Your depression is called *Amanda*?'

'Yes, what's wrong with that?'

'Is she always with you?'

'When the depression is there she's there.'

'And when the depression goes away?'

'Then she's not there. I don't know where she goes.'

'Do you talk to her?'

'I talk to her and she talks to me.'

'Is she there now?'

'And how!'

'Is she saying anything?'

'Just a second, let me listen.'

I listened to what Amanda was saying. 'She knows all about you and your family, Michael. She knows who your father is and your mother and your grandparents and your uncles.'

'Hey, Dan, wake up, buddy. Dan, can you hear me?'

'Of course. It's just that my eyelids are so heavy I can barely keep my eyes open.'

'Tell me something, Dan.'

'Sure.'

'You make it sound like Amanda knows something you don't know.'

'Right.'

'Can you ask her something for me?'

'Sure. I can ask her anything.'

'Ask her what she thinks of me,' said Michael.

I did what he asked. He fixed his gaze on me and I knew what he was looking for. He wanted to see if my lips were moving. They weren't.

Then I told him what Amanda thought of him.

‘The key words for you are sympathy, affinity, affection. People like you. The opposite of sympathy is antipathy, aversion, dislike. Amanda is always going on about sympathy. She thinks about it a lot. I won’t bore you with everything she says about sympathy. She says it’s an endless concept, bottomless.’

Michael remained at my side until I fell asleep.

A few days later when I was back in the dorm he knocked on my door one evening and asked, ‘How would you like to meet my sister?’

I gave him my usual cold response. ‘Why should I want to meet your sister when I don’t even know your sister?’

Such trifles didn’t bother Michael. ‘My sister doesn’t want to meet you, she wants to meet Amanda.’

‘Amanda?’

‘Yes, Amanda.’

‘Does your sister know Amanda?’

‘Don’t you remember? You told me about Amanda over at the hospital?’

‘Sure I remember. ‘

‘I’m having a party in the kitchen on Saturday. Can you come?’

‘Sure. Thanks.’

‘See you there then. Want to play some soccer?’

‘Sure,’ I said.

The first time I saw Puk Bonnesen, Michael’s little sister, was when she walked into the kitchen passageway that Saturday night at 7 p.m. She looked like a parody of a well brought up, well-mannered High School girl even though she was 22. In the meantime I had gleaned some information about her from the lit students at the dorm.

She was a kind of prodigy. She had already written two collections of poems and a novel that was very likely autobiographical. The novel was about a love affair between a 17-year-old schoolgirl and a man old enough to be her father.

I was not surprised that Michael had a sister who was a successful author. Everyone in his circle seemed to be successful at something. I was surprised though that she wasn’t more outgoing. When she gave me her hand she kept her eyes glued to the ground. During the meal she sat at another table with her back to me. A lot of beer and wine was drunk and most of us were drunk by the time we started dancing.

Towards morning a few of us were sitting around in Michael’s room when one of the med students asked me about my acid trip. I was in a state of pleasant exhaustion, the result of several drunken highs. I had reached the mechanical doll stage. Whenever anyone asked me a question it wound me up and got me going.

It felt as though I talked about Amanda for hours. I told them everything I knew about her, how whenever there was something I didn’t know, I’d ask Amanda and she would tell me. As usual I gave a precise and detailed account.

Then I buckled over onto the floor. Hands grabbed hold of me and carried me into my room down



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