

# **ALT JEG SKYLDER DEG ER JULING**

## **(All I Owe You is a Beating)**

Novel by Arne Svingen

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## **Translation**

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### **1**

If I'm honest, there is nothing more cathartic than feeling your fist hit an idiot's jaw. Not because I like hurting people. Nor because I love fighting. But because someone has to retaliate. And I retaliate with two iron fists. Sometimes a baseball bat. I have boots with steel-capped toes. My forehead is like a cannonball.

Because the world is totally out of whack. Every day, thousands of morons are born. It seems like intelligence isn't dished out to people anymore. And if you ask me, things are only getting worse.

Sometimes, these are just distant thoughts at the back of my head. Other days, I ball my concrete fists and punch until the terrified eyes below me cloud over. It's as though my body's working on autopilot. There's a volcano boiling somewhere inside me. The sparks flying in my head burn off any doubt.

That is when I am dangerous. I know that much for sure. And so does the guy who just felt the force of my knuckles in his face. A dazed whimper comes from his mouth. He tries to protect himself, hands over his face. I recognise the feeling. The certainty that I'm going to come out of this victorious. A kind of thrill races through my veins. It's as though my muscles swell out of my skin. I don't do boxing. I fight. There's no rules. I can smash his face if I think he deserves it. And if I feel like it, I can stamp on his belly, a parting shot that might make him realize he's behaved like an utter knob. But that doesn't mean that I do it.

'Kick him in the head,' Tarik shouts.

He should know me well enough to know that I'd never kick someone in the head when they're down. And I'll stop Tarik if he even tries.

Because there's a limit. I don't hurt old people. I don't hit girls, kids or dogs. Or the disabled, or short-arses and cowards who never fight back. I don't beat up people who don't deserve it. And I don't fight because I'm drunk or on drugs. I don't fight for the sake of fighting. I don't even beat up everyone who deserves it. And I don't kick people in the head when they already on the ground whimpering.

But I fight. And I've got granite fists and a left-hander that makes people see double, triple, blackout. I don't punch to do damage, but to make sure my opponent doesn't hurt me. No one likes to get a hard fist in their face, not least me, especially after the time I broke my jaw and had to drink disgusting soup through a straw for weeks. I've also broken my pinkie and have some annoying shadows on one of my eyes that won't go away.

But today, I won't get hurt. I'm pretty sure of it anyway, as I stand over the boy who was being cocky. I hit him first, and I hit him hard. He fell over straightaway and it doesn't look like he's getting up anytime soon. But I don't think his head has been rearranged or there's any cracks in his brain. His skull didn't hit the tarmac, I didn't heard anything snap when my knuckles met his jaw, and he's not making incoherent noises, even if he's lying dazed in the recovery position with his eyes squeezed tight for fear of a flying boot. I'm breathing like I've just been to the gym and clenching my teeth so hard that my jaw aches.

'Leave him be,' I say, barely opening my mouth.

I know, I sound like some real old school fighter, with morals and rules and clear boundaries. But the truth is that today I'm in control. And that's not always the case. So everything I've just said is not entirely true. But it should be. Because I do have boundaries. And as long as my head is calm, they're even clear and strict.

'Fucking arsehole!' Tarik screams at him, as we leave the backyard.

The boy stays lying where he is. He's holding his nose, so maybe it is broken after all. The idiot had a big mouth. But he's not saying anything now. His mates crowd round him as we leave without batting an eye.

'You should've given him a kick. Shown him you're the boss,' Tarik says.

'He knows that I'm the boss.'

'You should have asked him to say sorry.'

'He looked like he was sorry.'

'Ha-ha, it's not fucking alcohol that's going give him a hangover tomorrow, that's for sure.'

We mosey down the road, and my body fizzes like newly-shaken champagne. We're not looking for anything or anyone in particular, we're just walking, because this city belongs to us and the night is ours, and even though that's perhaps not strictly true, it's the feeling of victory that counts. And Tarik and I are the same in one way: we never get bored. Certainly not on a warm Friday night that's about to spill over into Saturday morning. Otherwise, we're so different we shouldn't really be friends, and when I think about it, I'm not sure that we are, we just hang out together at the weekend, for a few wild nights. There's more that I can't talk to him about than I can.

'You've got a face like a pig,' Tarik says to a boy walking past with a couple of friends.

To say he was telling the truth would be pushing it. They look a bit confused, and no one answers.

I don't like it when Tarik goads people. Anyone could overreact on a night like this. We all have a mega-prat hidden somewhere deep inside, and I don't like to call them out. But I don't tell him to shut up either. Because without Tarik, I'd be on my own, and the difference is enormous. If I was to describe Tarik, I'd say two things: absolutely no fear and a super-fast right hook. His fist might not be made of lead, but I've never seen anyone punch so fast. His opponent barely has time to react before another bullseye has the guy reeling. Tarik says that he'd rather hang out with me than his friends who go bowling, to cinema, dancing, because sooner or later life just becomes one long repetition. He wants to get out into the world, go to dangerous places, climb rock faces, go basejumping. For now, he's here with me. But one day, I too may be nothing more than repetition.

Last weekend he asked if I was up for a beef in Groruddalen. *Crazy gangs that meet to fight, everything's allowed*, he bragged. The ones that are picked are the poor sods who're left behind. I tried to tell him it wasn't my thing, but I'm not sure the message got through. I've seen the videos on the internet, and I don't want to spread like a virus in winter. I'm only too aware that people pull out their mobile phones faster than a revolver, everywhere, and if something's organised, someone's bound to be at the ready. Whereas in my reality, you'd have to fumble for your phone, and I always strike before the thought's even there.

I think my goals are different from Tarik's. If I have any goals, that is. I'm not sure that you actually need them. Whatever, I think I want to be here. In this city. My city. I was born and bred here and will probably live here for the rest of my life, unless something happens that turns everything upside down. Maybe I'll make some powerful enemies and

have to live at a secret address with a new identity. Or what if I just get bored of the place, the people and the weather? Maybe things are actually better somewhere else?

‘So what the fuck should we do?’

‘Kebab?’

‘Kebab.’

It’s a bad decision. My body is not asking for food. It wants to run, dance, maybe, do a somersault. Eating is never one of my nocturnal needs. But I could imagine hanging out in a bar, somewhere with long queues of people outside, waiting impatiently for all the fantastic things that are going to happen inside. But when you’re seventeen, that option is closed off with a chain and the world’s biggest padlock. Maybe I won’t wander the streets anymore the day I pass the magic age limit. Maybe everything will just carry on as before. I’ve never been interested in the future, I don’t look forward or back, sometimes not even to the side. Not that I’m proud of all of my past, but regret is a black hole and it’s not always easy to climb out.

There are lots of people in the kebab shop, and a couple of them complain when we jump the queue. We don’t do it on purpose, it just happens. So when the atmosphere changes, we give them a hard stare and stick out our chins and that puts an end any complaints.

We sit on two bar stools by the window and look at the night. The kebab tastes more of dressing than anything else and feels like a spicy sponge in my mouth. Someone says there’s no meat in kebabs, just marrow and innards all minced together. I lose my appetite and ask Tarik if he’d like the rest of mine.

‘You kidding?’ he says, and shakes his head.

That’s the kind of conversation we have all the time. Not that I need to talk about my emotions and life and problems, but sometimes it’s like Tarik and I speak two different languages, even though it’s the same language and our mother tongue. Anyway, I think Tarik kind of hates the world. I don’t know why, because he never tells me anything. Personally, I don’t wake up thinking that life’s a stinking swamp and everything’s going down the pan. Only parts of my life stink. But some of those smell truly revolting. I’m sure I could have been better at balancing the line I’ve been dealt. It’s what they call personal insight. I’m not sure that I’ve got very much of it. Or maybe there’s just never enough.

I don’t tell him if I’m kidding or not. Because I don’t if that’s what Tarik is actually asking, or if he just thinks my offer’s a step too far. Like he’d eat anything that my mouth had touched. I put the rest of my kebab down on the shelf in front of us.

‘That left hook of yours, it’s like it’s glued to their face,’ Tarik said and grinned, showing the bits of kebab between his teeth.

‘Hmm.’

‘This kebab tastes like shit, doesn’t it?’

I nod. Tarik and I have had another conversation.

I notice some dressing on my fist that just served me so well, and I wipe it off with a serviette. The knuckles are red, and the knuckle of my index finger is grazed and bloody. I can almost feel the impact still running up my arm. Sometimes I fight in my sleep, heavy punches in the air, and I wake sitting up, sweaty, and have to tuck the duvet in around me again. Takes me about an hour to get back to sleep. Other times I stand in front of the mirror and try to recreate my best moments, just to see if I look frightening, but I’m not an actor. And right now, I can see a blurred version of myself reflected in the window, my short hair, strong chin and heavy eyebrows that have a tendency to drop into my sightline.

Tarik starts to talk about some people outside who look like idiots, but I’m not really following. Which is my life in a nutshell, basically, I’m not always fully present. But things happen all the time, like in a film. And if I were to choose, I would rather be in an action film than a drama. My life is definitely not a comedy, because I don’t cope very well with people laughing at me. People should be happy to laugh at those who are trying to be funny, and take the rest of us seriously.

We leave the remains of our kebabs in a sticky mess on the shelf, and go out. Tarik swears. I can tell from his voice that there’s trouble, long before I see them. When I turn my head I see the three boys who have obviously spotted us and are storming down the pavement. I recognise them from last weekend, and even from here I can see that one of them still has quite a colour palate around his eye.

‘Let’s split,’ Tarik says, and runs off in the opposite direction.

I often do things before I’ve had time to think. Standing paralysed is just not me. And yet I stand there and watch them pounding towards me with muscular strides. I know why they want revenge, and now that Tarik’s bolted, the odds ain’t good. But something in me resists fleeing. This is not the night to be a coward.

When they’re only a few metres away, I step back into the kebab shop. I close the door behind me and lock it from inside. The first one smashes into the thick glass door. I shrug, hold up my hands in a gesture of innocence, as though I don’t understand what it is they want. The man behind the counter asks what’s going on, and I give him the same shrug. Only the door separates me from a thrashing, but they know only too well that breaking into a kebab shop would be taking it to another level. And you can never predict where the police

are in this town, sometimes they're right around the corner, and other times they don't even show up.

The trio wave for me to come out onto the pavement. I cross my arms. The kebab man says he doesn't want me in his shop. A couple of customers have retreated to the far wall.

'They just came at me,' I say.

'You're trouble,' the kebab man says.

'They're trouble.'

'If you don't leave, they'll break my door.'

'You care more about the door than you do about my safety?'

'Your issues are not my problem.'

'Well, right now they actually are.'

He gets out his mobile phone and I see him dial three numbers. And suddenly everything is in the balance. A single moment when any number of things could happen and I have no idea if I'll land on my feet. The only thing I know for sure is that something is about to explode. I know that I'm ready for everything, I won't give up without a fight, and on a good day, I could take all three of them out. If you lose faith, then everything is lost.

One of the boys outside has got hold of a rubbish bin. He raises it above his head as he comes towards the door. But he's obviously forgotten that bins are usually full of rubbish, and sometimes it's slimy and disgusting. Something milky spills down his face. The guy drops the bin and spits furiously as he wipes it off on his sleeve.

I spot the smirk straightaway. The face belongs to one of the lads who was just in here to get a kebab. Only now he's outside and thinks the bin thrower's milky mistake is hilarious. That's what people are like. Beer-swilling idiots who can't hide a smile at a critical moment. The bin thrower has already got the gunk out of his eyes and mouth and sees the smile. Makes no difference that the lips immediately flatten into a line. The guy charges over to the kebab boy and hits him on the side of his chin. The boy drops his food and collapses like an empty sack. He doesn't even have time to protect himself before his head hits the ground, and he's in no way prepared for the sharp foot aimed at his kidneys.

I go over to the door. The bin thrower's movements indicate that he's about to kick again. The poor sod needs help, and if any of his friends are out there, they're not doing anything about it. I hear sirens in the distance. It's one of those days. The police will be here in twenty seconds.

The kebab boy throws up when he gets the second kick to his stomach. And that's when I have to take the chance. I unlock the door and take off sharp right. I'm quite a way

down the street before someone shouts *He's getting away!* It's possible that they give chase, but they're too late. I've got the headstart I need - you'd have to be Usain Bolt to catch up with me now.

The wind in my hair and roaring in my ears feels so fucking good. I could have run a sprint marathon tonight. My body is an unlimited store of stamina and energy. Each breath burns like a teasing flame in my throat.

At one point I turn and all I see is the deserted asphalt stretching out behind me. I slow down, disappear down a side street and stop when I get to the fence by the graveyard. If I'd run off with Tarik, I would never have got this high, one that's completely natural and called *a close shave*. A close shave is actually the most amazing buzz. The opposite of school, the opposite of work, the opposite of everything normal life is about. Life is really just a collection of small details with enormous consequences, and nothing feels better than winning over seriously poor odds.

'YES!' I shout. 'Yes, fucking yes!'

The graves are my silent audience. I laugh a little, cough, shake my head vigorously, then more laughter tumbles out. I walk home. The night is over. I will sleep like a log. If nothing had happened tonight, I would have lain there thinking about everything I'd missed.

The streets are heaving with people in Grünerløkka and up towards Tøyen, but I'm no longer part of the nightlife. I open the door and let myself in to the quiet flat. The door to the living room is ajar. If I listen carefully, I can hear Mum's steady breathing. The door to Linn's room is closed.

I brush my teeth and rinse the grazes on the knuckles of my left hand. In English, a left-handed boxer is called a Southpaw. The hook comes as a shock because the opponent is instinctively expecting a punch from the right. My knuckles sting, but it's not too bad, and the grazing usually heals within a week, if I don't pick off the scabs.

I did boxing for a week once, and didn't stop because I hated it, but because the trainer said I wasn't suited. I didn't have the mind to become a good boxer. He suggested MMA, but I've never liked watching people squeeze the breath out of each other for ages while punching furiously and there's blood everywhere. And I don't particularly like fighting with bare feet. Might sound weird, but having once caught the nail on my big toe on a stony beach, so it stuck up like a bloody sail, I've always seen shoes as my thing. So no Mixed Martial Arts for me. Nor boxing. And none of the other martial arts, either. I fight. That's it.

I get undressed and fall into bed. I take a deep, deep breath and feel the adrenaline cooling. I picture the guy who got a taste of my fist, the surprise on his face and the clumsy

way he fell to the ground. And that's when I suddenly realise – I know who he is. He didn't fit there and then, but here, with my head on the pillow, I realise who I've punched.

I stare up at the ceiling.

Shit!