

BEISTET (The Beast)

Novel by Per Schreiner

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He woke early the next morning and went to the bathroom before the others got up. Even though his right arm was still swollen and fatter than the left, his body didn't hurt much anywhere else. When he got out of the shower, he stood still for a few seconds to centre himself, then wiped the condensation from the mirror.

His face was the same, the swollen eye no better. A few days without shaving had left him with light brown, speckled stubble; he tried to shave, so he wouldn't look so bad. He slid the razor carefully over his right cheek, and to begin with it was fine, then he felt the blood trickling down his neck.

When he went into the kitchen a little later, he had ten or so small, skin-coloured plasters on his face and neck, so was relieved to discover that Marit was still not up and did not need to see him like this. He ate two bowls of muesli standing by the counter, then made himself a coffee, which he threw out as soon he had taken a sip – it didn't taste right. He slipped back into the bedroom, chose a medium-weight polo neck sweater and some loose-fitting trousers, which he took with him into the bathroom. It was difficult to get the trousers on, as he struggled to bend his left leg. The polo neck covered most of the plasters and a good deal of the grey skin. His swollen eye wasn't that noticeable, but his hair was odd. It was pushed back, flattened and stiff, and no matter how much hair gel he used, it would not lie

any other way. After several attempts, he gave up and ruffled his hair so it was messy and uneven and the flat part didn't look so strange.

He had no problem driving the car with his left hand, and twenty minutes later he parked beside his business partner's Tesla in Bislett.

Their office was open, airy and unnecessarily large, with several seating arrangements that took up too much space and three glass-fronted meeting rooms. The walls were distressed to show off the concrete, and the ventilations ducts were visible on the ceiling. He hung his jacket on the coat stand and went over to the kitchenette, popped a capsule into the coffee machine, pressed the button and watched the thin dark trickle of fluid fill the glass. A couple of the younger employees went passed and said hello. He smiled with one side of his mouth and nodded; he was never sure if they actually liked him or were just being friendly because he was one of the owners.

When Michael spotted Knut, he came over and gave him a hug. He had a scent of coffee and leather. *Good to have you back. A bad fever, eh?* Knut nodded and smiled. *You were missed*, Michael said. *And how's the family?* Knut gave him a thumbs up. *You're looking well*, Michael gave him an affectionate pat on the shoulder. Knut used his hand to indicate that he had a sore throat, but Michael had already moved on, with a parting *super – see you in the glass house in fifteen minutes*, he called. *The Hiking Association. And a woman from Innovation Norway*. Michael went back to his desk, which was at the end of the open-plan office, half hidden behind a case full of books he never looked at. Knut wordlessly greeted a couple of other colleagues and sat down at his over-dimensioned desk with two large Mac screens. He stirred one to life, but quickly put it back to sleep as the light hurt his eyes. It had never bothered him before. He sat there, holding his coffee, and looked out of the window at the big, old brick houses and trees on the other side of the road. He couldn't actually hear the leaves blowing in the gentle wind, but imagined the sound.

His coffee was already cold when he realised that the delegation from The Hiking Association had arrived, and he had no idea where the time had gone. There were almost no chairs left when he got to the meeting room and sat down. Michael stood up and said a little something about each of the employees involved in the project. Knut was introduced as designer and co-owner. Thomas, graphic designer. Hilde, illustrator, fresh from art collage in England. And he described himself, Michael, as one-time designer, but now finance and meeting man. He went on to outline The Hiking Association's wish to create a new profile that reflected their recent expansion and new venture with neighbouring countries, *NorHike*. They wanted to attract more hiking tourists to Norway and to make their stay more environmentally-friendly. Michael suggested that surely the best thing for the environment would be if everyone stayed at home, but when only Thomas laughed, he quickly carried on with stories from childhood holidays in a very basic cabin, his experiences, and strong

relationship with nature. He mentioned that Knut had also spent summer holidays in a simple cabin as a child, and Knut nodded. Michael continued with a presentation of the agency's thoughts around the project, that it echoed their own values, that they'd had similar projects in the past, and showed pictures from several of them. None of them really resembled the project in question, but no one seemed to react. He moved on to some mind maps that illustrated the theoretical approach to the project. On the first slide it said *Culture and Nature* with a two-way arrow. *In other words, the meeting and synergy between culture and nature*, Michael said. The next slide showed two circles, where it said *Past* and *Present*, and a logo for *NorHike* was positioned where the two circles overlapped. To demonstrate that the new logo had not yet been designed, it was drawn in pencil. The lady from Innovation Norway nodded earnestly as though she was listening to something that required full concentration. She had large breasts and adjusted the strap on her bra several times as she listened. There were no objections from The Hiking Association people; the only one who seemed to be a little critical was a chap from Stavanger with a Metallica t-shirt on under his checked shirt, but when he tried to make snide remarks to the person next him, he was ignored, so made no more attempts to be witty. Michael continued with a more intricate image, three interlocking circles: it said *nature* and *culture* in the two lower circles, and *expansion* in the one above. Where the circles overlapped, it said *youth, pride* and *tradition*, and in the very middle was a space for *innovation*. To create such a bold visual statement that managed to retain the values and traditions of The Hiking Association was a challenge, Michael said, but that was precisely what made the job so appealing. He then handed over to the others in his team.

It was only now Knut realised that he would have to say something. He tried to think of an excuse to leave the room, but he was sitting in an awkward place with his back to the window and people on either side. Hilde spoke first, about a design package which combined classic illustration techniques with modern motives, and vice versa, but then stopped, blushed, and said that perhaps she had not given it enough thought. Michael assured her that to the contrary, it was an exciting concept, just the sort of thing they were looking for. Thomas suggested that they could create a new font for the association, and then make it available to others. For example, a font that was called *NorHike* or *HikeTour*, which could also be used in other situations. Like Times New Roman, which was originally created for the newspaper. Michael and several others around the table listened attentively and nodded. *Knut?* Michael said. He had tried to hide in his polo neck sweater. Now he wished he had been prepared and written a note on a piece of paper to say he had lost his voice. He sat up straight and formulated a sentence in his head. *I think it's a very exciting challenge, and Hilde and Thomas have some excellent ideas*, but what came out of his mouth was a hoarse, whispered garble that did not sound like words at all. There was silence around the table for a moment or two, then Michael asked if anyone else had something to add. The lady from Innovation Norway immediately started to talk about innovation and everyone listened passively. She used the word *vision* more than once.

At the debrief, Michael concluded that the meeting had been a success, and the next stage would be to gather a diversity of visual material to show the breadth of what they had to

offer. *It's all about getting the message across*, Michael said, *message, message, message*. For the rest of the day, Knut sat and tried to do sketches with his left hand, as he couldn't use the right one. But he was right-handed, so the sketches were crude and jagged. As he worked, the drawing in the A5 sketchpad got darker and darker, until it was almost solid dark surfaces with something might resemble branches and leaves. When his mother sent a text message to ask if he could help to move the old freezer, he took it as an excuse to finish early and left without saying goodbye to anyone.

His parents still lived in the terraced house where he had grown up, to the north of the city. A number of building entrepreneurs were interested in the site, but two of the households in the terrace refused to sell up. Apartment blocks were springing up all around them. When he and his older sister were young, their mother had taken a part-time job in the school library so his father could work long days in the pharmacy. As soon as the children had left home, she resigned, and started to weave. Five later, she had an exhibition in a gallery in town, only to discover that no one was interested, so stopped weaving as suddenly as she had started. She got a job in a bookshop in the local shopping centre, and worked there until she retired. She was quieter now than before, whereas his father seemed to thrive in retirement. He had wangled a few hours' work a week in the pharmacy, which had been taken over by a chain, and spent the rest of his time writing an extensive local history that now ran to several volumes.

As Knut opened the door and stepped into the hall, he was welcomed by a smell that had not changed since he was a boy. Loud thumping could be heard from the cellar, and from upstairs some music that he failed to identify. When his mother had started to weave, she had taken over his sister's room and the spare bedroom, pulled down the wall and bought an expensive record player on which she listened to symphonic pop. She still commandeered half of the first floor, but her taste in music had changed. The volume was turned down, a door opened and he heard his mother's deep, clear voice: *your father's in the basement*. She waited a moment for an answer, then closed the door again. There was more scraping and thumping from below. When Knut went down into the basement, his father was at the back of the storeroom and had started to push the freezer out from the wall. His father looked up and smiled. *Old rubbish*, he said. *You well?* Knut gave a measured nod and put his hand to his throat. *Have you got a cold?* his father asked. He nodded again. *You've always had a sensitive throat. Could never stand a draught.*

His mother was standing in one of the upstairs window and watched as he and his father carried the freezer out from the basement, through the bushes to his parents' battered other car. His father chatted the whole time about the book he was writing, about some new medicine, old neighbours who had sold out to the builders, or who were ill or had died. Knut nodded every now and then, no more was needed to keep the conversation going. His father talked as they drove to the dump and as they lifted the freezer out of the car. He only fell silent on the way back, which Knut took to mean that he was dreading going home. When

they pulled up outside the house, his father thanked him profusely for his help. Knut waved his hands as if to say, it was nothing. *Tea with honey*, his father said, *the only thing that helps*.

Rush hour had started, so Knut sat in a queue that slowly snaked its way west. He realised that he hadn't had any lunch, and started to dream about a good, solid meal with meat. When he got closer to the centre, he decided to buy some snacks he could eat in the car and some meat for supper. He stood by the shelves of crisps, out of habit, but nothing tempted him. He wandered past the biscuits, but the thought of something sweet made him queasy. In the end, he bought close to a kilo of fillet steak, wrapped up in shiny, white paper. The traffic was still slow when he got back in the car, but the knowledge that he had food kept him calm. The people in other cars checked their mobile phones as the queue crept west. When it eventually came to a standstill, he could not resist temptation and took the white paper package out of the plastic bag and put it down on the passenger seat. He managed to open the paper, keeping his eyes on the car in front, then glanced down at the fresh meat. He prodded it with his finger and felt the soft give. Without thinking he put his fingers in his mouth. The taste was cloying. He pushed his finger into the meat again, felt it. He picked up the smallest fillet and smelt it, before taking a bite from one end. He wrapped up the meat again and chewed slowly. The taste filled him with a feeling of disgust and cold joy. He chewed thoroughly, for a long time. Then he sat there, breathing heavily. He unwrapped the meat, lifted the fillet up and took another bite, chewing faster this time, then swallowed.

A few minutes later he had eaten all the meat and expected to feel sick, but instead he felt happy and warm, as he sometimes did after a couple of glasses of wine. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and saw that his chin was covered in juices and blood, so he wipe it with his sleeve.

Twenty-five minutes later, he parked on the road below the house, checked that no one could see him before he got out and went up the path. He stopped at the corner of the house, turned on the hose and washed his face and hands as well as he could. Silje sent a message: *Pasta today? I'll sort it. Great*, he wrote back with his left hand. He hosed down his face again and sat on the rotten wooden bench that was almost hidden by the pear tree, which was starting to blossom. No one could see him sitting there, but he could hear everything around him. He burped and caught a whiff of the raw meat in his belly.

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Knut didn't eat much of the mushroom pasta that Silje had made. After supper, he tidied away and put things in the dishwasher, took a cup of coffee in to Silje on the sofa and then sat

down at the old desk in the basement, with the intention of doing some sketches for The Hiking Association's new venture, *NorHike*. He was still not clear about what they actually wanted, or what Michael wanted to show them, but guessed it was simply an adjustment of what they already had. An updated logo and new colour scheme. A new design manual that was neat and tidy and felt forward-looking. He had not really paid much attention. Strictly speaking, it was the employees who did most of the work and he rarely had much to offer. He got as far as getting out a sketch pad and Dutch pencils, but then felt he needed a rest, so sat down on the short sofa. He stared at the apple tree outside with glazed eyes and switched off for a while, until the neighbour Gard's face appeared in the window. Only then did he remember that Silje had signed him up for a neighbourhood meeting down the road. They were going to discuss what should be done about the recent vandalism in the area. He hadn't noticed much vandalism, but had reluctantly agreed to go.

As they walked along the road together, Gard talked about himself. He had until recently been separated from his wife, but they had moved back in together. Only something wasn't quite right, his wife had changed, he said. The children were not happy, they had got used to staying her one week and him the next, and it was hard for them to adjust to living in the same place every week. Gard was looking for advice. Knut nodded vaguely and offered the odd *mhm*, but did not manage to indicate that he was not the right person to give advice about things like that. Fortunately they came to the oversized, newly-built garage where the meeting was going to be held, and had to finish the conversation. Fourteen men from the neighbourhood had gathered and the owner of the garage, Halvorsen – Knut couldn't remember his first name – gave a short introduction. He worked in one of the government ministries and was clearly used to holding similar presentations. In the past few months there had been several acts of vandalism in the neighbourhood. Rubbish bins had been pushed over, cars had been scratched. At least two bicycles had been stolen, one of which was expensive. Halvorsen himself was not particularly vulnerable, as he had a large garage and good locks, but as a good neighbour and friend, he was concerned. Several others told them about things that had disappeared, some outside furniture, plants, a sundial that had sentimental value. After a while, people ran out of things to say. Knut could not remember if anything had been stolen from them, but then he was not the sort of person who kept an itinerary of everything they owned. Halvorsen said that he would like to talk about what he chose to call *the elephant in the room*. No one made any comment, so he was obliged to continue. More and more often, Romas had been seen in the area and this corresponded with the increase in thefts and vandalism. The perpetrators were no doubt part of the gang that had set up camp in the nearby woods. A brief discussion followed as to whether they were gypsies or Roma people, or if some of them were quite simply poor people from Eastern Europe. One person said with conviction that *Roma* was not a derogatory term and they must surely be allowed to use it. Halvorsen interjected affably that they could certainly use the term *Roma* amongst themselves. He had spoken to the police in person and knew that several others had done the same, but there was little they could do. Apparently, there was nothing to stop these people rummaging through rubbish bins for things they could use or sell, one might even say it was environmentally-friendly and therefore alright, but as they had now

started to steal and break things, they as house-owners had to do something. If it became known that it was easy to help themselves to whatever they wanted in the neighbourhood, things would only get worse. Most of those present agreed, but men remained calm, as no one wanted to appear to be judgemental or impetuous. As they sat there, Knut stretched out his left leg, and kept the right leg bent. He only half-followed the conversation and realised that the hearing in his left ear was not as good as his right. The garage smelt of inner tubes and dust. Woolly socks, plaster and toothpaste. Halvorsen started to show pictures on his mobile phone of cars with small dents and scratches. Soon all the men were gathered around Halvorsen, showing their own pictures of damage to their cars, and the tension started to rise, these were expensive repairs. Someone said that it was one thing that they stole things to survive, but deliberately damaging cars was aggressive. Several agreed with this. Gard, who wanted to be seen as an understanding man, said that it was not necessarily the Romas. After all, they had no reason to wreck things. More often than not it was teenagers who did things like that, out of sheer frustration, or misguided idealism. One man – Knut didn't know his first name or surname – agreed with Gard, in principle. He was a psychologist and worked with young people who were *struggling*, as he put it, and believed that vandalism was often driven by envy. Deprived youth who wreak havoc because they feel disadvantaged and see others as unfairly privileged. But the Roma people may well feel the same, he explained. They are antagonised by wealth and unfair distribution. They are not young people, but often only have a basic education, if any at all. *Maturity nearly always corresponds with the level of education*, he said, and no one protested. The atmosphere became more serious, they needed to make a decision. Halvorsen looked at Hans-Petter, his closest neighbour, making it clear they had agreed that he should say something. Hans-Petter stood up with an amiable expression on his face. *We don't want to become vigilantes*, he said in a clear voice. *This must not become a way to vent our frustrations and anger*. He paused for effect. *But we must make ourselves visible in the area*. He had his yacht moored in a marina, where they did night patrols throughout the summer season to prevent any theft. The point was to scare people, not to be confrontational. If anyone who had no business there appeared in the marina, they talked to them and asked them to leave. And on the rare occasion that someone did try to steal a boat, they called the police. Hans-Petter emphasised that he did not want to make decisions on their behalf, but thought that perhaps they could get some kind of patrol together in order to scare people off. They just needed to make themselves visible. *Absolutely no weapons of any kind*, Halvorsen said, even though no one had suggested it. The men mumbled their agreement, no one wanted weapons. They then discussed whether they should wear hi-viz jackets, but could not agree, so in the end it was decided that those who had hi-viz jackets in their cars could put them on when it got dark, but it was up to each individual. When Halvorsen asked who would like to be part of the first patrol, straight after the meeting, Knut put up his hand. He wanted to get it over and done with. Three others, including Gard, also volunteered for the first patrol. Halvorsen put a list up on the wall and they spent the next fifteen minutes working out the patrols as the men checked their diaries.

Soon after, Knut and the three others set off down the road. They split into pairs so they could cover a larger area, and he and Gard continued together and kept their eyes peeled

for strangers. Gard talked about how frustrated he was by the changes in his wife since they moved back in together. She didn't really bother to keep the house tidy and spent very little time cooking. On occasion she disappeared for hours at a time without letting him know where she was. And if he asked where she had been, she said with a girlfriend or at the gym. Sometimes she went to the cinema alone. Gard had always been the messy one before and might forget to say if he was going out, but now he was the one who had to remember things. He had to make sure the children did their homework and went to practice. She did help, but only when she was reminded. Gard had never really found out what she did in the year they had been apart, other than rent a flat in the centre of town and go on at least one extended holiday. He didn't know if there had been other men, but presumably there had. *She's slim and attractive*, Gard said and sent Knut a questioning glance, to which he nodded. *I met a couple of women during that year; one was a cleaner at work*. He went home with her after the Christmas party, and then he met a woman who he dated for a few weeks. They spent a long weekend together in the mountains. *She was sweet, but nothing much happened after that*. Gard noticed that Knut had stopped, and fell silent. There were two figures half hidden behind some rubbish bins. When they got closer they could see it was two boys of around ten who were waiting for a third boy who was sneaking up towards a front door. The boy rang the doorbell, then all three scarpered. Shortly after, the door opened and an old lady looked out. They could hear the boys laughing hysterically in the distance, as though they had done was immensely brave. The men walked on. Gard continued his monotone monologue, which was then interrupted by a text message from Halvorsen, with an address and the word *NOW*. Gard and Knut ran along the road and round a gentle bend to see the two other men with Halvorsen, who was not strictly speaking on patrol, standing under a tree, close to the fence. They were looking at a car parked on the other side of the road, about thirty metres away. A person was standing behind the car fiddling with the lock. He straightened up and they could see he was a short, stocky man. He swore, slapped the roof of the car with the palm of his hand, then leaned in towards the car door again. Gard took two steps forward and shouted *Oi!* The man froze. Gard walked quickly towards him. The others followed behind more hesitantly. The stocky man stayed where he was for a moment, but when he realised that Gard was coming for him, he ran off down the road. Gard pursued him at around the same speed, and yelled *Oi!* again.

After about twenty metres, the man stopped and Gard did the same. *What were you doing?* Gard asked. The stocky man looked at him in surprise. *What were you doing with the car?* Gard continued. The man explained that it was his car. There was a problem with the central locking system, so he had to try to force the lock. He was afraid it might be something electronic as that kind of thing tends to be expensive. The men apologised and explained what they were doing. Gard felt ashamed and said he was sorry.

They accompanied the man back to his car and stood watching until he managed to open the door. Meanwhile Halvorsen told them about all the problems he had had. Halvorsen's car was quite new, but that did not always make things easy, he said.

Gard and Knut then did another round of the neighbourhood. Gard was not as talkative and apologised again for overreacting. Knut patted him on the back, to show that he needn't worry.

Darkness fell. They heard suspicious noises a couple of times, which turned out to be a cat, and then a pensioner washing a bicycle outside a garage. In order to fill the silence, Gard told Knut about his mother who had moved to Spain and constantly sent him messages to say how wonderful it was, which Gard took to mean that she wasn't happy there. His father had died a few years ago, and she was tired of living alone in a big house. *She posts photographs on Facebook all the time, photos of new friends*, he said. *If she was happy, she wouldn't need to do that. I'm not sure who she is trying to convince. I'm not convinced. When we went to visit her, she was friendly and funny for the few days, then she seemed to withdraw. As though she had nothing more to show us and was ashamed that there wasn't more.* Knut started when a small dog came bounding across a garden and stood by the fence barking at him. It followed them on the other side as they continued to walk down the road. The owner, an elderly woman in a colourful tracksuit, came running out into the garden to scold the dog and apologise to them. *He's not like that*, she said. *He doesn't bark.* She took the dog in with her, but they could hear it was still barking. They said goodbye outside Knut's house, and Gard said that they must come over for dinner one day. *Irmelin has mentioned it several times*, he said.

On his way through the garden, Knut stopped and looked at the apple tree. Several of the lower branches were rotten and he tried to remember what to do with them. It took a while, but then he remembered that they should be cut as far in as possible, before the branch got thicker towards the trunk, but could not recall who had told him that.

Both Marit and Silje had gone to bed. The house still smelt of food, but he was not hungry. He studied himself in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. His face was no worse, and his hair seemed to be more or less normal again, which he took as a sign that he was on the mend. He thought about Halvorsen and the neighbourhood patrols. There was something unnerving about it. He tried to find the right word to describe it. It was not *exaggerated*, perhaps *overzealous*, or just plain *aggressive*. He tested the words as he brushed, but did not manage to find the one he was looking for.