The Story of a Good Man

by Birger Emanuelsen

(Excerpt translated from the Norwegian by Tiina Nunnally)

After six years as a full-time employee at one of Norway's biggest newspapers, I stood in the living room and prepared myself to tell Hedda that I'd been sacked. I was not filled with sorrow but rather a private sense of fear, which I was worried she wouldn't understand. That was why I tried to rehearse the conversation in my mind as I listened to Tobias yelling in the kitchen. I envied his ability, though it was most likely temporary, to be unaware of anything except what he wanted. His own desires were all that mattered.

'Did you have a good day at work?' she called from the kitchen.

I sat down on the sofa, not even bothering to take off my shoes. My colleagues — meaning those people who until a few hours ago had been my colleagues — had taken me out to a pub close to the office. They meant well, but then one of them ordered whisky and asked me whether I was looking forward to what came next, saying 'You have your whole life ahead of you.' I thanked everybody, shook their hands, and got on my bike to ride home. I caught a glimpse of myself in a shop window. I saw my off-the-rack sport coat, my wrinkled shirt, and my bicycle helmet, the straps so loose that it was more like a hat. Semi-fit, semi-overweight, semi-smart, semi-lazy. A caricature who would offend no one.

Another wave of shame struck me when I saw his name on the letterbox. Earlier in the summer, when everyone in the community got together to do chores, I had learned that my neighbour, Lars W Flemming, wrote poetry. Of course that aroused my curiosity, and the very next day I went to the bookshop. His poetry collection touched me. It was as simple as that. Right then and there, as I was reading, something reached out to me from the pages. Now, five weeks later, I was unemployed. And from what my editor had said, I had no prospect of ever working in the newspaper business again. The lack of respect I'd shown — not only for the profession but also for my colleagues, my sources, and my readers — was unlike anything she'd seen before. There might be some truth to that, although I would have put it differently. I had broken the promise that every journalist owes to his readers: not to lie. But who looked closely at such minor lies? I'd ascribed quotes to certain sources even

though they'd never said any of those things. Yet none of them objected because I made them sound better and smarter than they really were. The truth was that most of the people I'd interviewed — celebrities, scholars, politicians, and cultural icons — babbled. It was pure chance if I understood even one word they said, or caught a connection between the sounds they muttered somewhere down there amid the self-hatred and gender denial. That's why I often rewrote what they'd said. Okay, I embellished a bit, but most often I merely created a coherence and gave their words some style. I redeemed them, and everybody seemed happy with this practice. The truth is that the truth is malleable.

But then Lars W Flemming came into the picture. The quiet poet.

At first he refused to be interviewed, yet I didn't give up. I rang his doorbell and left messages on his voicemail. I waited next to his letterbox. Finally, I met him face to face in the immigrant-owned shop next door where he stood holding two packages of toilet paper. And he agreed to meet with me. So I began meticulously preparing. It had been ages since I'd done that, but this time I read everything he'd written, analyzing his digital and analog worlds, trying to grasp the history of the numerous printings, both large and small. It was like being a young journalist again. I also went over my questions with Hedda. As usual, I disliked the fact that she had a science and math orientation and background, at times loudly expressing my displeasure. But I did listen to her responses. For this interview I wanted to be as prepared as possible.

The problem was that Flemming's replies were as stupid and flimsy as everyone else's. What he'd written was without a doubt precise and eminently quotable: 'Everything we have, small feelings and big words.' He wrote about the secrecy of fear, that it was our conscience and not our survival that governs our indolence. In addition, he did something highly unusual for a poetry collection: he applied a political perspective to Norwegian society, trying to comprehend it. This was what I understood him to say: If we allow everyone to do exactly as they like, and there are no economic or geographic obstacles, in the end we'll have a society in which people are perfectly situated according to ability. No one will any longer be forced into a profession where they don't belong. We'll have an orderly and specialized society in which everybody is what they are supposed to be, and the choices we make in our lives will seem as obvious as they are just. Compliance will be considered natural, and that would represent something new and radical in the history of the world. In a feudal society the stupid and fat were able to rule over the stalwart and beautiful because the former sat at the king's

table and the latter did not. The former had received a gift by virtue of his blood ties — not a gift based on genetics but on a network of commerce. Such a world was unjust, and we rebelled against it in order to create balance. But we ended up running in circles, because today blood is still the determining factor — or, more precisely, it's what the blood contains that is important: the inherited genes. Since we don't understand the nuances of this new truth, we regard it as just and natural, the way all rulers regard their own elevated status as law. But the poor; the sick; the overweight; the simple-minded; those who are kept outside — not merely outside comfortable society in the form of relationships and well-paid jobs and pensions and health services and private schools and company-paid mobile phone subscriptions and trips to the Alps and electric cars and public transit — but those who are kept out of that segment of the population which always has its own self-image confirmed by the newspapers and news reports: 'A child with highly educated parents sleeps better', 'Disability benefits passed on to next generation', 'Poor people are more likely to divorce', 'Researchers have discovered a gene for obesity'. None of these people will regard the order of things as natural. The problem is merely that for the first time in history, those who are oppressed have no strength, courage, or will to rebel. They will for ever remain our slaves in what Lars W Flemming called 'the tyranny of the righteous'.

In his poems this muddle of words was no longer muddled. Flemming forged it all onto a pinhead. Yet when he talked to me and I tried to steer him with my questions, all of these insights disappeared into bloated verbiage. And when he tried to convey his criticism of contemporary political conditions, it sounded so familiar and predictable that I could have written what he said with my eyes closed. From a literary perspective, he might be what we like to call a genius. I don't know. But personally, he was yet another individual out of touch with reality, a cultural creator who thought we ought to be nicer than foreigners and poor people and cultural creators. One more artist who wanted to dress up everything we already knew in beautiful words. That was why I lay awake that night after interviewing him. That was why I got out of bed, sat down at the computer in my office, and began to write.

The interview covered two whole pages in the newspaper. My colleagues cheered at the morning meeting, and when I opened my email, I'd already received multiple responses from readers who felt it was an important and worthy article. The interview was quickly disseminated on social media, and many called it the 'must-read' of the week. During the course of the day other newspapers picked up some of the points that had come out in the

interview, and even a couple of highly opinionated commentators — those deemed reliable by the moral middle class — gave a thumb's up. I wrote a lengthy status on Facebook, thanking everyone for their remarks. I said I was proud to be working for a paper that dared to publish such articles at a time when all the others downplayed literary material and proper cultural journalism. 'We are surrounded by PR reps and lies and entertainment, on our way to becoming an impoverished nation. And people like Lars W Flemming — serious writers who have something to say, who refuse to surrender and write for the marketing departments or their own circles of well-meaning arseholes — are on their way to becoming an endangered species. So even though I greatly appreciate all the comments, I have only one damn piece of advice to offer: Go out and buy his poetry book!'

It was perfect. Not too self-centered, just provocative and casual enough. It wasn't necessary to boast. I'd never really had any need to grab the spotlight — I knew that I was different. It was just past one in the afternoon. By then everybody was tired of working after lunch and was mentally preparing to leave for home. And all these minor and insignificant individual choices were making the Internet traffic increase noticeably. I ended up getting a hundred 'likes' in half an hour. That had to be a new record, and I decided to take a ten-minute break before I would allow myself to reopen the web page to check again. I got up from my desk and went over to the espresso machine. I stole a capsule from somebody in the lay-out department. It was only a matter of time before they were out of a job anyway. I stood there, drumming my fingers on the counter. Nothing was happening fast enough. I cast another glance at my watch. Only three minutes had passed, but I went back to my desk and opened the email program, wondering whether to send an email to Hedda to say that I'd bring home some take-away. She didn't need to bother cooking dinner. And as I sat there, planning this mundane celebration, an email appeared from my editor.

'Meet me in the quiet room right now.'

I didn't give it much thought, certain that it would be another congratulatory meeting. She probably wanted to discuss a follow-up article. Or maybe someone from radio had called and wanted us to take part in an on-air discussion. All that flew through my mind, but in hindsight I thought: That sort of quiet room is the perfect setting for an interrogation. Glass walls, everything white and steel, with landscape photographs on the walls. The chairs looked as if someone had stuffed a couple of toothpicks up the arse of a flounder. They were expensive and impractical, creaking steadily and threatening to collapse if anyone made a

lunge or came up with an idea that proved too weighty for the chairs to bear.

When I entered the room, Flemming was already there. As soon as I sat down, he began explaining the situation. He hadn't said any of the things we'd published. The whole article was composed of statements and words that I'd invented and stitched together. At first I denied it, and I did so vigorously and convincingly. The editor sat at the head of the table, and I could see the throbbing in the artery of her throat begin to slow as I talked. Things looked promising. But then Lars W Flemming got out his mobile and began playing a recording of the interview. It was at that point that the little hothouse in which I existed fell apart.

We sat there and listened in silence while my brain kept trying to find an acceptable explanation for all these unacceptable parts. I needed a new truth. It was one thing that I'd put different words into his mouth. That was something I could defend. During the course of the interview I'd also mentioned that I didn't like working as a journalist. Even that was defensible — something I'd merely said to placate my source. Flemming was a poet. He regarded the major newspapers as cyclopean and given to speculation. To get him to open up, he had to believe that he and I thought alike. That was Journalism 101. Yet as the recording continued, it became clear that not only did I lack the respect I should have shown towards my own employer, I had also actively participated in deriding both management and the newspaper itself. And, to top it all off, I gave the following explanation for why I wished to ask Flemming about his personal life:

'I know it's petty, but my editor loves that sort of thing. The only book she has read is *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and I don't think she even understood enough to get horny.'

When these words rolled out of Flemming's smartphone, I saw a muscle tighten in my editor's face. She'd been to plenty of seminars on how to be a good manager, so she tried to repress all visible signs of anger, even though her body reacted out of pure instinct. As a mid-level female boss, she ruled with a combination of passive aggression and poorly concealed sexuality. She never uttered blatant innuendos, like the male bosses did — or at least those who had been promoted to management in spite of their deficit of sexual marketing value, and who therefore, for the first time in their lives, possessed a sexual appeal which they had no idea how to handle. No, the female bosses behaved girlishly, prompting the male employees to want to both protect them and fuck their brains out. When these signals, in line with nature's laws for procreation, were seized upon, management did its best to discredit and

humiliate those men who had actually understood the signals perfectly from the beginning. Female bosses perpetuated the Byzantine hierarchy of the schoolyard. They clung to their girlfriends and admirers. Someone always had to be 'in', while others were 'out'. The constant battle to be part of the 'in group' — and, concurrently, keep somebody else out — created a dynamism and a roiling sea of sexuality, shame, and self-loathing in which these women could navigate, manipulate, and 'lead'.

Now, as I sat on the sofa and dreaded telling Hedda that I'd lost a full-time job in a profession that no longer even offered steady employment, in an economy that had forced us to put on our own oxygen masks before helping others, I retreated inside that heated anger.

I heard her singing in the kitchen. Then she again called out:

'Did you have a good day at work, or what?'

There was no reproach in her voice. Only concern and curiosity. After she'd decided to stay home another year with Tobias, she'd developed an increased appetite for everything that went on 'out there in the real world'. As if what took place between a child and his mother wasn't real. That thought fueled my anger even more. Because it was people like my editor, and the management staff to which she belonged, that made Hedda feel left out. A week ago we'd published a study which concluded that half of the parents interviewed had been happier before they had children. Research material at its best: precise, empirical, headline-worthy. At the time, even I thought the statistics were interesting. Now I viewed the matter differently. I pictured our target reader: The woman who had voluntarily chosen not to have children and who every Friday leaves a high-paid job to go to some pub in the centre of town. There she orders a Bloody Mary, takes a photo of the drink, and posts it on Facebook. And her girlfriends, all in similar living situations, press 'like' and comment: 'Thank God it's Friday! Although with an imperceptible ironic emphasis. Only an old classmate from elementary school — a girl who at one time had been this successful woman's closest friend, but who had stayed in the small town they both came from and soon had a husband and a baby, then another, maybe even a third, but who didn't have an impressive job title to include in the brief bios that had replaced personality after the advent of social media — only she remarked without a trace of irony:

'That looks good! What's in it?? Jon Ove and the boys say hello — we're going to Aqualand tomorrow. ♥ ♥'.

The only reason she was on social media at all, posting nothing but photos of 'the best

guys in the world' or 'what a superb view!! the sun is so lovely tonight' was that this soon-to-be middle-aged, 'strong', and happy! woman had said it was an easier way to keep in touch. 'It's so stressful to have to be making phone calls all the time.'

It soon turned into a sort of game. Sitting at the table with a Bloody Mary and her colleagues and girlfriends, they would read her comments out loud, listening to the waves of laughter, until someone uttered the psychopathic mating call: 'Oh, God, now I'm being too mean.' But they kept on reading. Her girlfriends laughed and drank toasts as their uteruses settled into lateral positions with the ovaries in their ears, singing loudly and trying to avoid thinking about the stranger's dick that in a few hours would be lunging in and out of them, showing its rare condom-clad head, just for a 'quickie' before disappearing for good. Regardless, her uterus was so thoroughly anaesthetized and subdued by all sorts of substances and alcohol that she hardly noticed the equally weary sperm that staggered up the vaginal passage before they gave up, to slide out with a gurgling sound and land on the washable upholstery of the sofa cushions, just as millions of sperm had done before. These grey cushions were so spattered with compatriots' sexual fluids that if a fertile woman had let loose so much as a little fart on them, a school-age kid would have appeared the next morning.

Living on the other side of the map of Norway, showing up as a small red dot beyond any highways and cultural networks, the woman's childhood friend showed the pictures to the man who had been her husband and sweetheart for fifteen years. And when he rolled his eyes and laughed, she looked dismayed and said: 'No, don't laugh.'

'But you have to admit it's kind of sad,' said Jon Ove.

'Yes, it is,' said Tonje.

Then they both fell silent. They took one more look at the display on her mobile before she put the phone away. Jon Ove pulled Tonje close, kissed her above the ear, and told her she was beautiful. And if she wanted, he would make her a Bloody Mary.

'No, no,' said Tonje. 'That's all right.'

'Sure? I think we have some taco sauce left,' he said and started tickling her.

She squirmed, saying 'Hush, we'll wake them,' but she kept on squirming, even though Jon Ove had stopped tickling her.

Then she sat up and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She sat astride him, put her arms around his neck, and fidgeted with the gold chain she'd given him on their wedding day.

‘Maybe we should invite her over some weekend? Just us and the kids?’ she said.

Jon Ove pressed his chin against her chest. The chain was tickling him. Then he wrapped his arms around her waist.

‘If you want to,’ he said.

She nodded.

‘But not next weekend. Your parents are coming over,’ she said.

‘Oh, shit,’ he said.

‘What is it?’

‘I need to buy the lumber before Papa gets here.’

And with that they were back into their daily life and plans — the veranda he was going to build, and a trailer that had to be fetched back from a neighbour who had borrowed it to take a jet-ski out for the season. And maybe they made love, maybe they didn’t, but it wasn’t that important because here they were, together, and their three boys were asleep in their bedrooms, and tomorrow they would get up, and then they’d grow up, and that was the only solace that humanity needed.

Then Hedda called to me for the third time:

‘Did you have a good day?’

Had it been a good day? Could it be described like that?

I got up and went into the kitchen. There stood my tall, beautiful wife, scraping up some burned rice that had stuck to the bottom of a saucepan. Tobias was standing close to her legs, probably hoping for a snack. He had forgotten all about his tears from the morning when we’d almost fallen on our way to the day-care centre, because the hybrid bicycle tyre got lodged in the tram track like a rail tricycle. Luckily nothing had happened, but he was scared and cried the whole way, and I didn’t have time for that, because they’d printed my article over two pages. I needed to get to work. I needed to read the reactions. So I stuck Tobias under my arm, slung his bag over my shoulder, and ran up the three flights of stairs to the day-care cloakroom.

‘Hi,’ I said.

‘Hi,’ said Hedda, coming towards me with a knowing look.

I was convinced that Hedda was genuine through and through. I had admired her from the very first moment I saw her, as she kicked her ski boots against the cabin wall and I turned in time to see her hit her head on the doorframe. Back then it was because she’d

walked to the tourist association's cabin all alone, in the dark. The light from her headlamp blinded me, so I couldn't see her face, only her long dark hair tumbling out from under a thick woollen cap. Three of my colleagues and I had gone up there to spend the night, and she came right over to the table where we were sitting to shake hands. When she turned to me, she must have noticed the beam of her headlamp on my face, because she began to laugh and took off the lamp before shaking my hand. I remember the brief feeling of humiliation that her laughter stirred in me before I comprehended the situation. And I remember clasping her hand, noticing that it was warm even though she'd just come in from the cold.

Now here she stood, still dazzling me, and I still couldn't see her clearly. But at least I realized that she wanted to give me a hug. And that made me feel ashamed. Tobias tottered over and tugged at my trouser leg. I picked him up and tapped his nose. He hid his face against my chest and laughed.

I looked at her and knew that I would have to change if this was going to last.

'Hedda,' I said.

'Mmm,' she said. She'd gone back to fixing dinner. She was grating cheese.

'There's something I have to tell you,' I said.

She turned to face me, and I couldn't understand how she could look so lovely in profile. My own face looked so weird if someone took my picture from the side.

'My God, did something happen to Anne?'

'No, no,' I said quickly, looking at Tobias. I wanted to see if he reacted, but he was playing with a pen I'd had in my sport coat pocket.

'I've been sacked,' I said.

She stopped, set down the grater, and looked me in the eye.

'Finally,' she said.