



TRUDE TEIGE

When
Grandpa
Breathed
With the
Waves

Novel



FISCHER
TASCHENBUCH

Content note: In the historical context, discriminatory terms and concepts common at the time were used in some .
The novel contains scenes of sexualized violence.



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Her grandfather Konrad was always a rock for young Juni. But he never spoke of the place that shaped him the most. Only now does Juni find out where her grandfather learned to breathe with the waves.

1943: The merchant ship of the brothers Konrad and Sverre is attacked in the Indian Ocean. At the hospital, Konrad falls in love with the nurse Sigrid. But their happiness is threatened: separated from each other, they are taken prisoner. What future awaits them beyond the sea?

FOREWORD

When the wind picked up and the waves turned white, my grandfather liked to take me to the highest point of the island where we lived. From there you could see the sea in all directions. He told me that when we slept, we breathed in time with the waves crashing ashore. "Whether it's stormy or calm, the waves always hit the land in the same rhythm," he said. "And when you're scared or sad, you have to breathe with the waves."

I wondered how he knew something like that, but when I asked him, he just smiled and said that he had learned it from someone a long time ago.

"From whom?" I wanted to know.

"We'll talk about that another time when you grow up," was his reply. He stroked my hair and told me about all the places he had been to as a sailor. The names of the cities barely escaped my tongue: New York, Buenos Aires, Honolulu, Rotterdam, BREMERHAVEN. I loved it when he took me to the sea and told me about everything he had seen and experienced as a young man.

Grandfather never told me who he learned it from but even as a child I thought to myself that he couldn't have gotten it from his grandmother. She usually breathed far too quickly.

It was only when she, my GRANDFATHER and my mother were no longer around that I found out that my

grandmother had kept a dark secret all her life. She had been a "German girl". It was only after her death that I began to wonder why my GRANDFATHER had never told me how he had fared during the war. Where had he been, what had he experienced?

Now, many years later, I know that of all the cities he told me about as a child, he never once mentioned the place that had shaped and almost broken him the most. Where he had learned to breathe with the waves. But what there and afterwards must have turned him into the gentle, sensitive man who gave me a sense of security throughout my childhood that neither my grandmother nor my mother ever had.

Juni Bjerke

1943, Indian Ocean off the coast of Java

Konrad Bjerke lay in his bunk on the Anitra and cursed the war. Ever since he was a little boy, he had admired his brother, who was five years older. He wanted to be like Sverre, do what he did, sail all the world's oceans and go ashore in distant ports: New York, Buenos Aires, Honolulu, Madras. All places with an exciting, foreign sound that he had sought out on his grandfather's globe. "You have a bright mind," his brother had said. "All options are open to you. Besides, working at sea is really bloody hard. Get a proper education, Konrad, you love reading."

In the meantime, Konrad regretted not having listened to his big brother. In 1938, at the age of just eighteen, he had signed on as a light seaman on the Anitra, where Sverre worked as a radio operator. His plan had been to become a helmsman, but when the war broke out, he had had to put all his ambitions on hold.

The Anitra traveled between Asia and Australia, and Konrad had considered himself lucky to be so far away from the war in Europe. How wrong you could be! He would never have thought that Japan would enter the war. But then, one year and eighteen months after the German occupation of Norway, the attack on Pearl Harbor had taken place and the USA had declared war on Japan.

Japan had already been at war with China for a few years, and rumors were circulating that the Japanese wanted to drive the Europeans out of all the countries of Southeast Asia in order to establish a new, great empire with Emperor Hirohito at its head. The events in Asia had not particularly concerned Konrad, but when Germany declared war on the USA four days after Pearl Harbor, he and the other men on board the Anitra had suddenly found themselves in the middle of it. Two separate wars, one in Asia and one in Europe, had become a single, large, global war fought on all the world's oceans. Within a short time, the Japanese had conquered Hong Kong, the British bastion of Singapore, Burma, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

The constant feeling of being in danger tugged at the nerves. Everyone on board was constantly peering over the deck, watching out for movement on the sea or in the air. Everyone slept with their passports in their pockets, their life jackets next to them and their cabin doors open so that they could run to the lifeboats immediately if the alarm went off. The crew was made up of men of all ages and ranks, but the danger welded them together, and everyone knew that their lives could be over the next day or the next moment. Nobody talked about it, as if the fear would diminish if they pretended it didn't exist. But all it took was a pot falling to the floor in the galley or a door banging somewhere for everyone to flinch. It was worst for the men in the engine room deep in the belly of the ship, where only a thin steel wall saved them from enemy bullets. Konrad had been down there once when depth

charges detonated nearby. He had reflexively thrown himself to the ground, while the others, to his astonishment, had only paused their work for a few seconds. But every time the machinists went on watch, their expressions darkened; he hadn't missed it. They had the longest way to the lifeboats and risked being helplessly trapped in the hull and dragged down with the ship if they were hit. Everyone thought about it, but no one talked about it.

The Anitra was on its way from Abadan in Iran to Darwin in Australia, loaded with 13,000 tons of diesel oil for the Allied warships. Konrad had been on lookout duty at the forward mast an hour ago and once again thought he had spotted a movement on the horizon to port. Possibly a submarine surfacing - the wet metal of the boat's hull always shone like a mirror.

Once they were in Australia, he wanted to persuade his brother to stay there with him. It was certainly possible to find work in a village somewhere far away from the war and wait until it was all over. He could no longer bear to live with the threat of catastrophe in the back of his mind. Although they were in the tropics and it was unbearably hot during the day, the fear was like a chill in his bones. He hadn't slept properly for days and had to get up every night and smoke a cigarette on deck to calm down. The Japanese were lurking everywhere on the Indian Ocean, yet they hadn't been given an escort. He took his packet of tobacco and climbed on deck. The day was coming to an end, visibility was good and there was a light, southerly breeze. He enjoyed the mild evening air as the sun approached the

horizon.

The nights were the worst, when the darkness hid everything. Konrad moistened the cigarette paper, sealed the cigarette with his finger and put it between his lips before untying the lifejacket. He leaned against the railing, lit the cigarette with a match, took a drag and felt himself calming down. It would go well this time too, and in a few days they would be in Darwin.

1943, Catherine Booth's Hospital, Java, Indonesia

Sigrid Greve stopped and bowed to the jaundiced soldier who was keeping watch at the hospital gate before continuing through the garden and taking in the scent of the yellow climbing roses next to the stairs. She stopped on the top step, ran her fingers through her long blonde hair, parted it into three strands and slowly plaited them into a plait.

The hospital was a typical country hospital, originally an old bungalow built more than a hundred years ago as the country home of a plantation owner. A roof stretched over the veranda, which had been furnished with small tables, armchairs and sofas as an outdoor room. Patients who were well enough could rest here, protected from the sun.

The morning mist lay like a silken ribbon around the palm trees and large birch figs. Further up the slopes, it obscured the rice fields and the colorful rose bushes on the terraced hillsides. When the sun came out, the dewdrops shone like crystals. In some places, the mist was transparent, and the air was still fresh, but soon the sun and heat would gain the upper hand again. A group of men came down the path out of the haze. The baskets they carried on poles over their shoulders were full of fruit and vegetables. Behind them followed women with baskets full of flowers. Some carried babies in their selendang, a long

cloth wrapped around their shoulders and upper body. They were all on their way from the small, scattered villages to the market in the city to sell their goods. A few little girls jumped between them with white flowers in their hair. Sigrid looked past them to the mountains and hills beyond. Her father had once called them "blue mountains" when they had been on vacation in the fjords on the west coast of Norway. She had been ten years old when her family had moved from Kristiansand to Java; now she was twenty. Sometimes she longed to return to Norway, where everything was so different from here. Winters with knitted hats and gloves, snow and skis and summers with crab fishing, campfires and sunbathing on flat shore rocks together with cousins. After the Japanese occupied Java, the longing had grown. But now it was completely impossible to travel anywhere.

Sigrid found a ribbon in her bag and knotted it around the end of her plait. As so often before work, she had taken the path that led along the rocks. Her thoughts had been far away, with her relatives on the other side of the world. The sea was like a bridge that connected her two worlds. At home, she only ever spoke Norwegian with her parents and sister, and every Thursday they had Norwegian food. Her mother had taught the cook to make meatballs with pea puree, cabbage rolls and meat in brown sauce. And he had even learned to make some desserts - plum compote, cheese pudding and veiled peasant girls.

Java was part of the Dutch East Indies, and Sigrid had gone to a Dutch school. She also spoke Javanese, as both her nanny and the cook were locals. The gardener was also Japanese and had taught her enough Japanese to hold

simple conversations. She had learned English and French at school.

The almost still air was filled with the scent of the flowers in the hospital garden. Sigrid thought she could hear the waves lapping steadily against the rocks in the distance. A peacock strutted around on the lawn in front of the house and large butterflies with black and white wings fluttered back and forth. Then the sun slowly took over, the haze lifted and the grass and trees began to steam.

Immediately afterwards, a powerful engine noise broke through the idyll. A truck drove past. On the side was a red sun with strong rays on a white background. Japanese soldiers stood close together on the loading area. The bayonets on their rifles pointed to the sky, reminiscent of a forest.

Just over a year ago, the Japanese had occupied Java. The Allies had surrendered and the staff at the hospital had feared the worst, as rumors had circulated about massacres of patients and staff in other countries occupied by the Japanese. However, not much had happened; a Japanese officer had simply ordered all the employees into the garden and informed them that the hospital was now under Japanese management and that they no longer had any rights as employees. The same applied to the Salvation Army, under whose management the hospital had previously been. A guard had been placed at the gate to control who came and went, but they were still allowed to treat injured Australians, Dutch and British soldiers. Many had been hiding in the mountains had been picked up by the Japanese over time. When the patients were well enough, they were picked up and

taken to the prison camp outside the city, so that by now only a few Allied soldiers were still being cared for.

The door opened behind her. One of the doctors, Dutchman Cornelis van Hoosen, stepped up beside her and wished her a good morning. With an annoying honk, the truck swerved to the side of an oncoming car on the bend. The driver just managed to swerve out of the way, and as the car drove past the hospital, Sigrid saw a man and a woman with two children in the back seat. There were mattresses attached to the roof, and on the overcrowded trailer, she recognized a cupboard among the boxes and crates.

"It's too late, there's no way out of here," said Cornelis. "We are surrounded by the sea on all sides, and there are no ships that could take us to Europe. We are condemned to stay."

"What do you think will happen to us?" asked Sigrid.

"Nobody knows, but the Netherlands has declared war on Japan, so they'll probably be targeting us first."

"But what are they doing here?"

"First and foremost, they are probably interested in oil. But they also have fantasies of grandeur. They want to establish a world empire under their holy emperor. Only the gods know what they will do to us."

"With the Dutch?"

"Yes, with us and all the other imperialists and representatives of the colonial powers. We took their land from the Javanese, and now the Japanese have taken it from us. The Allies have been defeated everywhere in Southeast Asia. Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of soldiers have been taken prisoner. And now they are also

arresting civilians. For now, they're only targeting the men, but what happens to the women once the men are interned? How are all these spoiled, gin-drinking colonial mistresses, who are used to servants and nannies and are only interested in the next cocktail party, supposed to cope when everything falls apart and their men are gone?"

A perfect description of my mother, Sigrid thought.

"Life will be different. You won't find your way around it," he continued. "And it's not just the Japanese who hate the Europeans. The locals will also rise up when they see the empires of their colonial masters collapse. They don't want the Japanese or the Europeans here. Life on Java as we know it is over forever."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Sooner or later, the people will rise up. They are tired of oppression. Whether in war or peace, they will rise up against the invaders, against the Japanese as well as against us who came here only several hundred years ago."

Sigrid looked at him thoughtfully. Cornelis was the youngest of the three doctors who worked at the hospital. He was unmarried and perhaps ten years older than her. His authoritative charm was based on his expertise as a doctor, but he was not particularly attractive. His reddish hair was thick, his skin more red than brown, and there was a large gap between his incisors, which made his smile somewhat mischievous. Sigrid liked him, he was funny, open and had a good rapport with the patients.

"Bushidō," he said.

"What's that?"

"The Japanese code of honor. It is better to die than to

live in disgrace. And as for women ... women are considered inferior, stubborn and stupid." He poked her lightly in the side and had a twinkle in his eye. "Your qualities exactly, Sigrid."

"How do you know all this?"

"I worked in a hospital in Tokyo for a year. I was fresh out of university then." He looked at her seriously for a few seconds before saying: "You must never look a Japanese soldier straight in the eye, Sigrid. Never forget that."

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