Mogens Klitgaard

There's a Man Sitting on a Trolley

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Eleventh Chapter

I

Life’s now beginning to take on a little tone and color. Strangely, that’s happening exactly at the same time that nature’s dying all around him. There are moments when Lundegaard feels downright young and resilient, when he deliberately makes his step bolder and his speech more lively in order to emphasize his enjoyment of life. At moments like that you see a whole bunch of things you otherwise never pay attention to. Or rather, you see them in another way, almost as if it were the first time you were seeing them, and they fill you with a delighted astonishment. They can be quite common things and still it’s as if it weren’t till now that you discover for real that they exist. It can be a couple of filthy kids playing or it can be a brewer’s horse standing at the curb and turning its ears toward the sound of the driver who’s going into a store with a case of beer on his shoulder. Lundegaard’s surrounded by such an orgy of colors and interesting things when he looks really closely. And he doesn’t feel at all embarrassed about yielding to his delight and calmly stopping and standing up against the facade of the building and watching the animal’s shiny brown body, which is steaming in the thin autumn air, while busy people hurry off in both directions between him and the horse.

He straightens his back and says to himself that of course he’s a man in the prime of life, that it’s not till now that his life is about to begin for real, now that he’s gotten the brains and ability to live it. It’s just now that he makes the discovery that the city, that life looks totally different when you look up, up above the roofs and the tower steeples, which fade out of sight
in a blue daze, and see the flocks of pigeons clatter off, and higher up a gull sailing on rigid wings, than if you let your gaze run along the flagstones in front of you, as he was otherwise in the habit of doing. He's more careful about his appearance than he usually is and takes his work less seriously; he can perfectly well take it into his head to go strolling along a street, catch a gleam from a pair of beautiful female eyes or in passing let his eyes follow a young woman's beautiful curves. And an expectant sense of what a travelling salesman's life can involve gets him to dream about the future, which is supposed to fully compensate him for all the bitterness and disagreeableness he's had to go through in the past months.

II

So actually it doesn't matter whether it's May or November. What it all depends on is you yourself—the eyes you look at life with. Because in reality November's so pretty damn dreary. Everything's withering and fading and dying right now; before you know it, it's winter and all of life's creatures are fighting for food more savagely, more bitterly than in the summer when there's plenty of food. If you go out into Frederiksberg Garden, where nice old ladies are feeding ducks and gulls French bread, you can see that the birds know the season, that they know that the point is to grab while the grabbing's good. They begrudge each other even the smallest crumb. And it's always the strongest and most brazen that are victorious. Now the nice little duck with the lustrous blue spot on its neck feathers had finally gotten hold of a piece of French bread, which, unfortunately for it, was so big that it couldn't be swallowed in one mouthful, and so it has to fight like crazy for its property right, it has to put up with being nipped by its own sisters and brothers, waddle over to the turf pursued by its own parents, fly across the water pursued by screeching gulls that naturally finally scare it into letting go of its little piece of French bread. The fear of hunger is so great that they begrudge one another a crumb. After all, they could
otherwise just stick around the nice ladies, who have a bag full and keep handing it out. But the brazen ones and the strong ones have always preferred to steal from others.

Naturally, November can be a cozy month for those who’re on the right side of the tracks. After all, there are plenty of colors, chrysanthemums, and motley foliage, Hubertusjagt in Deer Park in red coats, violet twilight, haze, gray sky, fogged atmosphere, and so on. In addition, they can go to the indoor swimming pool and convince themselves that the girls are still brown so that it obviously can’t be so long ago that it was summer. For them winter’s just a little breather in the permanent Danish summer, a little refreshing breather with furs, snow-covered woods, ice-skating on Lake Fuglesang and maybe a quick little trip to Norway’s sun and cold. And then of course cozy bridge evenings, good books, concerts, and theater premieres.

But for ordinary people, damn it, November’s dreary. Hopelessly dreary. Now you can’t put off buying coke any more; it’ll make heavy inroads into your budget, which is plenty cramped to begin with. The storm’s speeding across the country, sucking five Esbjerg cutters down into the deep and chilling thinly clad city people. Naturally, most of them have a winter coat, if not in the closet, then at the pawnshop, but for as long as possible they hate to start wearing it, faded and shabby as it is. Now the farm hands are coming from the countryside to the city to look for work: you can see them at the people’s kitchens and at the main railway station with their yellow rubber boots, big, red hands and worn-out appearance; this isn’t a season that calls on them to continue their trade—the fields are lying desolate and soggy from rain and heavy yellow mist clinging to the furrows. Now they’re plowing out there. And spreading dung.

The Royal Library garden’s so quiet—it’s like going into a convent garden. A couple of gardeners are going around taking up perennials. It’s November, the year’s dreariest month. At Hermitage Plain the deer roar and rattle their antlers against each other in fierce combat, Bennett’s advertising Christmas and New Year’s trips, the racing season closes in pouring rain, Titan jumps 4½ percent, it’s drizzling, the book season’s starting, it’s
getting dark early, and the Christmas tree that'll decorate City Hall Square next month has already been marked for felling.

III

And the way November really is, it fits the warehouse clerk’s mood splendidly. He’d thought that the sight of Anna on the back seat of the motorcycle would burn the wound clean so it would heal quickly, but instead it’s reopened the wound, infected it. The vision pursues him wherever he goes, tortures the joy out of his life and conjures up phantoms, which incite his hatred of the motorcyclist and Anna.

He mocks himself for his longing for a girl who’s engaged to someone else, ridicules himself by saying that maybe he can get the chance to become first reserve lover. Time and again he says to himself that he doesn’t love her and has never loved her, that if she hadn’t broken it off, he would’ve; it’s the humiliation at being jilted that’s done him in—her having rejected him. Of course he’s had other relationships and they all ended without making him unhappy. And that’s the way it would’ve gone this time too if she hadn’t suddenly thrown in his face that he wasn’t good enough for her. Of course that was ridiculous—who in the world did she think she was. Other girls like him and almost couldn’t be gotten rid of again, but she’d rejected him. What was so great about her since he supposedly wasn’t good enough for her. She wasn’t any great beauty—most people would probably even find her boring. Besides, they weren’t suited to each other erotically. In reality, he should be ecstatic over the fact that this warped, stupid relationship had now finally been terminated, ecstatic over the fact that he hadn’t married her—that, of course, would’ve been hell for his whole life. Just let the motorcyclist keep her—he’s welcome to her. Before a few months have passed, she’ll probably have taken a fancy to someone else, if in fact there was anyone at all who’d care to possess her. And those protruding eyes she had—god knows whether she had a propensity for Basedow’s disease or some such thing. In any
case, she was fickle and unpredictable, and life would’ve been hell if he’d swallowed the bait and married her. Thank god things went the way they did. When all’s said and done, maybe all these scenes were just something she’d arranged to awaken his jealousy and bind him more firmly to her. Why otherwise had she hailed him from the motorcycle—after all, he hadn’t seen her before she’d called his name. She knew, of course, that he liked to take a walk down Strøget at that time of evening and so she’d gotten an acquaintance to go for that drive. Maybe that was her brother when you get right down to it. And if it really was a new boyfriend she’d gotten herself, then he was, if anything, making a fool of himself if she was sitting on the backseat hailing other men. And if she’d met him and had stood around fiddling with his tie and so on. In any event, he wouldn’t care to be engaged that way. But one fine day the motorcyclist would surely realize what kind of creature she was and give her the boot, if he was a real man. Then maybe she’d come rolling up and try to make up for things, and then he’d show her that she was barking up the wrong tree.

Yeah, that was the lay of the land when push came to shove. It was good that he’d had his eyes opened to that. Finally a view of things that could calm him down and give him back his equilibrium, a view he desperately clung to. Naturally he knew perfectly well that it was a lie, knew that he loved the girl and would never ever come to love any other the way he’d loved her, knew that all these reflections were just fabrications that were calculated to comfort him, attempts to hoodwink himself. What could love otherwise be if not this constant, gnawing longing?

IV

Lundegaard had little by little grown accustomed to his street; he’s begun to feel at home there. Every evening he leaves his home on one pretext or another and sits down in the tavern over on the corner. In his current mood he simply can’t stand sitting home and listening to the sewing machine’s perpetual...
humming. Besides, why shouldn’t he be able to permit himself to go over and drink a beer. Other menfolk did. And they didn’t leave it at that: they played billiards and spent money on the girlies till they didn’t have a penny left when they came home. Of course, he wasn’t like that—he took his obligations seriously. But that was of course no reason for you to have to go and be a killjoy. There’s some action at the cafe. There’s light and cheerfulness in the cafe. So much light and cheerfulness that it penetrates out into the street and attracts marriage-weary menfolk. Once in a while sounds of women’s laughter and piano-strumming penetrate out through the door and are reflected back by the walls on the other side of the dreary street. Further on, across from the junk dealer, two police officers are standing and talking about the six-day race. In addition, they’re talking about how it’d be nice if it were 2 o’clock soon so they could go into the tavern and get the drink that is the Copenhagen tavern owners’ daily tribute to the custodians of law and order. It’s nice to be on good terms with the police. And it’s nice to be able to go in where it’s warm and have a highball or a toddy when you’ve been patrolling in the cold for a few hours.

And Lundegaard likes the atmosphere in the cafe, likes the smell of beer and tobacco smoke and the sound of the billiard balls caroming. It’s so cozy to sit there in a corner and suck on his cigar, take a slug of beer every now and then, so cozy to sit and watch people, the women, who aren’t afraid to be a little risqué, and drunken menfolk, who can get it into their heads to sing sentimental songs or dance around on the floor in the old-fashioned manner. Besides, it’s so fortunate that the girl in the jaguar fur, his woman friend, has now finally gotten a business. True, it’s not a business like the one she used to go around raving about and saving up for back then, but a business that’s simpler and more lucrative. A manicure parlor, with telephone, port wine, and subdued lighting. And if Lundegaard feels like a manicure, he can call from the tavern here and arrange a time, sit and enjoy his beer in peace and quiet and even enjoy his visit at the manicure parlor ahead of time. Naturally, the new arrangement also has its drawbacks: the girl’s busier now than before,
and there's no denying that Lundegaard felt a bit offended when she indicated to him that he had to buy a bottle of port if he wanted to keep sitting there and chatting. After all, little by little a kind of friendship has developed between them, and Lundegaard's fond of her company, fond of sitting and explaining his worries to her. And for her part, she's certainly also more indulgent toward him than toward the rest of her customers and lets him stay longer than his modest gift actually entitles him to.

Right now, of course, it's not the worries that are weighing him down, but his high-spirited expectations for the future he'd like to share with someone. And even though he's now going to be travelling around the country, he'll probably get time to visit the girl in the jaguar fur. His relationship to her is not solely erotically motivated; his visits to her are like stations on his trip, where he makes an account of how far he's gone and how much farther he has to go yet; he sees his life more clearly by hearing himself talk about it and outline his perspective. And whom else should he be telling about everything he feels deeply about without their obviously showing that they don't care to listen to it or straight out snapping at him. In any case, his wife would let him talk without listening and would demonstratively sit down to keep on sewing. In order to show him that it wasn't talk, but work that mattered. Of course, she lived the part of the righteous and injured party—that was the platform she lived on—and having become a Nazarene hadn't made it any better. On the contrary. The girl in the jaguar fur showed with smart questions that she understood how things were with him. She was becoming an axis in his life.

Incidentally, Lundegaard's spending quite a lot of money these days and earning less than he usually does. Without further ado he's spending left and right some of the money he collects; after all, it doesn't matter now that it's of course only a question of time—this chapter of his life, thank god, will of course soon be over. He catches himself counting the days, like a child counting the days till summer vacation or a convict counting the days till his release. Carlsen said he can call a few days into December—the boss would be back by then and Carl-
sen’ll have gotten to talk to him about Lundegaard. So the point’s just to kill the remaining time, and of course under these circumstances you lose your interest in running up and down the stairs in Sundby and presenting overdue bills to annoying people who only rack their brains over which excuse they’d prefer to use to get out of paying. Besides, it’s a pleasant thought that you can allow yourself to be a bit reckless without everything collapsing for that reason. That’s why he also didn’t think twice about borrowing 50 crowns from Carlsen one day he’d spent too much money and had run dry. From a tavern he called up Carl­sen’s firm and there hadn’t been the slightest problem. A momentary embarrassment and so on. And Carlsen seemed to be happy to do him a favor. Carlsen was a good guy—there should be several more of his kind, then life’d be less complicated.

All in all the thought of his future position made him more daring in his transactions. Quite as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he went up to see Mr. Salomonsen and explained to him that he couldn’t pay any installment this month, that to the contrary he wished to take out a new loan. Of course not a big loan, but a modest sum, which was necessary for him to be able to take up his position as travelling salesman. He even mentioned the firm’s name, and Mr. Salomonsen, without any further fuss, had given him the desired amount. In that way the new position had already made his life more pleasant even before he’d gotten it. It already dealt him better cards to hold and a different attitude toward life. Actually he already felt like a travelling salesman too. There’d been an article in the newspaper regarding travelling salesmen and Lundegaard had read it with a travelling salesman’s eyes and thoughts. The article, which was an attack on the travelling salesmen, made him indignant on behalf of his future profession. We travelling sales­men ought to protest against that sort of article, he thought.

V

Their home, the rear-tenement apartment, is no longer a
home, but just lodgings, a place where you live. Poul comes to visit at most a couple of times a week, Mrs. Lundegaard’s more haggard and more taciturn than ever, and Anna’s home only when she sleeps. You see her in fact only at dinner. As soon as she’s eaten, she’s out the door again. She comes home when the rest of them have gone to bed and gets up before them, makes her tea herself in the kitchen and eats with it the piece of French bread her mother buttered ahead of time in the evening. They hear her shout goodbye out in the entry hall and hear the door slam after her. She’s begun to be fond of her workplace, keenly works on getting ahead, and will probably end up as forewoman or something like that. Then at least she won’t need to be dependent on the menfolk either. Even if she took it into her head to get married, she’ll still keep her job and her independence. She doesn’t know anything worse than little whimperers who let the men dominate; she’s certainly going to have the right herself to share in making decisions. Besides, men always turn out to be a disappointment when you get up closer to them. Either they’re on their knees or else they’re superior and play the strong man who’ll certainly take care of everything. That’s why little by little she’s also thoroughly sick of the motorcyclist and once in a while longs for an antidote, longs for the warehouse clerk. Maybe all men are like that, and if that’s the case, then maybe the warehouse clerk’s after all the one she’d best be able to be reconciled to. And when she runs into him, sometimes she’s on the verge of wishing that he’d suggest to her going out with him some evening. But instead of saying anything along those lines, he just stands there looking at her imploringly. And as a woman, of course, she can’t possibly make the suggestion, let alone after what happened between them. That, of course, would ruin the relationship—if it were ever renewed—from the very start.

When she really considered it, maybe it was also more the motorcycle, the leather jacket, and all that stuff she’d fallen in love with than the man himself. And after the first intoxication of the speed and the motor had simmered down, it felt almost unpleasant to be straddling the back seat and desperately holding
on tight on the curves. The enjoyable part really was quickly overlooked. Besides, he drove recklessly in order to impress her, so she sat locked up in goggles and helmet without being able to see anything other than his back or to hear anything other than the noise of the motor, without thinking about anything but holding on tight and freezing with grace. Now, of course, it was winter, and on the back of a motorcycle the cold feels ten times worse than when you’re walking.

But so it didn’t look as though the warehouse clerk was so much of a real man that he’d come and say that he couldn’t do without her, that he was tired of playing hide and seek, and that he wanted to get engaged to her, with rings and everything, get married to her, and not let her go any more. If he came to her like that, she’d forgive him all his stupidities and mistakes, and they’d be able to get along splendidly.

But if he didn’t come and make up, and presumably he wasn’t going to, she wasn’t about to go mushy because of it. That was the only way the relationship could be renewed, and if it didn’t become a reality, there was nothing you could do about it. Besides, maybe there was something to it that once a relationship’s gone on the rocks, it can never be entirely all right again.

VI

On the next to last day of the month, Copenhagen showed its most disagreeable side and made people dream of Switzerland and the Riviera. It both rained and snowed and the damp, clammy cold penetrated into the houses and made people grumpy and surly. If it’d just been real snow, hard snow, but it was slush and raw weather. Real flu weather. It was already dark in the middle of the afternoon, and Lundegaard was just on the point of losing his good humor over having to go out to Sundby on such a day. But now the firm settled accounts every month and he had to see to pressing the greatest possible amount out of the debtors in order to be able to make it through the accounting. A bike was out of the question in this weather, and when he got to City Hall
Square and had to change to the number 2 line, it was naturally packed with wet, crabby, and mean people. He was pressed up into a corner of the platform and stood there half-freezing in his thin gabardine coat. Before he'd gotten to Knippels Bridge, he'd made up his mind that he'd be damned if he was going to run around in dark, cold stairways and quarrel with grumpy people on a day like this. Another solution had to be found. At Christianshavns Square he got off and went into an automat to drink a cup of coffee and get a little warmth in his body. Just 50 crowns would be able to help him past the first of the month and under these circumstances his brother certainly wouldn’t hesitate to lend it to him. Besides, it worked out splendidly that his brother had off in the afternoon these days: he had the transfer ticket in his pocket and could quickly and without expense get over to Islands Wharf. If his brother wasn’t home, of course there was nothing you could do about it; then he’d have to go out to Sundby after all and keep slogging away. Actually he’d decided never to approach his brother any more for loans, but now, when he could take up a decent position in a couple of days, it was something different.

Then he was sitting on the trolley again, got off at Lange Bridge and walked down Nials Street. It was his brother himself who answered the door. He didn’t turn out to be especially cordial at the sight of Lundegaard, but nevertheless pretended that he was glad for the visit. One of his children was sent to get bread, and his wife went out to make coffee. In the meantime Lundegaard had his brother to himself and had a splendid opportunity to state his business, but naturally he couldn’t manage to say it. The humiliation of having to ask for a loan appeared to him greater now that he was sitting here in the living room, and now when he was getting on his feet again, he’d be annoyed that once again he’d humbled himself. Maybe he’d manage the first of the month in spite of everything—after all, he’d managed it up till now. Besides, it was disgusting to have to say something like that when you’ve just come in the door. Preferably it should come totally naturally in the course of conversation, sort of purely in passing, as if it weren’t a matter of any great significance.
Then the coffee was ready and they sat down at the table. The wife wondered what’d actually made Lundegaard look them up like this in the middle of the afternoon—after all, they otherwise never saw him. His brother was thinking the same thing. Lundegaard was feeling uneasy and said something about having just come by and feeling like hearing how they were doing. His brother assured him a little ironically that they were doing just splendidly.

When they were finished with coffee, Lundegaard sat there thinking that he’d probably better leave again, go over to Sundby and try to get started, but the thought of the stairways filled him to such a degree with disgust that it swept all scruples aside, and regardless of the wife’s having put in an appearance, he began telling them about the new position he was going to take up in a couple of days and the expenses he’d been saddled with on that account. If he could borrow fifty crowns, he’d pay it back in a month.

One of the children absolutely wanted to get up and sit on his knee and call him Uncle August, and actually that suited him fine. He’d already seen on his brother’s face that he shouldn’t have stated his business. And seen in the wife’s face that he surely shouldn’t have stated it at all in front of her. And naturally Lundegaard had seen correctly: his brother uttered some commonplaces about the end of the month, rent, and all that stuff, that otherwise there wouldn’t have been any problem with it, and so on, and Lundegaard was quick to assure him that it didn’t matter—he’d surely manage anyway.

But still that was a lot of nerve when your own brother couldn’t do you that trifling favor under these circumstances. Lundegaard said goodbye and began trudging out to Sundby; the streets were dreary and slushy in the dusk and the cars splashed the slush on the pedestrians. Well, now, thank god, he was almost through with hopelessness and humiliations—in two days he could call Carlsen; maybe he could start right away. In any case, before long life would be different. Better.