

A NOVEL

Three Steps Behind

a story about never walking alone



TONY

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P R O L O G U E

He followed the edge where the asphalt met the cobblestones, that sharp line that was so easy to walk along. As long as he kept to it he knew where he was going, more or less. But the world tugged at him from every direction. A gull lifting off. A boat knocking against the jetty. A rope, thick as his own arm, lying sunning itself on the stone. He stopped at every one of them and half turned towards the giraffe, as if to say *look*, and the giraffe clattered forward its three steps and stopped as well. Ahead of him the pram rolled on. Mummy's shadow slid across the stones, long and calm, and he let it go in front of him like a thread to follow. He didn't need to look up very often. The shadow was there, and as long as it was there everything was as it should be. It was only when the cobblestones ran out that he really lifted his eyes. Because beyond them there was nothing left to walk along. Only light that trembled, and that stillness water has just before you understand that it is water.

The shadow had stopped. He looked up, and there she stood — Mummy, the pram, the whole world he came from, three steps away. As close as the giraffe had always been. He had not walked a single metre alone.

Mummy began taking things out of the pram, and perhaps a moment's rest was waiting now — for him and for

his friend, who had also stopped once no one was pulling the string any more.

Mummy always brought something extra nice along. Maybe it will be ice cream, he thought.

But what was set out was that jar food, and something to drink. So he knew the ice cream would have to wait until later. He just had time to think that he could whine a little — before a spoon was already on its way in, with something that actually looked rather good.

After a spoonful or two he had forgotten the ice cream for a while.

Now he was into his food, and he was determined to have a spoon of his own — because his friend had to have some too. He needed it. Someone so small, who had walked so far on that little body, it had to be hard work.

Mummy said he could pretend, that the giraffe could be fed off an empty spoon. But he didn't understand that. How was the giraffe supposed to grasp that there was no food on the spoon?

And what had happened to Mummy — didn't she need food and drink as well after that long walk? I'll bring that up when we get home, he thought. Because now Mummy had brought out the dessert.

Being a little lad with his friend in tow can be hard work. After the food and the dessert the boy had fallen asleep in the pram — and woke in a completely different place from the one he remembered last time he was awake.

Where am I? Why is the pram moving? Where is my friend?

He grew calmer when he felt the string still there in his hand. And there, on the shelf underneath, lay the giraffe, asleep as well. Good, he thought. So my friend got some food in the end. Because if he hadn't been given any by me, the giraffe would probably have turned really grumpy.

The pram rolled on, and the wheels sang against the stones in their own way — not sharp like the giraffe's wooden wheels, but in the same rhythm. Tightened and slackened, tightened and slackened, except that now no one was pulling. It simply went by itself.

He didn't need to hold the string tightly. It lay there in his hand anyway, soft, and at the other end his friend was sleeping. Ahead of him was Mummy's back, and behind them both the afternoon had begun to lean towards evening.

So he closed his eyes again. Someone else was carrying him now, someone else was keeping track of the way. And the last thing he thought, before sleep took him once more, was that it was good not to always have to know where you are going — as long as you have someone to not know it with.

CHAPTER 1

He had always known where his hands were. That a woman was now lying beside him was harder to explain. What actually happened last night?

The morning sun reminded him that a window needed opening in the caravan. He knew perfectly well how it was done. But she was lying on exactly the side he had to get across to reach it — and there, mid-movement, he was stopped.

He got past her and out of the caravan, but left the door ajar to let in a little fresh morning air. Once on his feet he went and fetched what he needed — the shower was in a trailer a little way off. Afterwards he brought back breakfast for the two of them. The staff who had made the sandwiches and brewed the coffee must have been up at the crack of dawn, he thought.

She opened her eyes when he came back. And when she saw what he was carrying — breakfast, put together for them both — the smile came before she had time to say anything.

“You’ve been up a long time,” she said.

“Someone has to,” he said, and set the tray down between them.

They ate for a while without saying very much. It wasn’t silent in an uncomfortable way — more the way it is when

two people don't yet know how much they are meant to say, and so let the coffee and the morning do the talking. He noticed that he didn't remember everything about the night before. But he remembered that it had been good. That would do for now.

Outside, the camp had begun to wake. He heard it before he saw it — a bucket rattling, someone whistling out of tune, and furthest off, beneath everything else, the low sound he always listened for first. The horses.

He put down his cup. "I have to go out to them," he said, and she nodded as if she already knew that sentence was coming.

He went out to the horses.

They heard him coming. One head after another turned towards him over the stall doors, ears pricking up, and one of them — the one he would fetch first — gave that low, almost murmuring whinny that was meant just for him. He took the halter from the hook where it hung, her hook, and she let him slip it on without moving from the spot.

He led her out towards the smaller paddock. The rope lay loose in his hand, tightened and slackened, tightened and slackened, and she walked half a head behind him — not because she had to, but because she wanted to. Neither of them pulled at the other.

Then the others, one at a time, impatient, with small stamps and snorts, until they all stood out in the morning light. The stalls had to be mucked out and put in order, and he set about it without really thinking; his hands could do this in their sleep.

This morning felt lighter. Perhaps it was the new woman — the one who had been helping him with the animals lately, the one still lying back in the caravan. He wasn't quite sure. But he let the moment be what it was, and enjoyed it.

Now he would brush his favourite — the one who could be quite contrary with the others who tended her, but who stood perfectly still for him.

Then he would plan for tomorrow's journey to the next place.

It had turned into a week at Fagerhult, a bit north of Jönköping. Now the whole circus was moving on towards Hammarö, just south of Karlstad. A fairly long haul.

Hammarö would be the season's last stop with the circus. After that he had holiday weeks to take, and then it was homewards — up to Mälarvägen 17 in Strängnäs, where his parents lived and where he had grown up himself.

But right now he was still at work, and that was enough daydreaming. It wasn't only the horses that had to be looked after; a circus company like this one had considerably more animals than that. And he was the one who carried the responsibility, together with his colleagues. Not just grooming and feeding, but paperwork too — feed to order, and everything else that came with keeping a whole menagerie alive.

And in the middle of it all the phone rang. A horse owner having a bit of trouble with his horse.

The man had been given a tip about him by a friend — about his feel for horses — and now that the circus was

nearby anyway he wondered whether he had time to come and at least take a look at her. He would of course be paid, and mileage on top of that. The owner lived in Järphult, ten minutes away by car.

They agreed on a time that evening, when he was off and the day's work was done.

Everything settled, and a proper lunch from the canteen in his stomach — then he set off for Järphult.

Calming a horse was something he could do in his sleep. Stay calm himself. Lower the horse's head. Speak in a quiet voice. Move it somewhere safe.

He stayed a couple of hours. When he felt the horse had settled enough, he wrote down a few pieces of advice on a slip of paper — things the owner could do himself to carry on, and keep the horse calm in the future.

Now he would head home and sleep, so as to manage tomorrow and the journey to Hammarö.

There was a great deal to do in the morning. Not just getting up early — everything around them had to be packed down into the wagons, and he reckoned they would be ready to roll around noon. There by evening. Some two hundred and forty kilometres, and with the whole convoy — heavy animal transports and stops for the animals — it still came to a journey of four or five hours.

One more week. He counted the days almost the way he had as a boy waiting for Father Christmas.

He had missed his parents. Most of all, perhaps, his mother's pork with onion sauce — and sitting and talking

quietly with his father about the things only the two of them could.

Both were retired now. But his father had written for years for *Strängnäs Tidning* about harness racing, about the races at Sundbyholm, and he knew it inside out. The bookshelf at home bore witness to it: breeding books, pedigrees, everything useful a man with an interest in trotting could wish for.

His mother had worked in a clothes shop in the centre of Strängnäs — women's wear and hats, nothing that had ever caught his interest.

The season's last performance stayed in the body in a different way from all the others. When the lights went out and the tent began to empty, everyone knew it was over for the year, and the departure from Hammarö was quieter than usual — as if even the animals could feel that something had gone to rest.

Then it was eastwards. Past Örebro, through Eskilstuna, mile after mile rolling by and leaving the summer behind. And it was as if every mile carried him closer to something more than a place on a map. A bridge of road and memory: the further east he came, the more clearly his childhood rose up in him. He drove, and he remembered, and he did not always know where the one ended and the other began.

Now he was on Enköpingsvägen, and the bridge across to Vargholmen was not far off. Soon the water would lie on both sides of him — and on the other side waited what had once been his entire world.