

THE IMPOSTOR



By Peter Seeberg

Translated by Anni Whissen

word by Niels Ingwersen

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Fugls Føde by Peter Seeberg

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by Anni Whissen

Afterword
by Niels Ingwersen

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1.

A chair scraped. Maybe someone was coming. He jumped up and hurried into the other room, where she was standing by the window looking out. He squeezed in next to her and put his arm around her soft waist, hoping to placate her. She had stayed in bed that morning, and they had not had a chance to talk yet.

'Is anyone coming, dear?' Tom said ingratiatingly and managed to push his head forward so he could see out.

'How should I know,' she snapped. Out on the road a boy of about ten stood and stared at the house. When he saw the two grown-ups standing close to the window, he lost courage and moved away a few steps with his head lowered until the hedge concealed him. But a little while later he appeared again with a forlorn look on his face. He disappeared a second time, but suddenly he came running all out of breath, gingerly making his way across the narrow boards that had been laid across the mud oozing from around the leaky pump hose, and a moment later he was hammering on the door.

Tom went to the door and opened it.

'Phone for you at the grocer's,' the boy yelled.

It was not the grocer's own delivery boy, Tom noticed.

The boy was already hurrying back over the narrow bridges, past the pump motor and the excavation, which was full of water with a bit of foundation jutting up here and there. Tom turned to Etna.

'I've got a phone call. I'd better run up to the grocer's. I'll bet you they've accepted one of my things.'

'Accepted?' she snapped.

'Want anything while I'm there?' Tom called while running around looking for his coat. 'What do we need? Couldn't we use a can of Portuguese sardines for lunch? And what about kerosene for the stove?'

'But you don't have any money,' Etna said in a flat voice.

'They'll just have to put it on the bill,' Tom shouted. 'I'll get us some lemon, too. I'll bet it's about my latest story.'

'More likely, it's the lawyer,' Etna said and sat down.

'When I'm done, we're going to take a trip, honey,' Tom said, putting one foot up on a chair to tie his shoelace.

'You haven't written one line yet,' she said.

'I have too,' he insisted.

'And just when was that, if I may ask?'

'To Italy,' he continued his train of thought.

When he got to the door, she looked up from her magazine.

'You come back again, you hear?' There was suddenly something urgent, dangerous in her voice.

'Of course, dear. Now, if it's your sister, is there any message? Think you'd like to go see her today? I bet it would do you good.'

Tom slipped out the door. Balancing from board to board in the mud, he stumbled and got the tip of his shoe wet in the slush, but he could wipe it off before he got to the grocer's. He would have to lay some more boards down. There were some in the neighbor's yard, and it couldn't do any harm to borrow a couple until there was a hard frost or the water had soaked into the ground.

He hurried down the poorly paved road, his collar up over his ears. The weather was miserable, as it had been all this fall. Rain and more rain. The summer, too, had been rainy and cold. They had been forced to sit inside and mope most of the time. Today it was sea fog that went right through you and that severed the last leaves from the skeletons of the trees. There would probably be a frost soon, and the day would come when they would have to give up and move in with their families until

spring came and they were beginning to think they couldn't do without each other, and they would move out to the house again and live these days that were so inevitable.

He was in a hurry as he always was when he walked by himself. It was in him to push forward, even though he was just as likely to turn back. He saw nothing around him as he walked. Other people would stop at the edge of the sidewalk and watch him hurry by, and children digging with little shovels in the gravel heaps hesitated for a moment, knowing instinctively that something had to be up if anyone was in that much of a hurry.

As he crossed the gravel in front of the grocery store, he was hailed by Bergstrøm, the grocer, who was pumping gas.

'Someone just called and asked for you.'

Tom continued his way toward the stairs and took them in three bounds. In the doorway he turned around and answered, 'It's probably from a magazine.'

'More likely it's someone who wants money,' Bergstrøm grinned, turning toward the driver.

Mrs. Bergstrøm was weighing sugar.

'Hello, Mrs. Bergstrøm,' Tom said. 'I'm sorry to be such a bother about the phone.'

'It does happen rather frequently,' she said, putting her index finger on the scales. 'Aren't you going to finish that house of yours someday soon? Really, you can't go on living the way you do.'

'Guess so,' Tom mumbled.

'It's a good thing you don't have any children,' the wife said. 'Children ought to have a real home. You can thank your lucky stars you don't have any. The phone is in there if that's what you're waiting for.'

'Thanks,' Tom said and raced into the office.

'The telephone was on the desk between heaps of invoices, but he couldn't miss the note. Tom found it right away. He read the number but didn't recognize it. While trying to guess who it might be, he caught sight of carton upon carton of cigarettes stacked on nearby shelves along the wall. He fished a pack out

of an open carton and put it in his pocket. Then he bent over and dialed the operator.

It took a while. He paced back and forth for a while with the receiver to his ear and then grabbed another pack of cigarettes. Glancing back over his shoulder, he was just about to slip it into his pocket when Mrs. Bergstrøm's eyes met his. Then he raised the pack in the air, waving it at her and smiling. At that moment the operator came on the line, and he asked for the number while trying to tear open the pack with one hand. He finally managed to fish out a cigarette and stood there playing with it in his hand.

The telephone rang. Tom put the cigarette in his mouth and sat down on top of the invoices with his legs up on the desk chair. He kept an eye on Mrs. Bergstrøm, who was in the process of arranging the paper money in neat stacks in the cash register.

'Hello,' someone said.

'Hello there,' Tom said, putting his cigarette behind his ear. 'You called. What can I do for you?'

'Is that you, Tom?' the voice said. 'It's really great I got hold of you. So you got out of the big city?'

'Hiffs, right?' Tom said. 'Sure, a man's got to get out in the country and have a little peace, you know, so I'm building a house out here and all.'

'How about that,' Hiffs said laughing. 'Wouldn't have thought you'd try that sort of thing.'

'Sure, why not?' Tom said. 'At least, that way the landlord can't throw you out. And if you want to write, you've got more peace and quiet. After all, there's no noise out here.'

'Keeping busy then?' Hiffs said.

'No, not really,' Tom said. 'You know how it is. You're your own boss. You do a lot of thinking and reminiscing and try to make something of it. I'm writing a novel, you know, and that's a bit harder than writing out invoices. You have to get started somehow.'

'Any chance you could come into town?' Hiffs said.

'Just where are you? Sounds tempting.'

'How about meeting me on the old pedestrian bridge,' Hiffs said.

'Fine with me.'

'So it's a date?'

'Sure, any special time?'

'I'll be in the area, so I'll be watching for you. And hey, try to get here as soon as you can,' Hiffs said with a quiet laugh.

'I'll be there,' Tom said.

'Good,' Hiffs said. 'See you.'

'Bye,' Tom said. He heard Hiffs hang up, but he still shouted, 'Say, have you got any money?'

It was too late. He waited a moment, then put the phone down and stuck the cigarette into the corner of his mouth. He went out into the shop.

'Thanks for letting me use your phone, Mrs. Bergstrøm,' he said. 'Could you let me have a box of matches and then put it on the bill with the cigarettes?'

'It really isn't customary here for people to help themselves,' Mrs. Bergstrøm said.

Tom scrutinized the shelves.

'Say, Mrs. Bergstrøm, would you happen to have some of those Portuguese sardines called "Nice"?'

'Do you have any idea how much you owe?'

'Ah, but now I'm getting money, Mrs. Bergstrøm. You'll have the whole amount by Saturday. Let me see what kind of sardines you've got.'

Mrs. Bergstrøm got out three or four cans and put them down with a bang one by one right in front of him.

'You haven't got any "Nice" sardines?'

'Just listen to him, "neese" this and "neese" that. Of course, we eat the Danish ones ourselves. They're cheaper!'

Tom paid no attention to anything she said.

'Let me have that can.' He put it in his pocket and made for the door. Bergstrøm was on his way up the stairs. Tom hurried out, moved aside, and took off down the road.

Bergstrøm looked after him through the store window.

'Did you give him anything?' he said.

'He helped himself,' the wife said.

'Might as well forget about that money . . .'

'You've got to tell him next time he comes that he can't get anything else here until he has paid up,' the wife said.

'Yeah, things have gone far enough,' Bergstrøm said seriously. 'Shouldn't we be sending him a letter?'

'No, you'll have to have a talk with him.'

'Okay, I'll see what I can do about it.'

Tom almost ran back to the house. He had no idea what it was Hiffs wanted of him, but he was sure there was something behind it. He could only guess at what that might be, but whatever it was, he figured something good, maybe even profitable, was bound to come of it; but the encouraging thing about it was the exhilarating feeling of being set in motion by somebody else who asked him to come and of suddenly being liberated from his own existence so that he could let himself drift weightlessly through the redeeming spheres of other people's decisions.

Hiffs was a strange fellow. Tom couldn't come up with any other term for the erratic intensity of his talents. He always had something cooking, original projects that he started, ran with, and then abandoned because they bored him or because he didn't want to get stuck. Money found its way into his pockets just as readily as into a bank, but he acted as if he didn't notice. That's the kind of guy you should latch on to. He would drop generous crumbs from his table, but Hiffs had never let Tom get anywhere, although Tom had been ready to transform himself into whatever it took for his sake. Hiffs had kept him at a distance and had never accepted one single offer of his services.

It was strange that he should call now, but Hiffs would always be Hiffs. He probably had use for him – he had used others before. They came and went, women of all kinds and men from all walks of life and with various points of view, and they always

seemed to fulfill his wishes satisfactorily, but either he never kept them, or they didn't keep him. He would disappear for a while and then pop up in new circles. But what did Hiffs want with him? He knew him only from chance meetings now and then, but there must have been some point to this series of coincidences, Tom thought, because now it seemed that Hiffs could finally use him.

Tom paid no attention to the mud splashing in his face as he ran across the boards in front of the house. He pushed the door open, took one long step into the room, and said, 'Now we'll get money. We can finish the house. It was one of my old buddies that called. He's got loads of money – in fact, money is no big deal to him.'

Etna looked up from her magazine.

'Aren't you a mess! How is it you always manage to get yourself so dirty? And just look at your face! What a sight you are!'

'And you know what?' Tom said. 'I got Mrs. Bergstrøm to let me have a can of sardines. You're welcome to have them for lunch. I've got to leave right away. You won't feel bad about that, will you? I also got cigarettes. You can have half the pack. That'll be something to keep you company, okay?'

'Thanks a lot. It's really great being stuck here all day.'

'When we get the house finished and the garden laid out, things will be much better, honey. I'm sure Hiffs has got something up his sleeve. I can just feel it.'

'And what have you got to offer?'

'That's not important. He's happy as long as you can help him shape an idea. The rest takes care of itself. It's nothing that takes any special talent, just good ideas, and those I've got plenty of.'

'You haven't even written one line of your book.'

'It's hard to get started, you know. It's a matter of finding the right words, Etna. You know how it is.'

'You've been sitting there staring out the window for eons. I can't go on like this. Here I sit, and here you sit, and nothing

ever happens, and you find any old excuse to take off every time you get the chance, and I wait and wait for you, and you don't come home, and when you do, you never bring anything with you.'

'Sure I do, Etna. I just now brought you a can of sardines.'

'I don't even like sardines.'

'Fine, I'll run up and exchange them.'

'You never do anything for me, not a thing. You just sit there and stare, and when I talk to you, you don't bother to answer.'

'I know, Etna, but now things will get better.'

Etna burst out laughing, but she stopped abruptly with a stifled 'You – you – you?'

When she had pulled herself together, her eyes filled with tears, but she stammered, 'You are a real nitwit.'

Now she's okay, Tom thought.

'But Etna,' he said, 'Etna . . .'

'Go wash your face,' she said.

He got out his handkerchief and spat on a corner of it.

'You pig,' she said. 'Are you going to rub spit all over your face? What a terrific guy I married. I was really stupid. What a mistake I made.'

Tom poured a little water into the basin and rinsed his face.

'You don't think I could have anybody else?' Etna said.

'Sure,' Tom said, 'but no one would love you as much as I do. You know that, Etna.'

'A lot of good it does,' she said, starting to sob, 'when I can't even tell.'

'No, Etna, I agree. That's my big failing,' Tom said, 'but I've got to run now, honey. Take care. Things will work out. I'm sure there's money in Hiffs.'

When Etna looked up, Tom was already down the three steps and on his way out toward the road.

She jumped up and opened the door.

'Do you have a clean handkerchief?' she said in a voice hoarse from crying. Tom turned around and pulled a large blue handkerchief out of his coat pocket, waving it as he continued to walk backwards.

'Here, look,' he yelled. 'It's almost clean.'

'All right,' she said in despair.

Tom waved to her with wild gestures, and she slowly pulled the door shut and plopped down into the wicker chair.

Tom walked down the path leading toward the main road and the square where the bus to the city stopped. The neighbor's dog followed him for a while and jumped up at him a couple of times, but he didn't notice; however, his instinct told him to cross the street and look away as he passed the butcher's shop, because the butcher had come out and called after him several times before when he had walked by.

At the bus stop a dozen women with small children were already waiting in line. Tom positioned himself several feet away and turned the pockets of his coat, jacket, and pants inside out without finding anything. He got impatient and walked back and forth along the edge of the sidewalk without knowing what to do. He continued his pacing until the bus stopped and the doors opened. Then he piously joined the line, which was being admitted in small groups.

'Downtown,' Tom said and alternately put his hands in his left and right pockets. 'You'll have to take my name down. I forgot my money. Well, I guess that won't matter, will it?'

The bus driver shook his head knowingly.

'Okāy,' Tom said and got off again. He made his way across the sidewalk and went into a tobacco shop, where he leaned with his hands on the counter and rocked back and forth in this position until the trim, balding tobacconist came through the door to the back room.

'May I help you?' he said.

'Listen,' Tom said, 'I wonder if you would be kind enough to help me out of a bind. I left my billfold at home, you see, and I've got to catch a bus downtown. Do you think you could let me exchange a pack of cigarettes for a couple of kroner? I've got the cigarettes right here, there's nothing wrong with them, I guarantee it, but if you'd just let me have a couple of kroner, you'd be doing me a big favor. I think I'd just have time enough