

# THE SOLITAIRE MYSTERY

A NOVEL ABOUT FAMILY  
AND DESTINY



JOSTEIN GAARDER

A decorative border of playing card symbols (spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs) arranged in a repeating pattern around the perimeter of the book cover.

# THE SOLITAIRE MYSTERY

JOSTEIN GAARDER

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*Translated by Sarah Jane Hails*

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THE  
SOLITAIRE  
MYSTERY



ALSO BY JOSTEIN GAARDER

*Sophie's World*

# CONTENTS

## SPADES

### ACE OF SPADES

*... a German soldier came biking along the country road ...*

9

### TWO OF SPADES

*... God is sitting in heaven laughing because people don't believe in Him ...*

17

### THREE OF SPADES

*... a little strange to decorate the forest floor so far away from people ...*

22

### FOUR OF SPADES

*... What I held in my hands was a little book ...*

28

### FIVE OF SPADES

*... I heard the old man walking around in the attic ...*

33

### SIX OF SPADES

*... a soda which is more than a thousand times better ...*

38

### SEVEN OF SPADES

*... a mysterious planet ...*

45

### EIGHT OF SPADES

*... like a whirlwind from foreign lands ...*

50

## CONTENTS

## NINE OF SPADES

*... he saw peculiar things everyone else was blind to ...*

57

## TEN OF SPADES

*... like distant islands I would never reach under this boat's sail ...*

62

## JACK OF SPADES

*... like polished chestnuts ...*

68

## QUEEN OF SPADES

*... these butterflies made a sound like birdsong ...*

75

## KING OF SPADES

*... close encounter of the fourth kind ...*

84

## CLUBS

## ACE OF CLUBS

*... exactly the same figures you'd find on playing cards ...*

91

## TWO OF CLUBS

*... He waved two tickets in the air ...*

98

## THREE OF CLUBS

*... a bit of a threesome ...*

103

## FOUR OF CLUBS

*... one huge lottery where only the winning tickets are visible ...*

109

## FIVE OF CLUBS

*... it had already become a bit difficult to play cards ...*

115

## CONTENTS

## SIX OF CLUBS

*... as though he had to make sure I was a real human being made  
of flesh and blood ...*

119

## SEVEN OF CLUBS

*... that enamel and ivory grew in my mouth ...*

128

## EIGHT OF CLUBS

*... If our brain was simple enough for us to understand it ...*

131

## NINE OF CLUBS

*... a sweet juice which glitters  
and tastes mildly sparkling or fizzy ...*

137

## TEN OF CLUBS

*... I couldn't understand how something could just grow out of nothing ...*

143

## JACK OF CLUBS

*... if the world is a magic trick, then there has to be a great magician, too ...*

146

## QUEEN OF CLUBS

*... could at least have signed the masterpiece before He took off ...*

153

## KING OF CLUBS

*... He thought it was downright annoying that  
he didn't know more about life and the world ...*

160

## J O K E R

*... He stole into the village like a poisonous snake ...*

167



## DIAMONDS

## ACE OF DIAMONDS

*... a fair man who wanted all the cards on the table ...*

177

## TWO OF DIAMONDS

*... Old master receives important message from the homeland ...*

183

## THREE OF DIAMONDS

*... She was drawn here by her own reflection ...*

190

## FOUR OF DIAMONDS

*... Her little hand was as cold as the morning dew ...*

195

## FIVE OF DIAMONDS

*... the unfortunate thing was that the drink I was given  
actually tasted sweet and good ...*

201

## SIX OF DIAMONDS

*... now and then they climbed down to mingle with the people ...*

204

## SEVEN OF DIAMONDS

*... a large costume party where the guests had been told to turn up as  
playing cards ...*

207

## EIGHT OF DIAMONDS

*... We are conjured up and tricked away ...*

214

## NINE OF DIAMONDS

*... we are all part of the same family ...*

219

## TEN OF DIAMONDS

*... a little figure peeping out from behind a newspaper stand ...*

226

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CONTENTS

JACK OF DIAMONDS

*... any vanity Dad had was associated with being a joker ...*  
230

QUEEN OF DIAMONDS

*... And then the small clown broke down and cried ...*  
235

KING OF DIAMONDS

*... we had to wear a bell around our necks ...*  
243

HEARTS

ACE OF HEARTS

*... When I turned the card over, I saw that it was the Ace of Hearts ...*  
249

TWO OF HEARTS

*... She is probably standing on a wide beach looking out over the sea ...*  
258

THREE OF HEARTS

*... a woman who was all dressed up and wearing a wide-brimmed hat ...*  
262

FOUR OF HEARTS

*... we don't know who is dealing the cards either ...*  
267

FIVE OF HEARTS

*... Now it was necessary to have nerves of steel and  
not to count my chickens before they hatched ...*  
272

SIX OF HEARTS

*... as real as the sun and the moon ...*  
277

SEVEN OF HEARTS

*... The sticky-bun man shouts down a magic funnel ...*  
283

## CONTENTS

## EIGHT OF HEARTS

*... such a fantastic miracle that it's hard to know  
whether one should laugh or cry ...*

287

## NINE OF HEARTS

*... the world is not mature enough to hear about Frode's playing cards ...*

293

## TEN OF HEARTS

*... there is a fool walking the earth who is never ravaged by time ...*

297

## JACK OF HEARTS

*... a little man rummaging around in the back seat ...*

300

## QUEEN OF HEARTS

*... then suddenly an elderly lady came out of the old pub ...*

304

## KING OF HEARTS

*... the memories float farther and farther away  
from that which once created them ...*

307

THE  
SOLITAIRE  
MYSTERY



## *In This Story You Will Meet*

**Hans Thomas**, who reads the sticky-bun book on his way to the philosophers' homeland

**Dad**, who grew up in Arendal as the illegitimate child of a German soldier, before running away to become a sailor

**Mommy**, who has lost herself in the fashion world

**Line**, who is Hans Thomas's grandma

**Grandpa**, who was sent to the eastern front in 1944

**The midget**, who gives Hans Thomas a magnifying glass

**A fat lady** in the pub in Dorf

**The old baker**, who gives Hans Thomas a glass of pear soda and four sticky buns in a paper bag

**A fortune-teller** and her extremely beautiful daughter, an American lady who splits herself in two, a Greek fashion agent, a Russian brain researcher, Socrates, King Oedipus, Plato, and a talkative waiter

## *In the Sticky-Bun Book You Will Also Meet*

**Ludwig**, who came over the mountains to Dorf in 1946

**Albert**, who grew up as an orphan after his mother passed away

**Baker Hans**, who was shipwrecked in 1842 on his way from Rotterdam to New York, before he settled down as a baker in Dorf

**Frode**, who was shipwrecked with a large cargo of silver in 1790 en route from Mexico to Spain

**Stine**, who was engaged to Frode and was pregnant when he left for Mexico

**The farmer Fritz André** and the storekeeper Heinrich Albrechts  
**52 playing cards**, including the Ace of Hearts, the Jack of Diamonds, and the King of Hearts

**The Joker**, who sees too deeply and too much

Six years have passed since I stood in front of the ruins of the ancient Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion and looked out across the Aegean Sea. Almost one and a half centuries have passed since Baker Hans arrived on the strange island in the Atlantic Ocean. And exactly two hundred years have passed since Frode was shipwrecked on his way from Mexico to Spain.

I have to go that far back in time to understand why Mommy ran away to Athens . . .

I would really like to think about something else. But I know I have to try to write everything down while there is still something of a child in me.

I am sitting by the living-room window at Hisøy, watching the leaves drift from the trees outside. The leaves sail down through the air and come to rest like a loose carpet on the street. A little girl wades through the horse chestnuts, which bounce and scatter between the garden fences.

It's as though nothing fits together anymore.

When I think about Frode's playing cards, it's as though all of nature has come apart at the seams.



