VINTAGE

I CURSE THE RIVER OF TIME

PER PETTERSON

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About the Book

It is 1989 and all over Europe Communism is crumbling. Arvid Jansen is in the throes of a divorce. At the same time, his mother is diagnosed with cancer. Over a few intense autumn days, we follow Arvid as he struggles to find a new footing in his life, while everything around him is changing at staggering speed. As he attempts to negotiate the present, he remembers holidays on the beach with his brothers, his early working life devoted to Communist ideals, courtship, and his relationship with his tough, independent mother – a relationship full of distance and unspoken pain that is central to Arvid’s life.

About the Author

Per Petterson was born in Oslo in 1952 and worked for several years as an unskilled labourer, a bookseller, a writer and a translator until he made his literary debut in 1987 with the short story collection *Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes*, which was widely acclaimed by critics. He made his literary breakthrough in 2003 with the novel *Out Stealing Horses*, which has been translated into forty languages so far and won many prizes, including the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize.

ALSO BY PER PETTERSON

To Siberia
In the Wake
Out Stealing Horses

To Steen

PER PETTERSON

I Curse the River of Time

TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEGIAN BY
Charlotte Barslund
with Per Petterson

VINTAGE BOOKS
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I

1

ALL THIS HAPPENED quite a few years ago. My mother had been unwell for some time. To put a stop to my brothers' nagging and my father's especially, she finally went to see the doctor she always saw, the doctor my family had used since the dawn of time. He must have been ancient at that point for I cannot recall ever *not* visiting him, nor can I recall him ever being young. I used him myself even though I now lived a good distance away.

After a brief check-up, this old family doctor swiftly referred her to Aker Hospital for further examination. Having been for several, no doubt painful, tests in rooms painted white, painted apple green, at the big hospital near the Sinsen junction on the side of Oslo I always like to think of as *our* side, the east side that is, she was told to go home and wait two weeks for the results. When they finally arrived, three weeks later rather than two, it turned out that she had stomach cancer. Her first reaction was as follows: Good Lord, here I've been lying awake night after night, year after year, especially when the children were small, terrified of dying from lung cancer, and then I get cancer of the stomach. What a waste of time!

My mother was like that. And she was a smoker, just as I have been my entire adult life. I know well those night-time moments when you lie in bed staring into the dark, with dry, aching eyes feeling life like ashes in your mouth, even

though I have probably worried more about my own life than leaving my children fatherless.

For a while she just sat at the kitchen table with the envelope in her hand, staring out of the window at the same lawn, the same white painted fence, the same clothes lines and the same row of identical grey houses she had been looking at for so many years, and she realised she did not like it here at all. She did not like all the rock in this country, did not like the spruce forests or the high plains, did not like the mountains. She could not see the mountains, but she knew they were everywhere out there leaving their mark, every single day, on the people who lived in Norway.

She stood up, went out into the hallway, made a call, replaced the receiver after a brief conversation and returned to the kitchen table to wait for my father. My father was retired and had been for some years, but she was fourteen years younger than him and still working; though today was her day off.

My father was out, he always had something he needed to see to, errands to run my mother was rarely told about, the results of which she never saw, but whatever conflicts there had been between them were settled long ago. There was a truce now. As long as he did not try to run her life, he was left in peace to run his own. She had even started to defend and protect him. If I uttered a word of criticism or took her side in a misguided attempt to support the women’s liberation, I was told to mind my own business. It is easy for you to criticise, she would say, who have had it all handed to you on a silver plate. You squirt.

As if my own life were plain sailing. I was heading full speed for a divorce. It was my first; I thought it was the end of the world. There were days I could not move from the kitchen to the bathroom without falling to my knees at least once before I could pull myself together and walk on.

When finally my father returned from whatever project he thought was the most urgent, something at Vålerenga no doubt, which was the place he was born, where I too had been born seven years after the end of the war, a place he often returned to, to meet up with men his own age and background, to see *the old boys*, as they called themselves, my mother was still sitting at the kitchen table. She was smoking a cigarette, a Salem, I guess, or perhaps a Cooly. If you were scared of lung cancer you ended up smoking menthols.

My father stood in the doorway with a well-worn bag in his hand, not unlike the one I used in years six and seven at school, we all carried a bag like that then, and for all I know it was the same one. In that case the bag was more than twenty-five years old.

'I'm leaving today,' my mother said.

'Where to?' my father said.

'Home.'

'Home,' he said. 'Today? Shouldn't we talk about it first? Don't I get a chance to think about it?'

'There's nothing to discuss,' my mother said. 'I've booked my ticket. I've just had a letter from Aker Hospital. I've got cancer.'

'You have cancer?'

'Yes. I've got stomach cancer. So now I have to go home for a bit.'

She still referred to Denmark as *home* when she spoke about the town she came from, in the far north of that small country, even though she had lived in Norway, in Oslo, for forty years exactly.

'But, do you want to go alone?' he said.

'Yes,' my mother said. 'That's what I want.'

And when she said it like this she knew my father would be hurt and upset, and that gave her no pleasure at all, on the contrary, he deserves better, she thought, after so much

life, but she did not feel she had a choice. She had to go on her own.

‘I probably won’t stay very long,’ she said. ‘Just a few days, and then I’ll be back. I have to go into hospital. I may need an operation. At least I hope so. In any case I’m catching the evening ferry.’

She looked at her watch.

‘And that’s in three hours. I’d best go upstairs and pack my things.’

They lived in a terraced house with a kitchen and a living room on the ground floor and three small bedrooms and a tiny bathroom on the first. I grew up in that house. I knew every crinkle in the wallpaper, every crack in the floorboards, every terrifying corner in the cellar. It was cheap housing. If you kicked the wall hard enough, your foot would crash into your neighbour’s living room.

She stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and stood up. My father had not moved, he was still standing in the doorway with the bag in one hand, the other insecurely raised in her direction. He had never been a champ when it came to physical contact, not outside the boxing ring, and frankly, it was not her strong point either, but now she pushed my father aside, carefully, almost lovingly so that she could get past. And he let her do it, but with so much reluctance, both firm and slow, it was enough for her to understand he wanted to give her something tangible, a sign, without putting it into words. But it’s too late for that, she told herself, far too late, she said, but he could not hear her. Yet she allowed my father to hold her up long enough for him to understand there was enough between them after forty years together and four sons, even though one of them had already died, for them to live in the same house still, in the same flat, and wait for each other and not just run off when something important had happened.

The ferry she was travelling on, which we all travelled on when we headed south, was called the *Holger Danske*. Later she was docked and turned into a shelter for refugees, in Stockholm first, I've found out, and then in Malmö, and was now stripped down to scrap metal on some beach in Asia, in India or Bangladesh, but in the days I am talking about here, she still sailed between Oslo and this town in the far north of Jutland, the very town my mother grew up in.

She liked that boat and thought its poor reputation was unfair; *Not a Chanske*, as she was popularly known, but it was a much better ship, she thought, than the floating casinos which sail the route today, where the opportunities for drinking yourself senseless have become senselessly many and even though the *Holger Danske* might have rolled a bit from side to side when the weather was bad, that did not mean she was about to go down the great drain. I have thrown up on board the *Holger Danske* myself and never gave it a thought.

My mother was fond of the crew. With time she had made friends with many of them, for it was a small ship, and they knew who *she* was and greeted her as one of their own when she came up the gangway.

Perhaps on this occasion they noticed a new gravity in her manner, in her walk, in the way she looked around her, as she often would with a smile on her lips that was *not* a smile as there was nothing to smile about that anyone could see, but it was how she looked when her mind was somewhere else and definitely not in a place that those around her could have guessed. I thought she looked especially pretty then. Her skin was smooth and her eyes took on a strange, clear shine. As a small boy I often sat watching her when she was not aware I was in the room or perhaps had forgotten I was there, and that could make me feel lonely and abandoned. But it was exciting, too, for she looked like a woman in a film on TV, like Greta Garbo in

Queen Christina lost in thought at the ship's bow close to the end of the film on her way to some other more spiritual place, and yet somehow she had managed to enter our kitchen and stop there for a while to sit on one of the red kitchen chairs with a smoking cigarette between her fingers and a so far untouched and unsolved crossword open in front of her on the table. Or she might look like Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca* as she had the same hairstyle and the same curve along her cheek, but my mother would never have said: *You have to think for both of us* to Humphrey Bogart. Not to anyone.

If the crew of the *Holger Danske* had picked up on this or any other change in her way of greeting them when she crossed the gangway with her small brown suitcase of imitation leather, which is mine now and I still use wherever I go, there was no remark to that effect and I think she was grateful for that.

When she had found her cabin, she placed the suitcase on a chair, took a glass from the shelf above the sink, cleaned it carefully before she opened the suitcase and pulled out a half-bottle from underneath her clothes. It was Upper Ten, her favourite brand of whisky when she drank the hard liquor, which she did, I think, more often than we were aware of. Not that it was any of our business, but my brothers considered Upper Ten to be cheap shit, at least when you had access to duty free goods. They preferred malt whisky, Glenfiddich, or Chivas Regal which was sold on the ferry to Denmark, and they would hold forth at length about the distinctive caress of the single malt on your palate and other such nonsense, and we mocked my mother for her poor taste. Then she would give us an icy stare and say:

'And you are *my* sons? Snobs?'

And she would say: 'If you want to sin, it better sting.' And the truth is that I agreed with her, and to be honest I,

too, bought the Norwegian label Upper Ten the few times I mustered the courage to go to the wine monopoly, and Upper Ten was neither single malt nor mild on your palate; on the contrary, it made your throat burn and the tears well up in your eyes unless you were prepared for the first mouthful. This is not to say that it was *bad* whisky, only that it was cheap.

My mother twisted the top off the bottle with a sudden movement and she filled the glass roughly three-quarters full, drained it in two gulps, and it burned her mouth and her throat so badly she had to cough, and then she cried a little too as she was already in pain. Then she put the bottle back under the clothes in her suitcase as if it were contraband she was carrying and the customs officers were at the door with their crowbars and handcuffs, and she washed her tears away in front of the mirror above the tap and dried her face and tugged at her clothes the way plump women nearly always do, before she went upstairs to the cafeteria which was a modest cafeteria in every sense of the word, and the menu was modest and manageable the way she liked it, and that made the *Holger Danske* the perfect boat.

She brought with her the book she was reading, and she was always reading, always had a book tucked into her bag, and if Günter Grass had published a novel recently, it was very likely the one she was carrying, in German. When I stopped reading books in German shortly after I left school for the simple reason I no longer had to, she dressed me down and told me I was intellectually lazy, and I defended myself and said I was not; it was a matter of principle, I said, because I hated the Nazis. That enraged her. She pointed a trembling index finger at my nose and said, what do you know about Germany and German history and what happened there? You squirt. She would often call me that. You squirt, she said, and it is true that I was not tall of stature, but then neither was she. But I was fit, I always

have been, and the nickname ‘squirt’ implied both meanings: that I was fairly short of stature, like she was, and at the same time fit, like my father was, and that perhaps she liked me that way. At least I hoped she did. So when she dressed me down and called me a squirt, I was never in serious trouble. And I did not know that much about Germany at the time of this conversation. She had a point.

I cannot imagine she craved company in the cafeteria on board the *Holger Danske* and approached a table to engage someone in conversation, to find out what their thoughts were and what their dreams, for they were of her kind and had the same background, or the opposite, because they were different too, and it is in the way we differ that you find what is interesting, what is possible, she believed, and she searched for those differences and got a great deal out of them. On this occasion she sat down, alone, at a table for two and ate in silence and concentrated on her book over coffee after her meal, and when her cup was empty she tucked the book under her arm and stood up. The very moment her body left the chair, she felt so exhausted she thought she would collapse there and then and never stand up again. She clung to the edge of the table, the world drifted like the ferry did, and she had no idea how she would manage to get through the cafeteria, past the reception and down the stairs. And yet she did. She took a deep breath and walked with quiet determination between the tables, down the stairs to the cabins, and she had the expression on her face which I have already described, and only a few times did she lean against the wall for support before she found her cabin door, pulled the key from her coat pocket, and locked the door behind her. The minute she sat down on her bed, she poured a large measure of Upper Ten into her glass and downed it in three quick gulps, and she cried when it hurt.

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AFTER MY MOTHER had crossed the gangway of the *Holger Danske* and stepped on to the quay in the North Jutland town which was the town she grew up in and still referred to as home after forty years of fixed abode in Oslo, she walked along the harbourfront with the small brown suitcase in her hand and onwards past the shipyard which, in fact, had not been shut down, back then in the Eighties, when almost all other shipyards in Denmark collapsed like houses of cards. She walked past the old whitewashed gunpowder tower of Admiral Tordenskjold, which the town council had moved to the spot where it now stood from where it stood before, one hundred and fifty metres closer to the water. They had dug under the tower and laid down well worn railway sleepers, a giant winch was installed, and more than one thousand litres of soft soap were used to make the whole thing glide. And they did it. They dragged tons and tons of stone tower, centimetre by centimetre to its new location, which had been prepared in every possible way, so they could build a new dry dock for the shipyard without sacrificing one of the town's very few attractions. But it was a long time now since that operation had been carried out and she was really not quite sure if the story about the soft soap and the railway sleepers was entirely true; it did sound a bit odd, and she was not there when it happened. She was in Norway at the time,

kidnapped by fate, like a hostage almost, but they did succeed. The tower had definitely been moved.

Three years earlier her father had been buried (irritable and impatient as he always had been) in the Fladstrand Church cemetery that bordered the lovely park, Plantagen, which shared with the cemetery its trees, shared its beech and ash and maple, in the same plot where her mother, wide eyed and confused, had lain down almost willingly two years before, where her brother had lain for thirty-five years, dazed and unwillingly after too short a life.

A dove was looking down from atop the family gravestone. It was made from metal so it could not fly away, but sometimes it went missing all the same and only a spike would remain. Someone had taken that dove, someone out there maybe had an entire collection of doves and angels and other small, Christian bronze sculptures in a cupboard at home and on long evenings would close the curtains and take them out and run his fingers gently over the smooth, cold bodies. Every time someone nicked the dove, she had to order a new one from the undertakers just up the road and ask them to put it back. Maybe they did not do a very good job. The dove had gone missing three times in three years.

When she visited the cemetery these days, she could no longer leave it as she used to and walk or cycle past the care home to a flat in the centre of the town with an outside toilet, in a street which ran from the high street to the harbour, Lodsgade, it was called, and point to the windows, to the potted plants on the first floor, and say that this was where she had belonged, this was where she had become the person she was and then point to the window in the small room on the ground floor next to her mother’s dairy shop, and try to say something about who her brother had been, and fail. Nor could she drop by in the early morning and knock on the door behind the open cast iron gate with fresh rolls in a paper bag, having just arrived on

the ferry from Norway. No one would open that door. It was no longer her street. So she did not walk up Lodsgade and into town, instead she walked along the harbour with a strange flickering sensation in her chest, still there after three years, and right up to the new railway station where she hailed a taxi. It signalled and pulled away from the kerb in the direction of Nordre Strandvej and drove past the nautical school and Tordenskjold's Redoubt, concealed behind its neatly manicured ramparts and cannons, behind the tall poplars along the road, and then past the rowing club. They had a cafeteria there, and she often sat at a table with a Carlsberg by the glass wall facing the small harbour and the sea, looking out at the little blue and red boats chugging in through the narrow entrance in the breakwater, to dock or to go back out again with fishing tackle on board, but then only as a hobby, as all serious fishing along this coast had died out several years ago.

The taxi drove on across the windswept open stretch of marram grass and sand and scrub, which the wind kept down at knee height one year after the other, and the sea lay taut this early morning like a blue-grey porous skin and the sky above the sea was as white as milk. Where the tarmac turned into gravel, the car pulled in between the ancient dog roses and gnarled pine trees and the whole trip lasted no more than a quarter of an hour. It was odd, she thought, for it felt like driving in slow motion, the gentle mist outside the car window, the grey light across the water, and the island out there where the beams from the lighthouse still cast pale, lazy flashes, and the last rosehips still hung from the bushes, each of them glowing red, blue almost, like little Chinese lanterns. When she looked out the opposite window, her head turned slowly from one side to the other, she moistened her lips with her tongue, looked down at her hands and slowly moved her fingers, and her skin felt numb and stiff, and she smiled for no reason.