



VINTAGE

# TO SIBERIA

PER PETTERSON

## **Contents**

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Per Petterson

Dedication

Title Page

### **Part I**

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

### **Part II**

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

### **Part III**

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Copyright

## About the Book

In the bitter cold of Danish Jutland, where the sea freezes over and the Nazis have yet to invade, a young girl dreams of one day going on a great journey to Siberia, while her beloved brother Jesper yearns for the warmer climes of Morocco. Their home, with a pious mother who sings hymns all day and a silent father, is as cold as their surroundings. But the unshakeable bond between brother and sister creates a vital warmth which glows in spite of the chill and the dark clouds that threaten to overtake their dreams.

## About the Author

Per Petterson, born in 1952, was a bookseller before publishing his first work, a volume of short stories, in 1987. Since then he has written five novels, which have established his reputation as one of Norway's best fiction writers. *Out Stealing Horses* was awarded both the Norwegian Bookseller's Prize, the Critics' Award for best novel and won the 12<sup>th</sup> International IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize in 2007. *In the Wake* (in Anne Born's translation) was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

Anne Born, poet, critic and historian, has translated many works from the principal Scandinavian languages into English, including two other novels by Per Petterson.

ALSO BY PER PETTERSON

*In The Wake*  
*Out Stealing Horses*

*To Marit and Mona*

# To Siberia

Per Petterson

Translated by  
Anne Born

VINTAGE BOOKS  
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# 1

WHEN I WAS a little girl of six or seven I was always scared when we passed the lions on our way out of town. I was sure Lucifer felt as I did, for he always put on speed at that very place. I did not realise until much later it was because my grandfather whipped him up sharply on the way down the gentle slope past the gateway where the lions were, and *that* was because Grandfather was an impatient man. It was a well known fact.

The lions were yellow and I sat at the rear of the trap dangling my legs, alone or with my brother Jesper, with my back towards Grandfather, watching the lions diminishing up there. They turned their heads and stared at me with yellow eyes. They were made of stone, as were the plinths they lay on, but all the same their staring made my chest burn and gave me a hollow feeling inside. I could not take my eyes off them. Each time I tried to look down at the gravelled road instead, I turned dizzy and felt I was falling.

"They're coming! They're coming!" shouted my brother, who knew all about those lions, and I looked up again and saw them coming. They tore themselves free of the stone blocks and grew larger, and I jumped off the trap heedless of the speed, grazed my knees on the gravel and ran out into the nearest field. There were roe deer and stags in the forest beyond the field, and I thought about that as I ran.

"Can't you leave the lass alone!" bellowed my grandfather. I stopped running, there was dew on the grass and my ankles were wet, I felt stubble and stalks and rough ground under my bare feet. Grandfather pulled in the reins and shouted at the horse and the trap came to a halt; he

turned round and out of his beard a stream of oaths as foul as the devil himself could utter poured over Jesper's head. My grandfather was a man full of wrath and in the end I always had to stand up for my brother, for there was no way I could live without him.

I walked across the grass to the road again, climbed on to the trap and smiled at Jesper. Grandfather cracked the whip and Lucifer moved off and Jesper smiled back.

I walk the same road with my father. It is Christmas time. I am nine years old. It is unusually cold today, hoar frost and leafless poplars line the fields beside the road. Something grey moves at the grey edge of the forest, the thin legs of deer step stiffly and frosty mist comes in puffs from their soft muzzles, I can see it though I'm a long way away. You could touch the air, like glass, and everything seems very close. I am wearing my cap and scarf, my hands are thrust deep into my coat pockets. There is a hole in one, I can feel the lining on the inside. Now and then I look up at him. There's a bulge at the top of his back, almost like a hump. He got that out in the fields and he is never going back there, he says. My father is a carpenter in town, Grandfather gave him a workshop when he left the farm.

He grits his teeth. He is bare-headed and he looks straight in front of him with red-rimmed eyes, his ears are white with frost and I can't stop looking at them. They are like porcelain. His arm rises and stops before it gets right up, and he almost forces it down again. When we are halfway I take my hand out of my pocket to hold his, and he takes it without looking down and squeezes it lightly, but I am doing it because *he* is the one who is cold.

When we pass the lions we don't turn to look at them, he because he is just looking straight ahead anyway and I because I do not want to. We are going out to the farm. My mother is there already, and my uncles and Jesper are there, and my father walks stiffly and does not hurry. We

have come three kilometres from town, it is the 24th December and then I turn round after all. The lions lie on their plinths covered with greyish white shining ice. Yesterday it rained and then came the frost, and now they are caged and look like my father's ears, two porcelain lions on guard before the avenue leading to Bangsbo Manor where Hans Christian Andersen stayed when he came as far north as this, the tall hat in the low rooms, a black streak of a man who always had to bend his head, on his way in, on his way out.

I try to walk faster, I am worried about his ears, I have heard they can fall off, but he keeps on at the same speed. I pull him by the arm and then he gets cross.

"Stop that, can't you!" he snaps and pulls me back in place roughly and this is the first thing he has said since we stepped out of the door in Asylgade. My father is fond of Jesper. I am fond of my father. Jesper is fond of me, but he likes to tease me, frighten me in the dark with death's heads, pull me under water in the summer. I can stand it, it makes me feel like him. I am walking alone with my father, it is Christmas and his ears are made of porcelain. I'm afraid they will fall off and he does not touch them the whole five kilometres to the farm.

There are four farms in Vrangbæk and they are all called Vrangbæk, it is quite a small village. There are some children there, they go to Vangen School in Understed. I might have been one of them, but I'm not, and "You should be glad about that," Jesper always tells me. We turn down left at the crossroads where the road straight ahead winds across the fields to Gærum and the one to the right goes up to North Vrangbæk. We pass the first barn of stone and brick, my father walks if anything still slower and more stiffly and keeps a firm hold on my hand. The road takes a sharp bend with a steep slope on one side paved with round stones at the lowest point, it looks like a stone wall but is there to stop the earth sliding on to the road after rain and

barring the way. We are going to the last farm, they are close together and near the road, so you can just walk straight into the big cobbled yard with the dung heap in the middle. Everything is glazed with a layer of shining ice. The cobblestones leading to the door are slippery.

The first person I catch sight of is Jesper, he has seen us from the window. He stands waiting at the living-room door. Behind him I see the Christmas tree and the window on the opposite side with frost flowers halfway up the panes. It looks pretty. I hear my mother's voice. She is a Christian, her voice is Christian. She has one foot on earth and one in heaven. Jesper smiles as if we share a secret. Maybe we do, I do not remember. My father goes straight over to the big tiled stove. It is rumbling, I can see it is hot because the air around it quivers and I feel it on my face and he goes so close I'm afraid he is going to press his forehead to the tiles. I take off my coat and he lifts his arms like a puppet on a string and presses his hands to his ears. In the living room my mother sings "Chime ye bells", and Jesper gazes at me and over at the man standing in front of the stove. I hold my coat in my arms and see his crooked back and jutting jawbones and the white frosty vapour running out between his fingers.

The attic at the farm was icy cold and usually in half darkness with only one paraffin lamp I had to turn off as soon as I had gone up the stairs. There was a small window on the east side and the bed was under the window and kneeling on it I could talk to Jesper in the evenings when it was summer time and look out at the stars in winter and a spruce hedge and a Chinese garden from another world and then just rolling fields right out to the sea. Sometimes in the night I would wake up under the coarse heavy duvet thinking I had heard the sea filling the room, and I opened my eyes and it was just as dark as when I shut them again. The darkness lay close to my face and I thought, it doesn't

make any difference whether I can see or not. But there *was* a difference, and I would be frightened, for the darkness was big and heavy and full of sounds and I knew if I did not shut my eyes quickly I would be smothered. But when I wasn't frightened it was like being lifted up to float in space with a wind through my heart.

I lie in bed looking into the dark and everything is black and then it turns grey, for the moon has come out. I can't hear the sea. It is frozen like everything else, frozen and quiet. I do not think I am dreaming any more.

Someone is knocking. That is why I woke up, I remember now. I wait and the knocking comes again and I get up from under the duvet which has warmed through at last and walk across the cold floor in my nightdress to where I know the door is. More knocking. It is not the door, it's the window. I turn round and see a shadow moving against the moonlight in front of the window. It is Jesper. I know it's Jesper.

"Let me in," he whispers loudly, breathing warmth on the glass. I run over to the bed and jump up on to it knees first and open the window. A cold gust rushes in, it chills my chest and stomach and my thoughts turn sharp at the edges. I remember everything, the porcelain lions and porcelain ears and Grandmother's straight neck and Grandfather and my mother's frail voice fluttering in the room like a thin veil we all tend to ignore. Jesper hangs on to the eaves with one hand and has one foot on the window sill. He has my boots around his neck with the laces knotted behind his head.

"Get dressed and come with me," he says.

"All right," I say.

I have a will of my own, I do not do everything I'm told, but I *want* to be with Jesper. He does things that are original, I like that and I am wide awake now. He swings himself in and sits on the bed waiting and he smiles the whole time. I hurry to put my clothes on. They are lying on a chair and

they're very cold. The moon shines in through the open window and makes silver circles on the bedposts, on a pitcher, on an alarm clock whose hands have always stood still.

"What's the time?" I ask.

"Haven't a clue." He smiles so his teeth shine in the semi-darkness. I start laughing, but then he puts his finger to his lips. I nod and do the same and then I find my woollen underwear and pull it on and the heavy skirt and a sweater. I have brought my coat up to my room with me, it hangs over the chair back. Jesper hands me my boots, and when I am ready we climb out.

"Don't be scared, just do what I do," he says.

I'm not scared, and I just do what he does, it is not difficult when we do it in time with each other, he goes first and I follow, it is like a dance only the two of us know and we dance along the roof until we come to the end where a birch reaches up with strong branches and there we climb down. Jesper goes first, and I follow him.

We keep away from the road and the wing where the grown-ups' bedrooms are and go through the Chinese garden in the moonlight to get out into the fields. There are narrow paths and frozen shrubs and dead flowers in the garden and a winding artificial stream with frozen water, and there are several little wooden bridges across the stream. Carp swim in the stream in summer and maybe they are still there, underneath the ice. As we cross the bridges the woodwork creaks so loudly I am afraid it will wake the people in the house. When the moon goes behind a cloud I stop and wait.

"Jesper, wait," I call softly, but he does not wait before he is through the garden and into the first field. Then he turns round and there is moonlight again and I catch up with him.

We walk across the fields, at first we wind upwards and then down on the other side till we can see the sea and we throw shadows as we walk. I have never been outside like

this, never had a shadow at night. My coat is lit up in front by the moon and Jesper's back is completely dark. When we stop and look out over the ice it is white at first and then shining and then just the open sea.

Jesper takes something from his pocket and puts it in his mouth and lights a match. And then he blows out. There is a scent of cigar. He says:

"It won't be long before I'm going to do what Ernst Bremer did. Get hold of a fast boat and go to Sweden and come back with enough booze for everyone who wants to get really drunk. I shall make money and smoke cigars. But I shall only drink on Saturdays. And then only two glasses."

Jesper is twelve. Ernst Bremer is a smuggler. He is the greatest of them all and everyone knows who he is. A short man from Gothenburg who has a house in the street beyond ours where he stays when no one is after him. I have seen him walk past in a grey coat, with his dark hair parted in the middle and sometimes wearing a beret. He has been in the papers lots of times, once with a drawing by Storm Petersen showing him cocking a snook at the customs officers, and when the boys are out in the evening they do not play cops and robbers, but Ernst Bremer and customs men. He is better than Robin Hood. My father bought a bottle off him one summer, but when my mother realised where it came from she made him pour it out on to the flower bed. None of the flowers died, although she said it was poison.

Jesper blows grey smoke at the sea, and then he coughs and spits.

"Phoo!" he says, "but I'll need some practice first."

My mother is velvet, my mother is iron. My father often stays silent and sometimes over dinner he picks up the burning hot pan by its iron handle and holds it until I have filled my plate, and when he puts it back I can see the red marks on his hand.

"Hans Christian Andersen stayed at Bangsbo," I say although I know Jesper knows this and he says:



"I know," and we walk beside the water for a while and up a steep dune and back again across the fields. We have the moon on our backs and the shadow is in front and that is worse straight away. I don't like it even though I see the house clearly when we get to the top. It is dark down the slope. The wind is getting up, I keep my hand on one cheek, for it is freezing, then some clouds start to gather and I can barely see. We go round the garden instead of through it and come up to the house where the barn stands at an angle, and Jesper goes right across to the barn alongside the spruce hedge and puts his face to the nearest window. The whitewashed walls are as murky as fog, and he shades his eyes with one hand as if there were reflections and sunlight outside, but it is dark and I can't see what he is looking at and he says:

"Jesus Christ, Grandfather has hanged himself in the cowshed."

"No!" I cry and cannot think why he chose to say just that, but I have often thought about it since, in all the years that have passed until now.

"Yes," he says, "come over and see." I don't want to see, I feel sick even though I know it is not true, but still I run over and put my face beside his. It's completely dark, I can't see anything.

"I can't see anything. You haven't seen anything, it's all dark." I press my face to the pane, there is a smell of cowshed in there, there is a smell of cold and Jesper starts to chuckle. Suddenly I feel how cold it is.

"I'm freezing."

"We'll go in then," he says, and stops laughing.

"I don't want to go in yet. It's colder inside. I won't be able to sleep either."

"I mean into the cowshed. It's warm there."

We go round the barn over the cobbles as far as the cowshed door. It creaks when we open it and I wonder if Grandfather is hanging there, perhaps I shall walk straight

into his legs, perhaps they'll swing to and fro. But he is not hanging there and it's suddenly warmer, the smell is a smell I know. Jesper goes in among the stalls. There are a lot of them, there are twenty-five cows, it is not a small farm, they have labourers. Grandmother had worked in the kitchen before she was married to Grandfather. She wore a white apron then but she has never done so since. She is mother to my father, not to his brothers, and no time was wasted before that wedding once Hedvig was in her grave, so my mother told us. Grandmother and Grandfather are hardly ever in the same room together, and when they are Grandmother holds her head high and her neck stiff. Everyone can see it.

I stand there getting used to the heavy darkness. I hear Jesper's steps inside and the cows shifting about in the stalls, and I know without seeing them that most of them are lying down, they're sleeping, they're chewing, they bump their horns against the low dividing walls and fill the darkness with deep sounds.

"Come on then," says Jesper, and now I can see him right at the end, and I walk softly down the middle past the stalls, careful not to tread in the muck along the sides of the walkway. Jesper laughs quietly and starts to sing about those who walk the narrow path and not the broad road towards the pearly gates in the blue, and he mimics my mother's voice and he does it so well I would have burst out laughing, but dared not in the presence of all these animals.

"Come on now, Sistermine," says Jesper, and then I step all the way up to where he is and he takes hold of my coat. "Are you still cold?"

"A bit."

"Then you must do this," he says, enters one of the stalls and pushes his way in between the wall and the cow lying there. He squats down and strokes her back and talks in a low voice I do not often hear him use, and she turns her head and edges nervously towards the far wall, but then she

quietens down. He strokes her harder and harder and then cautiously lies down on her back, quite stiff at first and when he feels it is safe he goes limp and just lies there like a big dark patch on the patched cow. "Big animals have a lot of heat," he says, "like a stove, you try it." His voice is sleepy, and I do not know if I can manage, but now I'm sleepy too, so sleepy that if I don't lie down soon I shall fall over.

"Try the next stall," says Jesper, "that's Dorit, she's friendly."

I stand in the walkway and hear Jesper breathing calmly and look in at Dorit in her stall until her broad back stands out clearly and then I take a big step over the gutter but not quite big enough, but now I don't care, I'm too sleepy. I bend down and stroke Dorit's back.

"You have to say something, you must talk to her," says Jesper from behind the wall, but I do not know what to say, all the ideas I think of are things I cannot say aloud. It is cramped in the stall, if Dorit turns round I shall be squeezed against the wall. I stroke her neck and lean forward more and start to tell the story of the steadfast tin soldier into her ear, and she listens and I know Jesper is listening behind the wall. When I reach the end where the tin soldier bursts into flames and is melting, I lie down on her and put my arms around her neck and tell her how the puff of wind comes in at the window and lifts up the ballerina and carries her through the room into the fire where she flares up like a shooting star and dies out, and when I have finished I dare not breathe. But Dorit is amiable, she hardly moves, just chews and the warmth of her body spreads through my coat, I feel it on my stomach and slowly I start to breathe again. It is Christmas Eve 1934 and Jesper and I lie there each in our stall each on our own cow in a cowshed where all things breathe and perhaps we fall asleep, for I do not remember anything very clearly after that.

## 2

THE TOWN WE lived in was a provincial one at that time, in the far north of the country, almost as far as it was possible to travel from Copenhagen and still have streets to walk along. But we had earthworks going back two hundred years, and a shipyard with more than a hundred workers and a lunch-break siren that could be heard all over the town at noon. We had a harbour for fishing boats where the throbbing of the trawlers' motors never stopped, and boats came in from the capital, from Sweden and from Norway. If you took the swaying wooden staircase to Pikkerbakken up from Møllehuset and stood by the viewpoint at the top, you could see the sea like an enormous painting when the big boats turned in towards the two lighthouses on the breakwater. From the height of Pikkerbakken the sea looked as if it *hung* rather than lay.

I remember how we stood on the quay watching the swells go down the gangway from the Copenhagen boat. They had travelled first class and now they were going to Frydenstrand health resort for the bathing or further on to Skagen by train to rent holiday houses or stay at hotels for the summer weeks. The men wore straw boaters and the ladies' dresses were bright in the sunshine. The upper-class people of Copenhagen had just discovered Skagen and a special railway line ran from the harbour to take them to the station although it was only a few blocks away. I watched porters in uniform carrying their suitcases over to the train, and I thought it might be an aim in life, to have someone to carry your suitcases for you.