



PER PETTERSON

I Refuse

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
Out Stealing Horses

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About the Book

'Tommy. How long have we been friends.'

'All of our lives,' Tommy said.

'I can't remember us ever not being friends. When would that have been.' Jim said. 'I think it could last the rest of our lives,' he said carefully, in a low voice. 'Don't you think.'

'It will last if we want it to. It depends on us. We can be friends for as long as we want to.'

Tommy's mother has gone. She walked out into the snow one night, leaving him and his sisters with their violent father. Without his best friend Jim, Tommy would be in trouble. But Jim has challenges of his own which will disrupt their precious friendship.

About the Author

Per Petterson was born in Oslo in 1952 and worked for several years as an unskilled labourer and a bookseller. He made his literary breakthrough in 2003 with the prizewinning novel *Out Stealing Horses*, which has been published in forty-nine languages and won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

ALSO BY PER PETTERSON

To Siberia
In the Wake
Out Stealing Horses
I Curse the River of Time
It's Fine By Me
Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes

to Øivind

I Refuse

Per Petterson

Translated from the Norwegian

By

Don Bartlett



Harvill Secker
LONDON

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JIM · SEPTEMBER 2006

DARK. IT WAS half past four in the morning. I was driving towards Herregårdsveien from Hauketo. Just before Ljan station I turned off to the left over the railway bridge, the lights were red, but there was no one else around, so I turned anyway. When I was over the crossing and further down the road, past the shop there, they called it Karusellen, a man plunged out of the darkness into the headlights of my car. He was about to fall when I saw him. I hit the brakes, the wheels locked and the car skidded sideways for a few metres with a sickening squeal and stopped right by him. The engine died. I was certain I had hit him with the bumper.

And then he didn't fall. He leaned against the bonnet, took three steps back and swayed. I saw the light flooding in through his eyes. He stared at the windscreen, but he couldn't see me, he couldn't see anything. His hair was long, and his beard was long, and he had a grey bag tucked tightly up under his arm. For a moment I thought it was my father. But it wasn't my father. I had never seen my father.

Then he was lost in the darkness on the other side of the road, where the path led steeply down into Ljansdalen. I sat with my arms straight out in front of me, my hands pressed hard against the wheel and the rear of the car halfway into the opposite lane. It was still dark. Darker, even. Two headlights approached from down the hill. I twisted the key, but the car wouldn't start, and I tried again and then it burst into life. I felt my breath at the top of my throat, I was panting, the way a dog does. I backed into the right-hand lane before the other car could reach me, and I turned and

drove slowly down to Mosseveien and turned right at the bottom, towards Oslo.

Back then, during Jens Stoltenberg's first red-green coalition government, I lived to the north-east of Oslo, in Romerike, and yet less and less I drove the easy way into Oslo - along the E6, but instead made a long detour around our capital in the east, from Lillestrøm via Enebakk to Hauketo, because it brought back sweet memories.

Of course it was a lot further that way and took more time, but it was not so important, I had been off work for a whole year and had no idea what would happen next. A letter from Social Security came in the post telling me to show up at their office, but I guessed I wouldn't have to go back to work straight away. As long as I remembered to take my pills, one day slid nicely into another.

I drove at just under the speed limit along Mosseveien to the suspension bridge connecting the island of Ulvøya to the mainland. There was still no traffic. I moved slowly across the bridge as it swayed beneath me, a nice feeling, as if on the deck of a boat, I liked that feeling.

I parked in the lay-by to the right, on the bend there, and leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes and waited. Breathing from my stomach. Then I opened the door and swung my legs out and walked around the car and took out the old, black bag with the fishing equipment in it. Nothing fancy, a bait rig with a line and twenty hooks and a weight at the end.

The regulars were already there, standing alongside the railings, where they had stood for ten years or more. I was the only newcomer for perhaps just as many years, but no one asked me why I had suddenly appeared. I had been coming here at least twice a week for three months now.

The man closest to me turned when I stepped on to the bridge, the bag in my hand. He saluted with three fingers to

his cap, like a Boy Scout. He had two sweaters on, one over the other, the top one blue, the one underneath white, well, off-white, and they were both in rags, they called him Container Jon. On his hands he had fingerless mittens, or maybe they were normal gloves he had cut the fingers off. I had seen newspaper boys do the same. These ones were an unexpected reddish colour, pink, almost.

'Any bites,' I said. He didn't answer, but smiled and pointed to the newspaper he had spread out on the ground by his feet. On it were a medium-sized cod and two mackerel, one still wriggling. He winked with his left eye and raised his right hand and flashed five fingers three times.

'In fifteen minutes,' I said with a low whistle.

A plastic bag had been tossed up against the railings, ICA, Co-op, whatever, it wasn't his, that's for sure, and two scrunched-up paper cups likewise tossed, and a light-coloured paper napkin smeared with ketchup and mustard, and further up a tangled mass of lousy fishing line. Container Jon coughed a few times with a mitten covering his mouth, it was an ominously hollow sound, and he turned and said into the darkness:

'Damn foreigners. Fishing during daytime.'

I walked past him and stopped between two suspension cables. Each stretch between two cables had been given a number, this was the niner. Then I loosened the last hook from the rig and pulled out half a metre of line and leaned over the railings. With a few clumsy twists of my wrist I let the line with the weight on the end slowly unwind from the bait rig and into the water. Around the top of each hook I had wound a bit of shiny, red tape. When my uncle did some serious fishing a little further south from here, in the Bunnefjord not far from Roald Amundsen's house, in a rowing boat he had hired free and for nothing, he always used mussels as bait. He wanted salt water to fish in, this was right at the beginning of the 1960s, and he drove for

miles and miles in the grey Volvo PV to walk in his high waders in the shallows out by Bekkensten quay with the shiny surface of the water only just below the tops of his boots and his shirtsleeves rolled up in a vain attempt to keep them dry each time he bent over to catch the mussels and put them in a bucket cut in half that was floating in front him.

But all this was too much trouble for me, and I certainly didn't go anywhere near the distance he did to get his bait, and the fish didn't bite any different for me than they did for my uncle back in those days. You don't need bait, the others on the bridge said, they'll go for anything shiny.

I fixed a wheel hub I got off a bike to the railings, using mudguard struts to secure it firmly around the top handrail, it was called a windlass, that kind of device, and was usually attached to the gunwale of fishing boats and you could probably buy it in a shop if you wanted, but this was my personal patent. I placed the fishing line in the groove and in that way I could gently raise or lower it without the line wearing thin on the railings until eventually, it snapped with a loud crack. Which of course had happened to general amusement.

Day was slowly breaking. I had been standing there for more than two hours and hadn't had a single bite. It annoyed me, but frankly, fish wasn't my favourite dish any more. Not like it was in the past. The fish I did catch, I always gave away.

As a rule I drove home before the first cars came down the hill towards the bridge, but today I had frittered my time away. I hadn't even started to pack my bag, and the cars that were coming were classy cars, expensive cars. I turned my back to the road, my frayed navy blue reefer jacket wrapped tightly round me. I'd had that jacket ever since I was a boy in Mørk, and only one of the old brass buttons was still intact, and I had a woollen cap on as blue as the

jacket, pulled down over my ears, so from behind I could have been anyone.

I tied the bait rig to the railing, turned round and crouched down to take a cigarette from the pack I had in my bag. I really ought to stop smoking, I had started to cough in the mornings, it was a bad sign, and then a car stopped right in front of me with the window on the driver's side level with my face. I had the cigarette between my lips, and as I stood up, I lit it with a match behind my cupped hand. I always used matches, I didn't like that plastic.

It was a grey Mercedes, brand new, and the paintwork was shiny as skin can be shiny at certain times, in certain situations. Then the window slid down without a sound.

'It's Jim, isn't it,' he said.

I knew him at once. It was Tommy. His hair had thinned and was greying. But the horizontal scar above his left eye was still evident, white, luminous silver. He was wearing a purple coat buttoned to the throat. It didn't look cheap. He was the same, and yet he looked like Jon Voight in *Enemy of the State*. Leather gloves. Blue eyes. Slightly out of focus.

'I guess it is,' I said.

'Well, I'll be damned. How long has it been. Twenty-five years. Thirty.' And I said:

'About that. A bit more.'

He smiled. 'We each went our separate ways that time, didn't we.' He said it neither this nor that way.

'That's true,' I said. He smiled, he was happy to see me, or so it seemed.

'And here you are on this bridge, fishing, with your cap on, and here I come, in this car. It didn't come cheap, I can tell you that much. But I can afford it. Hell, I could have bought two, or more, if I wanted, cash down. Isn't it strange,' he said with a smile.

'What's strange.'

'The way things can turn out. The opposite.'

The opposite, I thought. Was that it. But he didn't say it to put me down. He never would have, not if he was who he was when we were young. He just thought it was strange.

'Yes,' I said. 'You may be right. It is pretty strange.'

'Fish biting,' he said.

'Not worth a shit,' I said. 'I guess it's not my day.'

'But you don't need the fish, do you. I mean, for eating or anything, you know what I mean.'

'No,' I said.

'Because if you did, I could help you,' he said, and I said nothing, and then he said: 'That was badly put, I'm sorry,' and his face went a bright red, and it looked like maybe he drank a little too much.

'That's all right,' I said.

It wasn't all right, but he was so important back then. We went through thick and thin.

More cars came down the hill towards the bridge, there was only one lane, so they queued up behind him, and inside one car someone leaned on the horn.

'It was really good to see you, Jim. Maybe another time then,' he said, and I felt a little uncomfortable when he said my name, like having the beam of a torch straight into my face, and I didn't know what he meant by 'another time', or what would happen if there was. Then the tinted window slid up. He raised his hand, and the car set off, picking up speed over the bridge, and turned left at the other end, heading for the city. It was almost day now. It would be a clear one.

I wound the line round the bait rig as clumsily as I'd unwound it and tucked the last hook inside the roll and walked by the railings with the weight dangling and flicked the cigarette I had barely smoked over the edge, over the cable, in a glowing arc towards the water and put the rig in my bag and the bag in the boot and closed the lid and walked round to the passenger side, by the bushes, right at the end, and fell to my knees and wrapped my arms tight

round my body and tried to breathe slowly, but I couldn't do it. I started to cry. I held my mouth wide open, the noise wasn't as loud then, and the air flowed easier in and out, and I didn't groan so much. It was a bit odd.

It took time for the rushes of pain to subside, I had to get exhausted first. So I let it take its course. It's strange what you can teach yourself. Finally I stood up with one hand against the car door, wiped my face with the other and walked back around the car. The others on the bridge were busy with their own affairs. Three of them were about to leave. I got in. I was the only one of us with a car. I didn't know where the others lived, but I guessed it wouldn't be too far away if they could walk. Or maybe they just took the bus, if there was one. One time I asked if anyone wanted a lift, and they all said no.

Across the bridge, I chose the shortest route home, which was straight through Oslo city centre although the queue was building up on Mosseveien. Then I had to go in through the toll gates, it cost twenty kroner, but if I had taken the simplest route to get to the bridge instead of the detour I now preferred, there was a toll gate on that side too, coming in from the east, so it was even money.

I drove out of town in the opposite direction to the one I came in, and in my lane, heading east, there was hardly any traffic and little competition for space. In the opposite lane they were all going in to the city centre, bumper to bumper, links in a chain, barely moving, while on my side I was driving into the tunnels by Vålerenga, Etterstad, and then out into the morning light along the E6 and off to the right towards Lillestrøm, past Karihaugen, and the entire Lørenskog area was under reconstruction, had been demolished and razed to the ground and was now being hauled up again with shopping malls and multi-storey car parks, and there were bottomless craters everywhere and cranes and hillsides sliced off like pieces of bread after the

Solheim crossroads. And it was autumn already, September, well into it, and the few trees that were left in scattered clusters either side of the motorway glowed dimly red and yellow, and cold, damp air came rushing in through the open window on my way towards Rælingen Tunnel.

From the garage I walked the stairway two floors up to the ground floor and unlocked the door to the three-room apartment where I lived alone. I was tired. I stretched my neck and a few times rolled my head in a circle and took off my shoes and placed them with their heels against the skirting board, right below the coats hanging from their pegs on the wall, and hung the reefer jacket on one of them and put my fishing gear in a large metal box with a picture of a good-looking rooster on the lid, which had once contained a selection of the finest biscuits from the Sætre Kjeks factory and pushed it on to a shelf in the closet and went to the bathroom and filled my hands and carefully washed my face. I studied myself in the mirror. The skin was dark under my eyes, and my eyes were red in the corners by the bridge of my nose. I must have been driving under the influence. It didn't strike me until now.

I rubbed my face hard with the towel and walked in my stockinged feet through the living room to the bedroom and peered in. She was still asleep. Her dark hair on the pillow. Her unfamiliar lips. I stood on the threshold waiting. One minute, two minutes, then I turned round and walked to the sofa and sat down at the coffee table and lit a cigarette. I could only smoke half of it. I would have to give it up soon. I could try this week.

I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and stood up and walked to the hall and found a blanket in the closet and walked back and lay down on the sofa. My eyes were so sore. My eyelids would barely open and close, and the skin on my face chafed stiff and dry like a mask against my cheekbones. I was sure I wouldn't sleep. But I did, and when

I woke up she was gone. I tried to remember her name, but it was gone with her.

TOMMY · 1962

TOMMY, TOMMY! HURRY, Tommy!

It was Tya calling, it was my mother, I could hear her so clearly, I remember that I did, but today I cannot remember what it was that made her voice hers, what made it different from others. It faded a long time ago.

I, Tommy Berggren, remember how cold it was that day, below freezing point, and I turned ten the day she called me. *Tommy, Tommy! Hurry, Tommy!* she called, and I ran down the flagstone path to the postbox and on to the road where I saw the stiff sheets hanging on the washing lines like stretched canvases in front of every house and they were just as stiff when the women took them down, they stood out like flags in the wind, like white flags, I surrender, they said.

I ran for all I was worth when I heard her calling me, *Tommy! Tommy!* she shouted, but I couldn't see her, couldn't hear where her voice was coming from. I ran in circles, round and round staring up the road, staring down, but there was no one out there on the road, and I ran down the path between our house and the next and further across the field, after the dip, and we used to play in the dip, Jim and I, because they couldn't see us from the windows. And there she was, I could see my mother by the low ridges, in her grey cape between the birches, in her warm coat in Birch Woods, we all called it, and the crooked pine was the tallest and was split from the top right down to the middle and from there it grew up again like two completely different trees and the one didn't know what the other was doing. Lightning had struck the pine tree exactly on the night that I

was born, someone had said, perhaps my father said, but I didn't believe it, lightning striking, on the day I was born, come on, there were no thunderstorms at that time of year, and later in the day Jim was supposed to come, he was coming after dinner, to have cake.

Behind Birch Woods the field went up to the ridge, and I ran as fast as I could, and our school was on the other side of the ridge, in Mørk, and we went there in the school bus every morning, every single day except Sunday. There had been a farm by Birch Woods called Bjørkerud, but now it was gone, along with the barn and hen houses and all the things you were supposed to find on a farm, like the tractor was gone and the plough behind the barn and the horse's harness from the stable wall and the dog's leash and the storehouse on pillars was gone and had been for all my living days, not a stone left standing. There was a pond there too, that had belonged to the farm, and there were ducks in the pond, or so my father said, he even said they had a house built on stilts in the water, a little house, the ducks' house that is, when the farm was a farm. And what was more, the people who lived on the farm used the greenish water in the pond as their drinking water, my father said, and it sounded so sickening with the ducks swimming around in the green water doing all kinds of things in it, that anyone could drink that water.

And that's what I was thinking about as I raced away, that someone had drunk that devilish green water. I could see it before me as I ran, I could see them drinking it, their mouths opening to the glass, and it was from down by the pond that my mother was calling me, *Tommy! Tommy!* she called, *Hurry! Hurry! He's drowning!* And then I pushed myself even harder, and I couldn't feel my feet touching the ground, but of course they were, my feet, they were touching the ground, I couldn't fly for God's sake, but on the path down to the pond they were lost to me, for there was someone drowning and my mother couldn't swim.

It was a dog. It was Lobo in the water. I saw his dark head, and his grey beard, just sticking up from the pond, and he was stretching his neck for all he was worth. He looked so tired, he was old and his legs were so full of rheumatism that the joints could hardly bend, and every single day he made the trip up to the Slettens' house on his four stiff legs to get a good sniff at close range and find out if their bitch was on heat. It took him twenty minutes up and twenty minutes down, and the bitch *was* on heat, she was on heat about twice a year, on the dot, like all bitches of the right age were, but Lobo had trouble mounting her from the rear, and it didn't look stylish, no, it did not. Besides, he didn't have it in him, everyone knew that, and no one could be bothered to chase him away, why would they. Let the dog have some fun for God's sake, Sletten said, his days are numbered.

He had a pistol in the kitchen drawer, my father said. Sletten had.

She couldn't swim, but Lobo couldn't either, not with those sticks for legs, and I ran straight past her in her grey coat and threw myself into the pond. A thin sheet of ice had settled on the water overnight and was still there, and I hit it and it cracked around me like flatbread, and the water was cold, cold, cold. I grabbed his collar with one hand and was treading the green water and it wasn't easy, moving forward with my shoes on, and my clothes, and Lobo's feet couldn't touch the bottom of the Bjørkerud pond and neither could mine. It was slippery, and sticky, and I had to drag him as I swam, and a few times I tried to push off with the tips of my toes, like I did when I took my swimming badge, but I couldn't reach and Lobo couldn't help me. He tried, but his body was like an anchor, a dead weight I had to pull through the water, and his black coat was short, so he must have been frozen stiff, Lobo, like the rest of him was stiff. I was just a boy then, he was older than me, but we had never

been friends. I thought he was shifty, a sneaky lurker always on the lookout for a screw, and what the hell were you doing in the pond, I said, were you thirsty, Lobo, and I was so fond of that dog, I really was, I wouldn't have been without him, not for a single day, and why did you come here for a drink, Lobo, I said, were you so thirsty, I said, was it too far to walk home.

At long last I felt solid ground beneath my feet, and I hauled Lobo up the muddy slope at the end of the pond where the double pine was holding on tight with its long, gnarled and twisted roots, and my teeth were chattering beyond control, and they grew bigger in my mouth, and Lobo keeled over on to the grass like a block of wood. He was breathing in long gasps with a whistle at the back of his throat. Soon he would draw his last breath, a few more gasps and he was done for, no question about it. But then he just kept breathing, and I stood up in my sodden clothes. I was so cold. Everything was a sticky green, there were sticky green stripes across my wet, blue jumper, and in my mouth there wasn't room for one more tooth, and my mother said to me, *There's a good boy, Tommy.*

TOMMY · SPRING 2006 · 1966

THE TELEPHONE RANG in my office. I had just taken the lift from the garage and got out on the ninth floor in the new high-rise in Oslo close to the harbour front. I was still thinking about Jim. The bag. The reefer jacket. The dark woollen cap. Once upon a time his clothes had been so stylish, he was the first to have long hair out where we lived, the first to wear flared hipster pants, a reefer jacket and a neckerchief. A long-haired sailor on dry land. He looked fantastic.

It was Upper Romerike police district calling. I said:

‘Hello, this is Tommy.’

I was a bit out of breath, I hadn’t run a metre. I drank too much, that was why.

‘Could you come up here and collect your father.’

‘I don’t think my father’s alive,’ I said, and the policeman said:

‘He’s not so sprightly at the moment, I’ll give you that, but he’s not dead.’

‘Are you certain it’s *my* father,’ I said. ‘How can you know,’ and the policeman said:

‘Who else could it be.’

I had been so sure he was dead. I tried to work out how old he might be now. Seventy-five, maybe. Or even older. So he was alive. It was hard to imagine.

Back then, in 1966, we lived in Mørk. My father was a dustman. He worked on a dustcart. He was the man who stood on the footplate with his hands in gloves and the gloves round the steel bar at the back where the shiny, curved shutter door slammed down like a huge bureau top