

THE TRUE DECEIVER

TOVE JANSSON (1914–2001) was born in Helsinki into Finland's Swedish-speaking minority. Her father was a sculptor and her mother a graphic designer and illustrator. Winters were spent in the family's art-filled studio and summers in a fisherman's cottage on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, a setting that would later figure in Jansson's writing for adults and children. Jansson loved books as a child and set out from an early age to be an artist; her first illustration was published when she was fifteen years old; four years later a picture book appeared under a pseudonym. After attending art schools in both Stockholm and Paris, she returned to Helsinki, where in the 1940s and '50s she won acclaim for her paintings and murals. From 1929 until 1953 Jansson drew humorous illustrations and political cartoons for the left-leaning anti-Fascist Finnish-Swedish magazine *Garm*, and it was there that what was to become Jansson's most famous creation, Moomintroll, a hippopotamus-like character with a dreamy disposition, made his first appearance. Jansson went on to write about the adventures of Moomintroll, the Moomin family, and their curious friends in a long-running comic strip and in a series of books for children that have been translated throughout the world, inspiring films, several television series, an opera, and theme parks in Finland and Japan. Jansson also wrote novels and short stories for adults, of which *The Sculptor's Daughter*, *The Summer Book*, *Sun City*, *Fair Play*, and *The True Deceiver* have been translated into English. In 1994 she was awarded

the Prize of the Swedish Academy. Jansson and her companion, the artist Tuulikki Pietilä, continued to live part-time in a cottage on the remote outer edge of the Finnish archipelago until 1991.

THOMAS TEAL has translated Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book*, *Sun City*, and *Fair Play*.

ALI SMITH is the author of seven works of fiction, including the novel *Hotel World*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 2001, and *The Accidental*, which won the Whitbread Award in 2005 and was short-listed for the 2005 Man Booker Prize.

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For Maya

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IT WAS AN ORDINARY DARK WINTER MORNING, and snow was still falling. No window in the village showed a light. Katri screened the lamp so she wouldn't wake her brother while she made coffee and put the Thermos beside his bed. The room was very cold. The big dog lay by the door and looked at her with his nose between his paws, waiting for her to take him out.

It had been snowing along the coast for a month. As far back as anyone could remember, there hadn't been this much snow, this steady snow piling up against doors and windows and weighing down roofs and never stopping even for an hour. Paths filled with snow as quickly as they were shovelled out. The cold made work in the boat sheds impossible. People woke up late because there was no longer any morning. The village lay soundless under untouched snow until the children were let out and dug tunnels and caves and shrieked and were left to themselves. They were forbidden to throw snowballs at Katri Kling's window but did it anyway. She lived in the attic over the storekeeper's shop with her brother Mats and her big dog that had no name. Before dawn she would go out with the dog and walk down the village

street towards the lighthouse on the point. She did this every morning, and people starting to get up would say, It's still snowing and there she goes again with her dog and she's wearing her wolfskin collar. It's unnatural not giving your dog a name; all dogs should have names.

People said of Katri that she didn't care about anything except numbers and her brother. And they wondered where she'd got her yellow eyes. Mats's eyes were as blue as their mother's had been, and no one could really remember what their father looked like, it was so long ago he'd gone off north to buy a load of timber and never come back – he'd not been a local man. People were used to the fact that everyone's eyes were more or less blue, but Katri's eyes were nearly as yellow as her dog's. She looked at the world around her through eyes narrowed to slits, so people seldom discovered their unnatural colour, more yellow than grey. But her perpetual distrust, so easily roused, could cause her eyes to open in a sudden straight stare, and in a certain light they were actually yellow and made people very uneasy. People sensed that Katri Kling did not trust or care about anyone except herself and the brother she had raised and protected since he was six years old. That kept people at a distance, that and the fact that no one had ever seen the nameless dog wag its tail. And the fact that the Kling woman and her dog accepted friendliness from no one.

After her mother died, Katri took over helping in the shop, where she also did the accounts. She was very clever. But in October she quit. It was thought that the store-keeper wanted her out of the building but didn't dare say

so. The boy Mats didn't count. He was fifteen, ten years younger than his sister, tall and strong and considered a bit simple. He did odd jobs in the village but mostly hung out in the Liljeberg brothers' boat shed when work hadn't stopped because of the cold. The Liljebergs gave him small jobs that were not too important.

There hadn't been any fishing in Västerby for a long time. It didn't pay. There were three sheds that built boats, and one of them took in boats on slips for winter storage and overhaul. The best builders were the Liljeberg brothers. There were four of them, all unmarried. The eldest was Edvard, who designed the boats. In between he drove the mail truck to the market town where he also picked up goods and groceries for the storekeeper. The truck belonged to the storekeeper and was the only vehicle in the village.

The boat builders in Västerby were proud men. They signed every boat with a W, as if the village name were still the venerable Wästerby of olden days. The women crocheted coverlets in old, reliable patterns, and they too signed them with a W, and in June the summer people arrived, bought boats as well as bedspreads, and lived their easy summer life for as long as the warm weather held. Towards the end of August everything went quiet again, back to normal. And by and by came winter.

Now the morning twilight had turned dark blue, the snow had begun to glow, and people had turned on the lights in their kitchens and let their youngsters out. The first snowballs struck the window, but Mats slept peacefully on.

I, Katri Kling, often lie awake at night, thinking. As night thoughts go, mine are no doubt unusually practical. Mostly I think about money, lots of money, getting it quickly and taking it wisely and honestly, so much money that I won't need to think about money any more. And I'll repay it, later. First of all, Mats will get his boat, a big, seaworthy boat with a cabin and an inboard motor, the best boat ever built in this otherwise miserable village. Every night I hear the snow against the window, the soft whisper of the snow blown in from the sea, and it's good, I wish the whole village could be covered and erased and finally be clean... Nothing can be as peaceful and endless as a long winter darkness, going on and on, like living in a tunnel where the dark sometimes deepens into night and sometimes eases to twilight, you're screened from everything, protected, even more alone than usual. You wait and hide like a tree. They say that money smells; it's not true. Money is as pure as numbers. It's people that smell, every one of them with their own furtive stink, and it gets stronger when they're angry or ashamed or when they're afraid. The dog smells it, he knows immediately. If I was a dog, I'd know too much. Only Mats has no smell, he's as clean as snow. My dog is big and beautiful and he obeys. He doesn't like me. We respect each other. I respect the mystery of dogs, the secret natural wildness that big dogs hold on to, but I don't trust them. How can anyone trust big watchful dogs? People give their animals almost human qualities, and they mean noble and attractive qualities. Dogs are mute and obedient, but they have watched us and know us and can smell how

pitiful we are. It should astonish us, move us, overwhelm us that our dogs continue, incredibly, to follow us and obey us. Maybe they despise us. Maybe they forgive us. Or maybe they like having no responsibility. We'll never know. Maybe they see us as some sort of unfortunate race of overgrown, misshapen beings, like huge sluggish beetles. Not gods. Dogs must have seen through us, they must possess a crushing insight that thousands of years of obedience holds in check. Why aren't people afraid of their dogs? How long can what was once a wild animal deny its wildness? People idealise their animals, and at the same time they patronisingly overlook a dog's natural life – biting fleas, burying rotten bones, rolling in garbage, barking up an empty tree all night... But what do they do themselves? Bury stuff that will rot in secret and then dig it up and bury it again and rant and rave under empty trees. And the stuff they roll around in! No. My dog and I despise them. We're hidden in our own secret life, concealed in our innermost wildness...

The dog was on its feet, waiting at the door. They went down the stairs and through the shop. In the hall, Katri put on her boots, and all the time her brain kept grinding out threatening night thoughts without any prompting from anywhere. When she came out in the cold and stood still, breathing winter's cleanness, she looked like a tall black monument with the unreachable dog tight by her side as if they'd grown into one. He never wore a lead.

The children went quiet and trudged off through the snow. Around the corner of the first house, they started

shrieking again and began to fight. Katri walked on towards the lighthouse. Liljeberg had driven some gas cannisters out to the lighthouse only yesterday, but the tracks had nearly filled with snow. Closer to the point, the northwest wind blew straight in from the sea, and there was the side road leading up the hill to old Miss Aemelin's house. Katri stopped, and the dog stopped instantly as well. On the wind side, both of them were white with snow melting slowly in their fur.

Katri studied the house the way she'd done for some time, every morning on her way towards the lighthouse. In that house Anna Aemelin lived alone, all by herself, alone with her money. Through the whole long winter she almost never appeared, the shop sent what she needed, and Fru Sundblom came once a week to clean. But early each spring, Anna Aemelin's pale overcoat could be seen at the edge of the woods as she moved slowly among the trees. Her parents had lived long lives and never allowed anyone to cut trees in their woods. They'd been rich as trolls when they died. And the woods were still untouchable. Little by little they had grown almost impenetrable and stood like a wall behind the house; the "rabbit house", they called it in the village. It was a grey wood villa with elaborate carved window frames in white, as grey-white as the tall backdrop of snow-drenched forest. The building actually resembled a large, crouched rabbit – the square front teeth of the white veranda curtains, the silly bay windows under eyebrows of snow, the vigilant ears of the chimneys. All the windows were dark. The path up the hill had not been shovelled.

That's where she lives. Mats and I will live there too. But I have to wait. I need to think carefully before I give this Anna Aemelin an important place in my life.