

# The King's Birthday

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Hans Pedersen sat at the oak table and watched the eighty-seven-year-old man eat his oatmeal. In spite of the absurdity of the past twenty-four hours, Hans couldn't help but smile. Today, like every day, was the king's birthday.

Now that senility had taken over what was once a sharp, perceptive mind, Hans's father believed every day to be the monarch's birthday. Each morning Hans's wife, Joanne, treated the old man to hot chocolate with his breakfast, his two pieces of buttered toast and a bowl of oatmeal, what he called "mush". Every day became a special day, the day that all of Denmark celebrated, the day to commemorate the birth of the head of the royal family. But this isn't Denmark, thought Hans. This is Iowa.

In better times, before dementia gripped the poor man in a strangle hold, Hans's father had shared tales about the old country, tidbits about customs and celebrations, tropes about what life was like on the family's impoverished dairy farm in Denmark, quaint little curiosities such as the peculiar notion that Danes – at least this Dane – believed it was incumbent on them to have chocolate on the king's birthday. Hans thought it an odd tradition, but he'd been born in Iowa, not in the old country. If Danes wanted to celebrate the special day by treating themselves, while honoring the king through the consumption of "*chokolade*," so be it.

That his father was at that stage in life when he couldn't remember conversations or events from one day to the next, but could accurately recall the most miniscule details of his youth in the cold, damp finger of a country, was nothing more than a fact of life, although tragic in Hans's eyes. Let the old fellow live out as much of his remaining time in what must be a happy place. Let him be pleased, day after day, to discover a hot cup of cocoa before him and say, "Oh, choc-

olate, today must be the king's birthday"; it had to be better than just okay – it's had to be pretty damned good.

Twenty-four hours had passed since, in the sterile, disinfected air of the doctor's office, both Hans and Joanne were too stunned to ask many questions. Other than the obvious questions they had for Dr. Richardson after he'd given them his diagnosis. And the doctor's matter-of-fact replies.

"How could he get it?"

"I think we all know how he got it. We just don't know the details."

"But when?"

"That we can't know. These sores can come and go. It could have been decades ago."

"Will it kill him?"

"It hasn't yet, but it might help explain the dementia."

The word itself made Hans queasy. Dr. Richardson had been a little too casual, almost flippant, in his startling declaration. "Every doctor has seen this too many times. Your father has syphilis. We'll do the lab work, but I can guarantee you I'm right."

The ride home in Hans's new Chevrolet was mostly silent. Joanne asked the old man how he liked the doctor. The always-pleasant old guy just smiled and broke into his signature response to any question posed to him: he told the story about coming to this country. How the man in the uniform at Ellis Island asked if he had any money. "Sixteen dollars," he answered. "Oh, then you're one of the rich ones," the officer told him. Hans had heard the story every day for the past half dozen years, sometimes two or three times a day, as well as all the times he'd heard it growing up. Grocery clerks, salesmen, total strangers were treated to the story whenever they asked the old man how he was doing. Hans had discovered that whenever he took his father out shopping or to the park, people wanted to be nice to the old guy, they just didn't expect to get such a scripted response to their pleasantries. It wasn't such a bad story – the first fifty times Hans had heard it. But it had become a little tiresome, especially on the ride home from Dr. Richardson's office.

Hans went immediately to the encyclopedia when they arrived home from the appointment, but what he found was far too clinical. A small sore was usually the first symptom — appearing within a short period after the initial infection. He read on. Penicillin, if administered shortly after the infection, could solve the problem, but obviously that wasn't the case with his father. Hans wondered if perhaps he might have become infected before penicillin was discovered — maybe even back in Denmark before his father, a wide-eyed twenty-one-year-old, crossed the Atlantic to start his new life on the vast plains of northwestern Iowa. But wouldn't the customs officers check for this sort of thing? From what Hans read, symptoms may have come and gone through the years without his father ever having a clue that anything was amiss.

"There's not much we can do," said Joanna at lunch, "we just have to be careful not to touch the sore without latex gloves, and, I guess, wash his linen and clothing separate from ours." Hans was somewhat hurt that his wife wasn't as distressed as he was; but, then, it wasn't *her* father they were talking about. Joanne's parents, both dead a dozen years, after having lived out their tidy little lives in Minnesota, devout Irish Catholics, could never suffer this sort of indignity. No trauma of this magnitude in her family. While Hans had frantically pored over the pages in the Britannica, Joanne, seemingly unperturbed, prepared lunch for the three of them as if nothing had changed.

"I just don't know how he could have done this," said Hans. "How could he have done this to my mother? And to us." His father, asleep in front of the television set in the den, was content after having gotten to go out for a ride. The doctor's visit, already forgotten, lost in the fog inside his head, had worn the old man out. The oldster loved to nap through the soap operas on channel nine. He didn't like the ones on channel four. How could he tell the difference? Hans had no idea. Hans and Joanne were free to talk; even if his father was awake, he'd have no idea what they were talking about.

"He didn't do anything deliberately to anyone." Joanne shook her head, then smiled. Hans could tell she found the

whole thing amusing. Or she found his reaction to it entertaining. Damn her. "It just happened," she added.

"What do we tell Karl and Beth? How do we tell them their grandfather is some kind of a degenerate?"

"Your father is still the same kind, gentle man he's always been," she said, shaking her head at what Hans knew she considered another overreaction on his part. "It just shows he's human. That's all. This doesn't make him some kind of monster. As far as Karl and Beth are concerned, we just tell them their grandfather seems to have a venereal disease and that they need to make certain their children don't get too close to him. But they never get that close to him anyway. You're all a bunch of Scandinavians, not the warmest and the fuzziest people in the world."

Easy for Joanne O'Leary to say. The Irish spent too much of their time hugging, and weeping, and laughing, even kissing – carelessly flaunting their emotions in front of the whole world, a world that would appreciate a little more restraint on their part. Everyone in her family had been that way. Hans found it more than a bit troubling. He cringed every time one of them embraced him. He suspected they sensed his discomfort, and delighted in making him cringe.

"He was a married man, for heaven's sake. He probably infected my mother, his own wife."

"Has it crossed your mind that maybe he's the victim here? Don't get mad, but maybe your mother infected him. There are all kinds of possibilities. If you were to ask me, I wouldn't put anything past your mother."

Hans thought about it. It was too baffling. His father had always been a man of rather strong principles, a good Lutheran, a substantial citizen of Branston, Iowa, a steady businessman, the operator of the local creamery. A gentleman. Yet, Joanne had a point. His mother did have a way about her. She had the more strident personality. But he couldn't imagine either of them fooling around. How had a small sore on his father's foot become the catalyst that led to his entire world being turned upside down? If that's what was really happening. Hans knew Joanne found him a prude

about this sort of thing. Her attitude was "What's the big deal? Your mother's dead. Your father seems to have a medical condition, one that no one need ever find out about. Just get over it."

"Maybe it's time to consider a nursing home." Hans decided not to go into it with Joanne about his mother. She was possibly right about the woman. If anyone had messed around, and obviously somebody, at some point, had, it would more than likely have been his mother. But Hans couldn't go there. There had always been bad blood between the two women.

"Holy cow, listen to yourself," said Joanne. "You'd punish your own father for just doing what people do? This is as old as mankind. People have been having sex for quite a while. You need to get out more, or read the papers, or, perhaps a novel every once in a while. Hans, don't you remember when we were dating? I had no idea whom you'd been with. You didn't know anything about me. It's called passion. Something you Danes, with the exception of one of your parents, seem to know nothing about."

Hans let this pass. It was a ridiculous thing for her to say. He understood passion. She was the one who was a little too blasé about the whole thing. "In the nursing home it would be their problem," he suggested, "not ours."

"But it is our problem. It's a problem we'll live with. We'll take care of him as long as we can. If he gets to be more than we can handle, then we look at other options." She was riled up. Hans always knew when it was time to back off. And they'd reached that point.

Hans stepped outside, onto the back porch. It would be best to get away from everything for a moment or two. He thought about his father, back to when Hans and his brother were boys; they both admired their parents, especially their father. All of the farmers would bring their milk into town to the creamery their parents owned.

Karl Pedersen was well liked; every single farmer, with the exception of a few ornery jerks, trusted and felt good doing business with him. Both of his parents talked fun-

ny; their Danish accents never faded. But there were other accents, the Germans, the Swedes, and, oh God, those quirky Norwegians. His father was an honest man who dealt with everyone fairly. A pretty good thing to say about anyone.

“I’ll fix supper,” Joanne said behind him, “then we’ll watch the Twins game, and get a good night’s sleep.” Hans hadn’t heard her when she came out the door. She stood beside him and looked across the lawn with him.

“You’re right. Everything will be okay.”

Joanne laughed. “Of course, I’m right. Tomorrow’s going to be a big day, so we’d better rest up tonight and be ready for it.”

Hans turned to her and stared into the same green Irish eyes that had enchanted him forty-five years ago. She had the same smile now that she had then. “What’s tomorrow? Do we have something special going on?”

She smiled. “How could you forget? Tomorrow’s the king’s birthday.”