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opening extract from

A Bridge to the Stars

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1

The dog.

That was what started it all.

If he hadn't seen that solitary dog, nothing might have happened. Nothing of what later became so important that it changed everything. Nothing of what was so exciting at first, but became so horrible.

It all started with the dog. The solitary dog he'd seen that night last winter when he'd suddenly woken up, got out of bed, tiptoed out to the window seat in the hall and sat down.

He had no idea why he'd woken up in the middle of the night.

Maybe he'd had a dream?

A nightmare that he couldn't recall when he woke up. Or maybe his dad had been snoring in the bedroom next to his own? His dad didn't often snore, but sometimes there might be an occasional one, a bit like a roar, and then it would be all quiet again.

Like a lion roaring in the winter's night.

But it was when he was sitting by the window in the hall that he saw the solitary dog.

The window had been covered in ice crystals, and he'd breathed onto the glass so that he could see out. The thermometer showed nearly thirty degrees below zero. And it was then, as he sat looking out of the

window, that he'd caught sight of the dog. It ran out into the road, all on its own.

It stopped underneath the streetlamp, looked and sniffed in all directions, and set off running again. Then it vanished.

It was a familiar kind of dog, common in northern Sweden. A Norwegian elkhound. He'd managed to see that much. But why was it running around just there, all alone in the wintry night and the cold? Where was it heading for? And why? And why did it look and sniff in all directions?

He'd had the impression that the dog was frightened of something.

He'd started to feel cold, but he stayed in the window, waiting for the dog to come back. But nothing happened.

There was nothing out there, only the cold, empty winter's night. And stars glittering in the far distance.

He couldn't get that solitary dog out of his mind.

Lots of times that winter he'd woken up without knowing why. Every time, he got out of bed, tiptoed over the cold cork tiles and sat down on the window seat, waiting for the dog to come back.

Once he fell asleep on the window seat. He was still there at five in the morning when his dad got up to make coffee.

'What are you doing here?' his father asked after shaking him and waking him up.

His father was called Samuel, and he was a lumberjack. Early every morning he would go out into the forest to work. He chopped trees down for a big timber

company with an unusual name. Marma Long Tubes.

He didn't know what to say when his dad found him asleep on the window seat. He couldn't very well say he'd been waiting for a dog. Dad might think he was telling lies, and Dad didn't like people who didn't tell the truth.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Maybe I was sleepwalking again?'

That was something he could claim. It wasn't absolutely true, but it wasn't a lie either.

He used to sleepwalk when he was little. Not that he remembered anything about it. It was something his dad had told him about. How he'd come walking out of his bedroom in his nightshirt, into the room where his father was listening to the radio or studying some of his old sea charts. Dad had taken him back to bed, but in the morning he couldn't explain why he'd been wandering around in his sleep.

That was ages ago. Five years ago. Nearly half of his life. He was eleven now.

'Go back to bed,' said his dad. 'You mustn't sit here and catch your death of cold.'

He snuggled back into bed and listened to his dad making coffee, preparing the sandwiches he would take into the forest with him, and eventually he heard the front door closing.

Then everything was quiet.

He checked the alarm clock by his bed, on a stool he'd been given as a present for his seventh birthday.

He hated that stool. It was his birthday present, but he'd really wanted a kite.

He felt angry every time he saw it.

How could anybody give a stool to somebody who wanted a kite?

He could sleep for two more hours before he'd have to get up and go to school. He pulled the blanket up to his chin, curled up and closed his eyes, and the first thing he saw was that dog running towards him. It was running silently through the winter's night, and perhaps it was on its way to a distant star?

But now he was sure that he was going to catch that dog. He would entice it into his dream. They could be friends there, and it wouldn't be as cold as it was outside in the wintry night.

He soon fell asleep, the lumberjack's son, whose name was Joel Gustafson.

It was in the winter of 1956 that he saw that solitary dog for the first time.

And that was the winter when it all happened.

All that stuff that started with the dog...

2

The house where Joel lived with his father, Samuel, was by the river.

The spring floods would come surging and thundering down from the distant mountains beyond the dark forests. The house was where the river curved round before continuing on its long journey to the sea.

But now it was winter, and the river was asleep under its white blanket of snow and ice. Ski tracks scratched stripes into the white snow.

Down by the river Joel had a secret.

Close by the stone buttresses supporting the big iron bridge where trains shuddered past several times a day was a big rock that had split into two.

Once upon a time the rock had been completely round. The crack had divided it into two halves, and Joel used to pretend that it was the earth. Whenever he crawled into the crack, where it smelt of damp moss, he would imagine being deep down inside the earth that he actually lived on.

A secret was being able to see what other people didn't see.

When he lay inside the crack, he used to think that he could change reality into whatever he liked.

Dancing around in the furious eddies and whirlpools caused by the spring floods were not logs, but dolphins.

The old uprooted tree that had stuck fast on the sandbank where Mr Under, the horse dealer, used to moor his rowing boat was a hippopotamus sticking its enormous head out of the water. And there were crocodiles under the surface of the water. Lying there, waiting to pounce on their prey.

Inside the crack in the rock Joel used to embark on his long journeys. In fact Joel had never been beyond the dark forests. He had never seen the sea. But that didn't matter. He would go there one of these days. When his dad had finally decided to stop working as a lumberjack. Then they'd go off travelling together.

In the meantime he could lie in the crack in the rock and go off on journeys of his own. He could imagine that the river was the strait between Mauritius and Réunion, the two islands off Madagascar. He knew what it was like there. His dad had explained how careful you had to be when sailing through that channel. There were dangerous sandbanks hidden just beneath the surface, and if your ship capsized it would sink four thousand metres to the bottom.

Joel's dad used to be a sailor. He knew what he was talking about.

When Joel saw dolphins and hippos in the river, it was his father's stories coming to life in his mind's eye. Sometimes he would take one or two of his father's sea charts down to the rock with him, to make it easier to transform the river into the other world.

Now that Joel was eleven years old, he knew that it was all make-believe. But it was important to take it seriously. If he didn't, he'd be betraying his own secret world.

In winter the enormous lump of rock would be covered in snow. He didn't go there so often then. Just occasionally he'd ski down the slope to the river, to make sure that the rock was still there. He'd establish a ski track round the rock, and think that it looked a bit like a fence. Nobody would be able to cross it and take possession of his rock.

It was in winter when they used to sit in the kitchen, Joel and his dad, and Joel would listen to all the stories.

In a glass case over the stove was a model ship. She was called *Celestine*, and his father had bought her from a poor Indian hawker in Mombasa. When his dad hung up his wet woollen socks to dry underneath her, the glass would mist over and Joel would imagine *Celestine* adrift in a thick cloud of fog, waiting for a wind to blow up.

He used to think something similar about the house they lived in. That it wasn't really a house but a ship that was riding at anchor by the river, waiting for a favourable wind. A wind that would blow them down to the sea. The rickety fence was in fact a ship's rail, and the attic flat they lived in was really the captain's cabin. The rusty old plough half buried in the abandoned potato patch was the ship's anchor.

One of these days the house they lived in would be set free. The anchor would be hauled aboard and then they would start gliding down the river, past the headland with the old dance pavilion. Just past the church they would be swallowed up by the endless forest...

'Tell me about the sea,' Joel used to beg.

Dad would switch on the radio and twiddle a knob until there was nothing to be heard but a murmuring sound.

'That's what the sea sounds like,' he would say. 'Close your eyes and imagine it. The sea that goes on and on for ever.'

They used to cuddle up on the kitchen bench when his dad felt like talking about all the remarkable things he'd experienced as a sailor. But sometimes he didn't feel like talking about it. Joel never knew when that would happen. Sometimes his dad came home from work with his nose frozen stiff and his socks wet through. But he was humming a tune and stamping his feet and snorting like a horse feeling pleased with itself as he shook off all the snow in the entrance hall, then sat down at the table and asked Joel to help him pull his boots off.

Joel would have boiled some potatoes when he got back from school, and if his dad was in the right mood he might well start talking about his adventures, once they'd finished eating and doing the washing up.

But sometimes there would be the sound of heavy steps on the stairs, a deep sigh as he pulled off his thick jacket; his face would be grim, his eyes averted.

Then Joel knew that he needed to be careful. Mustn't make a noise, mustn't ask about anything that he didn't need to know. Just set the table, serve up the potatoes, eat in silence the food his father prepared in the frying pan, then withdraw to his room at the earliest opportunity.

Two things were hard to cope with.

Not knowing why, and not being able to do anything about it.

Joel suspected that it must have something to do with his mother, and with the sea. The sea his father had abandoned, and the mother that had abandoned him. He'd often sat in the cleft in the rock and wondered about that. He always started by thinking about what was least difficult to face up to.

The sea.

If his father had been forced to abandon ship, how come that he was washed up in this little town in the north of Sweden where there wasn't even any sea? And how could he find any satisfaction in going into the forest every day to chop down trees when he'd never succeed in felling enough for him to be able to glimpse the open sea beyond?

How can you be washed up in a place where there isn't even any sea?

How can you drift ashore in the middle of a vast, dark forest?

What had really happened? Why did they have to live here, in the middle of this vast, dark forest, so far away from the sea?

Samuel, his father, was born in Bohuslän in the south-west of Sweden, he knew that. Right next to the sea, in a fisherman's cottage to the north of Marstrand. But why had Joel been born in Sundsvall, in the north-east of Sweden?

Mum, he thought. She's at the bottom of it all. The woman who didn't want to stay with them. The woman who one day packed a suitcase and took a train heading

south when his dad was out in the forest, working.

Joel didn't know how old he was at the time. All he knew was that he'd been too young to remember anything.

But old Mrs Westman on the ground floor had told him. One day he'd managed to lock himself out and it was twenty degrees below freezing and his dad wouldn't be back home for several hours. She'd invited him into her flat to wait. It was dark there, and smelt of winter apples and acrid candles.

Mrs Westman was old and hunchbacked. He'd once seen her lose her false teeth when she had a sneezing fit in the garden. The whole of her dingy flat was full of pictures of God. There was even a picture of Jesus on the doormat. The first time he'd been there, or at least the first time he could remember, he didn't know where to put his boots to dry – they were covered in dirty snow.

'Stand them on the doormat,' said Mrs Westman. 'He knows what you're thinking and He's watching you wherever you go. So why shouldn't He be on a doormat?'

She let Joel sit on a reindeer pelt she'd spread out in front of the open fire in the kitchen. He couldn't remember how old he was then, but suddenly she'd bent down over him with her hunched back.

'There were no evil intentions in your mum,' she said. 'But she had a restlessness inside her. I could see that as soon as they moved here, Samuel and your mum. She was always itching to be somewhere else. She came down with you one day and asked if you

could stay with me until your dad came home. She had an errand to see to, she said. But I could see she was restless, and I'd noticed the suitcase she'd left outside the door. But I don't think there were any evil intentions in her. It was just the itch inside her, whether she liked it or not...'

Joel can sit in the crack in his rock down by the river and carefully join together one thought after another until suddenly everything becomes clear.

He has a father called Samuel who longs for the sea.

He has a mother who had something called an Itch.

Sometimes when his dad looks at him and his eyes seem especially gloomy, Joel lies in bed worrying, waiting for the clinking of a bottle in the kitchen when Samuel thinks he's fallen asleep. He tiptoes to the door and looks through the keyhole into the kitchen. His dad sits on the kitchen bench mumbling away, stroking his hand through his shaggy hair over and over again. He keeps taking deep swigs from the bottle, as if he'd prefer not to, but he can't help it.

Why doesn't he pour some into a glass? Joel wonders.

Why does he drink something that seems to taste so awful?

One morning when Joel wakes up, his dad has fallen asleep at the kitchen table. His head is slumped down on the table top, and his clenched fist is resting on a sea chart.

But there's something else on the blue oilcloth table cover.

A photograph, creased and well-thumbed, with one

corner torn off. It's a photograph of a woman. A woman with brown hair, looking straight at Joel.

He knows immediately that it's his mother gazing at him.

She's not smiling nor scowling. Just looking at him, and he thinks that is what somebody with an Itch looks like.

It says Jenny on the back. And there's the name of a photo studio in Sundsvall.

Jenny. Samuel and Jenny and Joel Gustafson. If they'd been a family, that's what they'd have been called.

Now they are just names that don't fit together. Joel thinks he must ask his father what really happened.

Not now, not today, but some other day when there isn't an empty bottle on the kitchen table when he gets up to go to school. Not until his dad has given the kitchen a good scrubbing and everything has settled down. One of these nights when the kitchen has been cleaned up he'll be able to start talking to his father again.

It always happens at night.

He's woken up by the noise coming from the kitchen. There is a clanging and clanking of pots and pans. His father is muttering and hissing and roaring with laughter, much too loudly. That tells Joel he's started scrubbing down the kitchen.

He gets out of bed and watches him through the half-open kitchen door.

Samuel is splattering water all over the floor and the walls. Steam is rising from the glowing stove and his

face is sweaty and shiny. He's scrubbing away like mad at stains and specks of dirt that only he can see. He throws a whole bucketful of sizzling water into the hood over the stove. He squelches around the floor in his soaking wet woollen socks and scrubs so hard, it seems that doing so relieves him of a great pain.

Joel can't make up his mind if his dad is scared or if he's angry.

What kind of dirt is it that he can see, but nobody else can?

He can hear Samuel muttering and chuntering about spiders' webs and clusters of snakes. But surely there aren't any spiders making webs in the kitchen in the middle of winter? And how could there be a cluster of snakes in the hood over the stove? There aren't any snakes at all in this part of northern Sweden.

Joel watches him through the half-open door and realises that his father is scrubbing away something that only he can see. Something that makes him both scared and angry.

When Samuel has finished, he lies on his bed without moving. He groans and doesn't open the curtains even though it's broad daylight. He's still on the bed when Joel goes to school, and he's still there when Joel comes back home in the afternoon.

When Joel has boiled the potatoes and asks his father if he wants to eat, he just groans and shakes his head. A few days later everything is back to normal, as if it had simply been a dream. His father gets up at five o'clock again, has his coffee and goes off into the forest. Joel can breathe freely again. It will be a long

time before he's woken up by his father sitting at the kitchen table muttering away to himself.

It's easiest to think about all the things that happen and make him wonder what's going on when he's sitting in the crack in his rock down by the river.

One day he sits down at the kitchen table with a pen and some paper and writes down all the things he thinks about. He lists the questions he's going to ask his father. Questions he wants answering before the first snow has fallen in the autumn. When he writes down his questions it's still the middle of winter. There are big mounds of snow thrown up by the ploughs at street corners and by the wall of the church. It's bitterly cold when he goes to school in the morning. But spring will come one of these days.

His first question will be why they don't live by the sea.

That might not be the most important question, but he wants to start with something that isn't too hard.

For every question he writes down, he also tries to work out what possible answers there might be, and what answer he would most like to hear.

Then he wants to know why he was born in Sundsvall.

And why Jenny, his mother, went off in a train and left him with Mrs Westman.

That's also difficult because he never knows what to say whenever anybody asks him why he doesn't have a mother.

He's the only one. The only person he knows who doesn't have a mother.

Being the only one can often be a good thing.

Being the only one with a model aeroplane made of balsa wood, or having a bike with a steel-studded tyre on the back wheel.

But being the only one without a mother is a bad thing.

It's worse than wearing glasses.

It's even worse than stuttering.

Being without a mother is the worst thing there is.

The only mum allowed not to be there is a mum who's died.

He sometimes thinks he will give that answer when somebody asks, or is taunting him. He's tested it to hear what it sounds like.

'My mum died.'

But there are lots of ways of saying that. You can say it to make it sound as if she died in a dramatic plane crash in some far distant country, when she was on some urgent mission. Or you can say it to suggest that she was attacked by a lion.

'My mother's dead' is another way he could say it.

That makes it sound as if he doesn't really care.

But when he finds the photograph that morning, when his dad's asleep with his head on the kitchen table, he knows that his mother isn't dead. And he knows that he has to find out what happened.

Every night before he goes to sleep he thinks up a story with her in it, something he can lie and fantasise about before he dozes off. The one he likes best is when he imagines she is a figurehead on the bows of a ship with three tall masts and lots of billowing sails.

Sometimes he's the captain of the ship, sometimes it's his father. They always very nearly capsize but manage to make their way through the submerged rocks and sandbanks in the end. It's a good dream because he can think up lots of different endings.

But sometimes when he's in a bad mood he allows the ship to sink and the figurehead is buried two thousand fathoms deep. The exhausted crew manage to scramble onto a desert island, but he lets Jenny, his mother, disappear for ever at the bottom of the sea.

Samuel Island or Joel Island. The desert island they eventually land on is never called Jenny Island.

It's usually when he's been annoyed by Otto that he lets the ship sink.

Even if he's generally on his guard, always ready for somebody in the school playground to start asking awkward questions, Otto has a way of creeping up on him on the sly and catching him out when he's forgotten to have an answer ready.

Otto is older than Joel and is repeating a year because he has some illness or other and nobody understands what it is. Sometimes he's off school for months on end, and if he misses any more this year he'll have to repeat the year yet again. Otto's father is a fireman with the railway, and if you're lucky you can go with Otto and see what goes on in the engine sheds.

But Joel isn't one of those allowed to go along. He and Otto are usually at each other's throats.

'If I'd have been a mum and had a son like you, I'd have run away as well,' says Otto out of the blue, loud enough for everybody in the school yard to hear.

Joel doesn't know what to say.

'My mum's a figurehead,' he says. 'But I don't suppose you know what that is.'

The answer he hasn't prepared at all seems to be a good one, because Otto doesn't respond.

The next time I'll hold my tongue and just thump him one, Joel thinks. I'm bound to get beaten up because he's older and bigger than me. But maybe I'll be able to bite him...

The next class is geography. Miss Nederström emerges from the staff room where she makes tea and solves crossword puzzles during the lesson breaks. She has a club foot and she's been Joel's teacher ever since he started school.

Once he put on an act to amuse the rest of the pupils by walking behind her, imitating her limp.

She suddenly turned round and smiled.

'You're very good,' she said. 'That's exactly how I walk.'

If she hadn't had a club foot Joel could well imagine having her as a mum. But Miss Nederström is in fact a Mrs and has children of her own with the surveyor she's married to.

Geography is Joel's best subject. He never forgets what his father tells him, and he has a diary with maps of all the countries of the world in it. He knows where Pamplemousse and Bogamaio are, although he's not at all sure how to pronounce them.

Nobody else in the class knows as much about the world as Joel. Perhaps he doesn't know all that much about Sweden, but he knows more than anybody else

about what lies beyond the dark forests and over the sea.

No sooner have they sat down than Otto puts his hand up. Joel doesn't realise he's done so because Otto sits in the row behind him.

Miss Nederström nods at him.

'Do you want to go home?' she asks. 'Don't you feel well?'

Otto rarely puts his hand up unless he's feeling ill. But this time he has a question.

'What is a figural head?' he asks.

Joel gives a start and feels his heart beginning to pound. He might have known. That bastard Otto! He's going to be shown up now. Everybody heard what he said about his mother being a figurehead.

'Come again,' says Miss Nederström. 'What did you say it was?'

'A figural head,' says Otto again.

'No, it's called a figurehead,' says Miss Nederström.

Don't tell him, thinks Joel. Don't tell him...

And she doesn't.

'Is there anybody in the class who knows what a figurehead is?' she asks.

Nobody answers, least of all Joel, the only one who knows.

Then Otto puts his hand up again.

'Joel knows,' he said. 'His mum is a figural... one of those things...'

Miss Nederström looks at Joel.

'Where on earth did you get that from?' she said. 'A figurehead is a wooden carving attached to the bows of

a ship. Not nowadays, but in the old days when they had sailing ships. Nobody can have a mum made of wood.'

Joel has time to swear that he hates both Miss Nederström and Otto before the whole class bursts into cruel laughter.

'You know a lot about all kinds of unusual things,' says Miss Nederström, 'but I must say you sometimes get carried away by your imagination.'

Joel stares down at his desk lid, feels his face turning red, and he hates and hates as hard as he can.

'Joel,' says Miss Nederström. 'Look at me!'

He slowly raises his head that feels as heavy as a block of stone,

'There's nothing wrong with having imagination and making things up,' she says, 'but you must distinguish between what is fantasy and what is real. You remember that time about the water lilies?'

The water lilies! Of course he remembers, even though he's been trying to forget. The outsize water lilies on Mauritius that his father had once told him about. As big as the centre circle of the ice-hockey pitch they create every winter on the flat, sandy space outside the school by spraying water onto it and allowing it to freeze – the temperature never rises above zero, and they can play on it for months.

One day everybody in the class was asked to talk about something exciting they'd read about or heard somebody talking about.

Joel had told the story of the water lilies on Mauritius.

'I don't suppose they are really as big as that,' Miss Nederström had said when he'd finished his piece.

He had been silly enough to insist he was right.

'They are as big as that,' he said. 'Maybe even bigger.'

'Who told you that?' asked Miss Nederström.

'My dad saw them when he was a sailor,' said Joel, 'and he bloody well knows what he's talking about.'

He didn't know where the swearword had come from. But Miss Nederström was angry and sent him out of the classroom.

After that he'd made up his mind never to say anything about far-distant lands again in class. How are they supposed to know what reality looks like? All they've ever seen is snow and the endless forests.

He trudges home from school through the snow flurries. It's started to get dark already even though it's only early afternoon.

I'm eleven years old now, he thought. One of these days I'll be an old man, and eventually I shall die. But by then I'll be a long way away from here, a long way away from all this snow and that Otto who can never keep his mouth shut.

His nose is running, and he hurries on home.

He collects a kilo of potatoes from Svenson's, the grocer's; a pack of butter and a loaf of bread. Svenson, who's never fully sober and has grease stains on his jacket, notes the items down in his notebook.

I go shopping like a bloody mum, he thought angrily. First I buy the goods on tick, then I boil the potatoes. I'm like a mother to myself.

As he passes through the garden gate, hanging skewwhiff from its hinges, it dawns on him that this house will never float away down the river. There will never be a suitable wind. It might have been better to smash the house up, like his dad had told him they did to old tubs past their sell-by date.

He runs up the dark, creaking staircase, opens the door to their flat and lights a fire in the stove before he's even started to take his boots off.

Something has to happen, he thinks. I don't want to wait any longer.

While the potatoes are boiling he searches tentatively through his dad's room for the photograph of his mum, Jenny. He sifts through books and clothes, and all the rolled-up sea charts, but he doesn't find anything.

Has he taken the photo into the forest with him? he wonders. Why is he keeping it from me?

He decides to ask his father that the moment he comes home, before he's even had time to take off his woolly hat.

It's my mum after all, he thinks. Why is he keeping her from me?

But when he hears his father's footsteps coming up the stairs, he knows he isn't going to ask him anything.

He daren't. Instead he asks his dad to repeat the story about the enormous water lilies that only exist in the botanical gardens in Mauritius.

Samuel sits down on the edge of Joel's bed.

'Wouldn't you rather hear about something else?' he asks. 'I've told you about the water lilies so many times.'

'Not tonight,' Joel tells him. 'Tonight I want to hear something I've heard about before.'

Afterwards he lies down in the dark, listening to the beams twisting and creaking.

Something's got to happen, he tells himself before he dozes off with the sheets pulled up to his chin.

He suddenly wakes up in the middle of the night. And that's when, as he gets out of bed and tiptoes over to the window, he sees that solitary dog running off towards the stars.