

Jonathan Power

Under the Volcano

A Tale of a Marriage, a Journalist and an Island

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Edition Noëma

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im
Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed
bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: ID 82192739 © Betelgejze | Dreamstime.com

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2137-3

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8137-7

Edition Noëma

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2026

Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover

Germany / Deutschland

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Printed in the EU

For Jeany, who came with me.

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CHAPTER 1

Flight into the barely known

Thursday, 26th March

It had been a long time coming, but today it hit me as I ate the last dish of crimson damsons from the garden. The old tastes, the old smells, the lane, the one acre garden with the great oak under which my father would sleep on a hot summer's night, the drive down Boars Hill, past where Turner painted the dons, wandering up from college, memories of an even more evocative past age, down to the Oxford ring road, with its pounding lorries, then along, past Sainsbury's, often stopping there, and into Oxford. All this was about to end. We had sold the house. We had bought our boat tickets to Sweden to drive the furniture over to my wife's old but un-lived-in inheritance, a badly neglected house by the river in the untouched, pine-forested, lake-filled county of Blekinge, and then back to pick up the two adored cats and off "for a glorious year under the volcano, by the beach, a house in the banana grove, time to swim, write, learn Spanish and get healthy both in body and soul."

But at the moment of eating the damsons I seemed spiritless. A weighty sadness, not some liberated optimism was how I felt. My sister had just left after coming to say goodbye to the old family house. "Why do you have to go?" Judy asked for the tenth time. "I was picking the damsons one day last summer and I just realised we had to ...". My voice trailed off. I hate explaining financial necessity.

Seeing her off at the station in Oxford as she boarded the train to London to stay with my former wife, Anne, and my nineteen-year-old daughter, Lucy, I'd felt an inner calm. What was it that, later in the day, triggered such sadness, loneliness, and the melancholy that has haunted me on and off all my life? It was these damsons, the last of the damsons, with their velvet skin, a taste that took the roof off my mouth. How many times on a summer's eve had we clambered under the amazing tree where they hung in droves, an abundance like an Aladdin's cave of jewels—family, neighbours, friends, children, dogs and cats all picking and filling basket upon basket, a cornucopia that never seemed to end, but now it did. All that was left to do was to pack the house, tie up the contract on my new book, say as few goodbyes as possible and hit the road to Harwich.

* * * *

Sunday, 29th March

Oh yes, the contract. On Thursday it had looked so straightforward. On Friday it was caught up in a great political storm pitting the country's brainiest Conservative politician, Chris Patten, who'd recently stood down as the last British governor of Hong Kong, and Rupert Murdoch, the most cunningly brilliant media baron the world has ever seen.

Murdoch stepped in to stop his publisher, HarperCollins—none other than the one I was in final negotiations with—publishing Chris' book *East & West*. "Kill the fucking book," an angry Murdoch was reported to have said as he banged the table. A sharp critique of China and its human

rights failings was the last thing Murdoch needed as he was about to consummate a deal with Beijing on securing carriage of his Asian star satellite TV channel on a pan-China cable system.

I thought about it uneasily all weekend. My sister had said before she left, "Don't shoot yourself in the foot; you're always doing that," and my wife, Jeany, said, "You write what you want on China in your book and make Murdoch swallow that." But as the storm gathered pace with one other author pulling his book from HarperCollins, another threatening to, I felt I couldn't stand aside any longer. On Monday I called around the papers and said I was pulling out unless Murdoch apologised to Patten and to Stuart Proffitt, the future Publishing Director at Penguin and at that time Chris' editor at HarperCollins. On Tuesday my mini-hurricane broke—the lead story of *The Independent*—and big stories in other serious papers with the most accurate reporting, ironically, in Mr Murdoch's own paper, *The Times*. In fact *The Independent* had got the story all upside down, writing that Murdoch had spiked my own book. Never mind, it was only the first time in my life I'd been the subject of a front page on a national daily and between T.V. and radio interviews, I whisked it down to Oxford to have it framed. My children would have that one day, I thought.

One of the more interesting weeks in my journalistic life climaxed on Thursday with a phone call from Washington. I was sitting in an Italian trattoria, near the Embankment tube station with my daughter Lucy, en route to a modern ballet in the Queen Elizabeth Hall when my wife phoned me on my mobile to tell me, somewhat incoherently—she never can understand English when she is excited—that the editorial

page editor of the ultra-conservative, but raffish, *Washington Times* had phoned (*The Post*'s modest rival in circulation but, for all its relatively Lilliputian stature, often a thorn in the White House) and wanted to take my column. I was inside the Washington beltway once again! How ironic. I'd been driven out of *The Washington Post* and, after seventeen years, as a weekly columnist for *The International Herald Tribune*, perhaps for being too constantly critical of America's over-militaristic foreign policy and too consumed with the development and interests of the Third World.

Yet I was a free-marketeer long before Margaret Thatcher came to office. Maybe *The Times* saw what *The Post* had missed!

On Friday we switched on the 10 o'clock news to learn what no one expected, that Murdoch had capitulated and apologised to Patten. *The Daily Telegraph* headlined its lead editorial the next day: "Murdoch makes history".

* * * *

April 22nd

I'm at peace. I believe I've never been so happy. Can anything ruin it?—certainly not a call from HarperCollins saying they've decided to drop the book, after I'd decided to give them the green light. Ah! Rupert Murdoch, one must be careful about jousting with him. We're in Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife, beneath the volcano. The sea is shimmering blue by day, shifting scurrying shadows reflecting every wisping cloud in the pale light of the sub-tropical evening. Flowers and fruit like one can imagine only in a botanical garden.

Everywhere are jacarandas, large trees covered in mauve blooms, so perfect that my wife said they couldn't be real.

But they are. I've seen them once before in my life when, fresh from university, I arrived in the up-country hill station of Iringa in Tanzania to volunteer as an "agricultural advisor" and they were, that September month, in full bloom too, a sight to remember all my life, as I will this April. I wrote about them in my novel, "The Human Flow".

But if this is my first day to write in four busy weeks it is because so much has happened, tiring, exhilarating, in one word, liberating. When on April 5, I drove the rented lorry out of the gate of our Boars Hill house, all our worldly goods packed tight in the back, I felt, for the very first time in my life, in control of it.

For three weeks Jeany had been packing up the house. I'd cleaned out the loft, the garage, the stable and the garden shed and on a wet morning a handful of friends came to wave us off. I didn't look back. There were no second thoughts. If I'd stayed I'd have become my father's clone—growing older in the same fashion. I could already discern in some of my gestures features which, until recently, I'd thought peculiar to him. As my thirty-two year old daughter, Carmen, put it so well, it really was Old Boring Hill. It may have been a stimulating, high-paced place at one time, full of dons without kitchens—bachelor boys that only ate and drank in college—with poets like John Masefield, Robert Bridges and Mathew Arnold to keep them company in their daily perambulations or laid out in all its interesting parts in Vera Brittain's "Symphony of Youth" or made mention of in the pages of Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited". But these days dons couldn't afford it and

the place had filled up with successful businessmen, dealing in oil or computers. It even had a quota of rich plumbers and electricians. Only a handful, including Jill and Carl and their four children

who made us so welcome when we first moved in and our immediate neighbours, the semi-anglicised, Polish filmmaker, Pavel Pawlikowski, who later won an Oscar, and his idiosyncratic Russian wife, Irina, and their two children who were like brother and sister to our only child, Jenny, kept us moderately sane. But they were not enough. The weather, combined with the all too stiff Boars Hill attitude to life, was too melancholy-inducing, and at last, at the age of fifty-six, I had the wherewithal (although soon to learn it didn't go very far) and the professional freedom to escape it, and we were off.

We crossed the North Sea to Hamburg, drove past the state-ly mansions of this prosperous Hanseatic city and up the autobahn to Denmark. My mobile phone rang and there to my surprise was my second and sporty daughter, Miriam, with whom, after a splendid family row in Fuerteventura, another Canary Isle, where she was working with children and entertainment programs, I hadn't passed a word since early January. So not only was it a surprise to hear her enthusiastic voice again, I enjoyed telling her that there we were, the three of us, in the cab and all we had was tucked in behind in the van. If she lived free and gloriously, her dad was about to too! And it was thanks in no small part to those modern conveniences of life, the mobile phone, the JonatPower@aol.com address on the internet, that kept me intimately and immediately in touch with the big world

while hiding the fact that all the while I am sitting in the sunshine in Tenerife.

Surely if Americans could do this, commuting to California, Arizona and Florida, then I, one of the first generation of united Europeans, could do it too. Hurray for the Euro, for Schengen and the World Wide Web! "Give me liberty or give me death," said Patrick Henry, a hero of the American Revolution and often quoted by my erstwhile revolutionary friend, the late Stokely Carmichael, the father of "Black Power". Indeed, this is why I stayed freelance. I didn't want editors telling me what to do. Life was too short to "work my way up". My attitude to editors was, "take it or leave it".

We waited for a ferry to take us from Copenhagen's port of Dragør across to the nondescript Swedish city of Malmö—not its fault, it's the seaport for Skåne, the wide plain, the breadbasket of Sweden, where there is little to break the monotony, apart from the university town of Lund, 10 miles away. That is where we were heading, the old capital of the Viking empire of King Knut that covered western Sweden, Denmark and eastern Britain. Its centre is a charming, near intact eighteenth and early nineteenth century town, bereft of car traffic, crowded with bicycles and prams, revolving around its university. Today it's mushrooming on its ancient edges into rather uninspired, modern industrial estates with housing to match, the home of the university's spin-off, high-tech industries that keep semi-socialist Sweden on the cutting edge of global capitalism. Here are the homes of great Swedish corporations, Asea-Brown, the construction business, Ericsson, the phone company, Alfa-Laval, the engineering giant and, not least, Tetra Pak, whose great contribution to civilization is the ubiqui-

tous cardboard milk carton which, even after years of research, is still so damn difficult to open, as Tetra Pak's well-paid employees will privately confess. Never mind, it made multibillionaires off the Rausing family who live as tax-exiles in Chelsea, London, while still maintaining a grand old house on the close, overlooking Scandinavia's oldest and most magnificent cathedral, the home of the giant Finn, whose stone effigy can be seen intact in the Cathedral cloisters, clinging to the pillar he is threatening to pull asunder, and whose vaulted spaces, in my mind, still ring with the splendour of my opera singing wife Jeany's coloraturas.

Despite its latter-day hectic growth, the town remains comfortably cyclable from one side to the other, and only a fifteen-minute ride out into the country is the farmhouse of our friends Staffan and Nen. Staffan is one of the team members who has put the local hospital on the world map through its pioneering work (among its many other accomplishments) in children's heart disease. We pulled the lorry into the farmyard, stepped out into the chilly Swedish evening and smelt the air, cleaner, sharper and certainly colder than anything we inhaled in England. The northern light, as distinct as the tones of Scandinavian opera singers, was fading fast. The night closed in around us as we ambled into Nen's warm kitchen, her fresh-baked bread, cured salmon, farmyard eggs, and home-made cider covering the table from one end to the other.

Sweden may be my wife's home but in large measure it is mine too. Its democratic socialism fits me like a glove (although less since the Government decided to take the country into NATO- I will vote Green next time, as I will in the UK too, where the government has gone overboard support-

ing the Ukrainian/NATO war machine). Ever since I first started my life-long habit, while a first-year student, of reading the brilliant *Economist*, Sweden has been regularly knocked, the demise of its socialist structures predicted with dreary regularity. Right now, after an awful recession by Swedish standards, with school and hospital budgets being painfully paired, the economy is slowly moving forward, better than most. Eschewing all the gimmicks of the Anglo-Saxons, labour de-regulation, tax-cuts and the rest, (although it pioneered privatisation long before Mrs Thatcher), Sweden is comfortably increasing its GNP and announcing government spending plans to repair the damage caused by many years of cutbacks.

The myths about Sweden are legion and none are more profoundly wrong than those about Swedish sex life. One might be excused, if one walks around Lund, feasting one's eyes on one beautiful blond co-ed after another, for thinking that this country is some kind of sexual nirvana, but such lustful male thoughts are more likely to remain unfulfilled than satisfied. Swedish women are no more, or less, promiscuous than their Western peers. They may have pioneered living in sin, (their grandparents got the thrill of breaking the old taboos, not the present generation), a "sambo", the Swedish state officially calls it. This status entitles the partners to all the benefits of marriage, and all the penalties of separation—a 50/50 division of assets if you've lived together for more than two years—but most want and expect a stable relationship that matures into a life-long commitment, a house, children, a Volvo in the drive and holidays in the Canaries.

Swedes are more heavily taxed than almost any other nation in the world. They groan about it all the time. But given the chance to support a conservative government, after four years they inevitably tire of its tax cuts, therefore social service cuts, and throw them out. The Swedes realise that they live in a state that makes sure their hospitals, schools and old peoples' homes are among the world's best, and it would be all too easy to undermine their standing with a so-called competitive private sector that creams the milk and leaves the rest slowly but steadily to deteriorate, as has happened in America and gathered pace in Britain under the last Conservative government—London's water supply business, for example. The Swedes understand about being counterproductive.

Indeed, one of the unspoken reasons for me pulling up sticks in Britain was that I couldn't face the no-win choice I felt confronted us with the education of Jenny. Many Oxford primary schools are still good, but come secondary level, one could see the Britain of the future. Oxford has more top class public schools per acre than any other British town. Every educated parent feels they must scrimp, save and sacrifice to get their children into one. They're convinced that although most of them were themselves well educated in state schools, the tide has turned and they have no satisfactory alternative. In Oxford, this has reached a magnitude of self-fulfilling proportions. As more brighter children are pulled out of the state sector, the teachers become more disheartened. The critical mass of pupil intelligence is reduced, the less there is to attract next year's bright intake and so it goes on. Oxford may be ahead of the curve but this is where the country is heading.

I'd lived in the slums of Holloway, North London, during my first marriage. My first wife Anne and I had done our postgraduate work in America and then had ended up living in the black ghetto on the west side of Chicago with our newborn baby, Carmen, working on Martin Luther King's staff, during his first northern campaign. Back in England and frustrated by my wife's refusal to subject our baby to another ordeal—at one point they were besieged in our Chicago apartment by a gunman—to transport her to rural Africa (far from any hospital no doubt), as was my plan, we settled in this grimy, traffic-ridden comer of London where immigrant families from the Caribbean, Africa, Ireland and Pakistan crowded in room by room. Side by side, we started playgroups, an adventure playground, a law centre, housing co-ops, made films about the inner city—and sent our daughters to the local schools. Our second daughter Miriam imbibed the street mores. Carmen somewhat unhappily, she now says, apart from holidays in my parents' house in the Lakes or our friend's farmhouse in Switzerland, or the travels to America when I could sometimes take them with me, day dreamed her way through it, and Lucy, for the most part, side-stepped it, fortunate in that, unable to take the stresses anymore after fourteen years of grind, we moved to quieter, more salubrious, Highbury, but unfortunate, to say the least, in that I left home very soon after. The house then increased in value from £85,000 to over £2 million. For those like us who'd already bought in, it became a no-lose lottery. In the slum we became comparatively wealthy. Kate Winslet now lives in Holloway. The immigrants and the Cockneys, if not council or co-op protected, have been pushed into Hackney and further afield.

Thirty years on, we're now divorced and re-married. Anne is an internationally respected expert on the social issues of housing and a professor, a member of the faculty of the London School of Economics. I suppose we did well out of it but I look at my daughters and say, can I do that again with Jenny? Only by Anne's persistence did two of them get to university. (Lucy won a "first" at Edinburgh University.) Miri, the Cockney blotting paper, missed out.

While she's often happy as a sandpie in the wildscapes of the island of Fuerteventura, I feel irresponsible that she never had the opportunity as a child to experience a gentler milieu that would have given her, too, an academic chance. Of course, she did gain something that no university could have ever given her—an empathy for people and animals, especially those in trouble, and she constantly astonishes and edifies me with her sage illuminations.

Still, the question remains. Could I put Jenny through the rigours of British state education, even if we lived in the somnolent greenery of Boars Hill? If the Labour government was prepared to re-introduce the old grammar school (with a reformed secondary modern system to go with it) I might have thought again. But the grammar school that in Liverpool put me side by side in the classroom with Paul McCartney and Michael Sissons appears dead and buried.

Sweden, as my wife keeps saying, offers our daughter the best chance. Free state education, including university for all, that puts Sweden year after year in the top group of worldwide education comparative league tables, is hard to say no to.