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**DER GEFESSELTE**

**THE BOUND MAN**

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*Translated by Steph Morris*

He woke to sunlight, falling on his face. It made him close his eyes again, streaming down the bank unchecked, gathering in rivulets and drawing swarms of mosquitos in its wake, which flew low over his forehead, circled and tried to land, before they were overtaken by new swarms. When he tried to wave them away, he discovered he was tied up. Thin, twisted string cut his arm. He let the arm drop, opened his eyes again and looked down the length of his body. His legs were bound together, all the way up from his ankles. The same string was wound round his hips, his chest and his arms. He couldn't see where its ends were knotted and, feeling no trace of fear or impatience, assumed it constrained him fully, till he noticed it left space between his legs and was slightly loose as it wound round his body. His arms had also been allowed some room for manoeuvre; they had not been tied to his torso but to each other. This made him smile, and for a moment he imagined children had played a trick on him.

He reached for his knife, but again the string cut softly into his flesh. He tried reaching into his pocket again. It was empty. As well as his knife, the small sum of money he'd had was gone, along with his jacket. His shoes had been taken from his feet. He wet his lips and tasted blood, which had bled from his temples over his cheeks, chin and neck down under his shirt. His eyes hurt. If he held them open too long, reddish streaks were reflected in the sky.

He decided to stand up. He drew up his knees as far as he could, placed his hands on the fresh grass and shot to his feet. A branch of elder brushed his cheek, in flower. The sun blinded him and the ties pressed at his flesh. Out of his mind with pain he dropped to the ground and tried again. He kept trying till the blood burst from his hidden weals. Then he lay still for a long while, leaving sun and mosquitos to do as they wished.

When he woke for the second time the elder bush was now throwing its shadow over him, releasing the coolness stored between its branches. He must have been hit on the head. Then they must have lain him down here, like a mother placing her baby carefully under the bushes when she goes out into the field. They didn't intend their mockery to be wasted.

His only chance was the room for manoeuvre the ties allowed. He rested his elbows on the earth and observed the play of the string. As soon as it tightened, he eased off and tried again more carefully. If he could reach



the branches above his head he might have pulled himself up on them – but he couldn't reach them. He placed his head back on the grass and rolled over till he was kneeling. He felt for the ground with his toes, and could suddenly stand with little effort at all.

A few steps away from him the track led off along the upland; wood pinks and flowering thistles grew amongst the grasses. He raised his foot to avoid treading on them, but was held back by the string at his ankles. He looked down at his body.

The string was tied to each ankle, but ran in a playful pattern from one to the other. He bent down cautiously and pulled on it, but although it was loose, it couldn't be loosened further. To avoid stepping on the thistles with his bare feet he sprang lightly from the ground and hopped over them like a bird.

He paused as he heard a twig snap. Someone round here was finding it hard to suppress their laughter. It frightened him to think he was not in a position to defend himself, as he otherwise would. He hopped on, till he was standing on the path. A long way below, bright fields stretched away. He could not make out the next village, and it would be night before he reached it, if he were unable to move any faster.

He tried to walk, and discovered the string allowed him to place one foot in front of another as long as he raised it only a certain distance from the ground and placed it down before he reached the full span. He swung his arms to the same extent.

After just a few steps he fell. He lay across the path and watched the dust fly up. Now he expected the long-suppressed laughter to break out, but all remained silent; he was alone. As the dust settled, he got up and walked on. He looked to the ground and observed the shifting string, the way it hung slack, tautened over the earth, then sank again.

As the first fireflies flew up, he succeeded in tearing his gaze from the ground. He felt in control again, and his impatience to reach the next village eased off.

Hunger made him light-headed and at times he felt he'd reached a speed no motorcycle could beat. Or that he was standing still as the land came swiftly towards him, like a strong current hitting someone swimming upstream. The torrent carried bushes the north wind had bent southwards, young, crippled trees, and chunks of grass holding bright, long-stemmed flowers. Finally it flooded even the bushes and saplings, leaving only the sky above itself and the man. The moon had risen and lit the domed, open centre of the upland, the path overgrown with short grass, the bound man, walking with swift, measured steps, and two field hares, who crossed the hill ahead of him and vanished down the slope. Although the nights were still



chilly at this time of year, the bound man laid himself down at the edge of the bank before midnight and slept.

In the morning light, the animal tamer, camped with the circus he owned on the meadow outside the village, watched the bound man approaching down the path. He saw the man stop and reach for something – the man bent his knees, held one arm out to keep his balance, swiped an empty wine bottle from the ground, straightened himself, and lifted it up. He was moving slowly to avoid been cut again by the string, but to the circus owner it looked like the willing restraint of a powerful velocity. He was captivated by the astounding grace of the movements, and while the bound man was looking for a stone to smash the bottle against, so he could sever the string with its jagged neck, the animal tamer walked over the meadow towards him. Not even the young panther's leaps had brought him such delight.

'You see before you: The Bound Man!' His very first moves brought such cheers that blood rose to the animal tamer's cheeks in excitement, standing at the edge of the ring. The bound man stood up. His surprise, again and again, was that of a four-legged animal as it rises. He knelt, stood, jumped and turned cartwheels. The spectators were amazed, as if watching a bird which chooses to remain on the ground and restrict its movements. Everyone who came, came because of the bound man, his schoolboy gymnastics. His ridiculous moves and jumps made the tightrope walker redundant. His fame grew from place to place, but his moves remained the same moves he was continually forced to practice, daytimes in the tent's subdued light, to maintain his ease within the ties. By remaining wholly within them he became free of them, and as they no longer enclosed him, they spurred him on and gave aim to his movements. Just as the beating wings of migrating birds have an aim, as they take off in the warmth of summer and mark small circles in the sky, still hesitant.

The local children would play nothing except 'The Bound Man' now. They tied each other up, and one day the circus folk found a little girl in a ditch, bound up to her neck, barely able to breathe. They freed her, and that night the bound man spoke to the audience after the show. He explained briefly that ties which didn't allow you to jump were pointless. After that he continued playing for laughs.

Grass and sunshine, tent pegs, hammered into the ground, then pulled out again, on the outskirts of villages. 'You see before you, The Bound Man!' The summer grew in on itself. It bent its face deeper over the fishponds in the hollows, beguiling itself in the dark mirrors; it flew up, staying close to the course of the river, and made the plain the thing it was. Anyone who could walk, followed the bound man.



Many of them wanted to see the ties close up. So each night following the show the circus owner announced that anyone who wanted to make sure the knots were not slipknots, the string not elastic, could do so right now. The bound man generally waited for the crowd on the green outside the big top, sometimes laughing, sometimes serious as he held his arms out for them. Some of them took the opportunity to look him in the face, others earnestly measured out the string, tested the knots at his wrists and ankles and asked about the precise ratio between its length and the length of his limbs. They asked the bound man how it all came about, and he always gave the same patient answer: well, someone had tied him up, and when he woke he found he'd been robbed too. They had probably run out of time to bind the ties properly because if he'd not been meant to move at all they were too loose, and if he had been meant to move very much they were too tight. But move he did, the people said at this. Yes, he said, what else was he to do?

Before he went to sleep, the bound man always sat at the fire for a while. When the circus owner then asked him why he didn't make up a better story, the bound man said he hadn't made this story up. And the blood rose to his face as he said it. He preferred to remain in the shadows.

He was different from the others, as he didn't remove the string once the show was over. This meant that his every movement was worth seeing, and the village folk slunk around the campfire for ages, just to watch him get up from the fire, hours later, and roll himself up in his blanket. And he would see their shadows retreating as the sky grew bright again.

The circus owner often discussed how they might undo the ties after the evening show and rebind them the next day. He consulted the tightrope walkers, who didn't spend the night on their ropes, after all, but no-one really took the idea seriously.

The bound man's fame rested precisely on the fact that he never untied the string, that when he wanted to wash his body, he had to wash his clothes at the same time, and when he wanted to wash his clothes, he had to wash his body, that he had no option but to jump in the river each day just as he was, as soon as the sun came out. And that he couldn't go very far out in case he was swept away.

The circus owner knew that the bound man's helplessness would protect him from the envy of his crew in the end. Maybe he deliberately gave them the fun of seeing him tiptoeing cautiously from stone to stone on the riverbank, in soaking clothes clinging to his body. When his wife pointed out that even the best of clothes would not survive this kind of laundering for ever (and the bound man's clothes were not the best of clothes), he replied curtly that this would not be for ever. And he dealt with all objections in the same way – this would only be for the summer. But he was



playing a waiting game; he was bluffing. Really he would have sacrificed even the lions or the tightrope walkers to keep the bound man.

He made this all too clear the night they started jumping over the fire, which he was later convinced was nothing to do with the longer or shorter days but with the bound man, who was sitting by the embers as ever, watching them – with that smile which you could never be sure wasn't just the fire lighting up his face. Just as you knew nothing else about him either, because the stories he told went back only as far as the moment he walked out of the woods.

But on this evening two of the circus people suddenly grabbed his arms and legs and took him up close to the fire, swinging him back and forth, while on the other side two others held out their arms in jest. Then they threw him over, but threw too short. The other two stepped back – to handle the impact better, they later claimed. The bound man landed at the edge of the embers, and would have been set alight if the circus owner hadn't picked him up and carried him out of the fire to save the string, which was the first thing the embers would have singed. And he was certain the attack was aimed at the string. He dismissed everyone involved in the incident on the spot.

A few days later his wife was woken by footfall on the grass and emerged just in time to prevent the clown's last jape. He had scissors on him, of all things. When he was interrogated, he repeatedly claimed he hadn't intended to take the bound man's life. He spoke in terms of sympathy, but he too was dismissed.

The bound man was amused by these attempts. After all, he could free himself whenever he wanted, but perhaps he would learn a few more moves first. A nursery rhyme sometimes came to him, lying awake at night, 'Let's run away with the circus! Let's run away with the circus!' From the opposite riverbank he could still hear the voices of circus guests, carried too far down the river by the current on their way home. He saw the river gleam, and the new branches shooting from the willows' dense crowns, and autumn felt a long way off.

The circus owner was worried about the danger sleep represented to the bound man. Less because there were still repeated attempts to free him – by sacked tightrope-walkers or bribed children. There were measures he could take there. The greatest danger was the bound man himself, who forgot the ties in his dreams, only to be surprised by them in the morning gloom. Furious, he would try to stand, leapt up then fall back down. He was the opposite of a hanged man. He was circled by rope everywhere except his neck. It was important to ensure he didn't have a knife on him at moments like this. The circus owner sometimes sent his wife to the bound man towards dawn. If she found him sleeping she leant over him and felt the ties.



The string had become hard with dirt and moisture. She measured the spaces and touched his sore ankles and wrists.

All sorts of rumours were soon in circulation surrounding the bound man. Some said he had tied the string himself, later inventing the story with the thieves, and by the end of summer the majority believed this version. Other went as far as suggesting he had asked someone to tie him up, and might even have done a deal with the circus owner. The bound man's clumsy explanations, and the way he broke off when the conversation turned to the attack, all fed these rumours. Anyone who still believed in the story involving the thieves was laughed at. No-one knew what a hard time the circus owner was having holding onto him, how often the bound man said, now he'd had enough, he'd like to leave, the summer would be over before he knew it.

Later he said nothing more on the subject. When the owner's wife brought his lunch to the river and asked him how much longer he wanted to travel with them, he made no answer. She didn't believe he was used to the ties, but he was used to not forgetting them for a moment, which was all the ties would let him to get used to. Didn't it seem ridiculous to remain bound up, she asked him, but he replied, no, it did not seem ridiculous. There were elephants and tigers and clowns travelling with the circus – why shouldn't a bound man travel among them too. And he told her about the exercises he was doing, about the new moves he had taught himself, about a turn which came to him shooing flies away from his eyes. He described to her the way he forestalled the string each time, the way he held himself back ever so slightly to prevent it tautening, and she knew there were days when it barely brushed him, jumping from the wagon in the morning and patting the horses' flanks, as if he were stirring in a dream. She saw how he vaulted the jumps, how briefly he held the wood, and she saw the sunlight on his face. Sometimes, he told her, he felt as if he wasn't bound. She replied that he never need feel bound if he were only prepared to take the ties off. He responded by saying he wasn't at liberty to do that.

In the end she no longer knew whether she was more worried about the bound man, or the ties which bound him. She didn't really believe he would carry on travelling with them if he were no longer bound, though she constantly reassured him it was possible. For his moves would be meaningless without the ties. He would be meaningless himself. He would leave if they were removed. The euphoria would end abruptly. She would no longer be able to sit with him on the stones at the river's edge without arousing the others' suspicion. She knew that it was only the ties which allowed them to be close, and the light evenings, and their conversations, for these conversations all revolved around the ties. As soon as she acknowledged the ties' advantages, he talked of the burden, and when he



talked of the fun, she urged him to shed them. It seemed as endless as the summer itself.

At other times she was worried her talk was helping to hasten this end. Sometimes she leapt up in the night and ran across the grass to the place where the bound man slept. She wanted to shake him till he woke, she wanted to beg him to keep the ties, but then she saw him lying there in them like a corpse, his blanket thrown aside, legs stretched out, arms opened slightly. His clothes had suffered from the heat and the water, but the string had not grown thinner in the slightest. Now she was once more sure that he would travel with the circus till the skin fell from his flesh and his joints were bared. Next morning she urged him more forcefully than ever to cut the ties.

All her hopes were vested in the cooling air. Autumn was coming, and he couldn't continue jumping in the river for long. But while he had previously remained indifferent, towards the end of the summer the thought of losing the ties filled him with sadness. The harvesters' songs – 'summer is over, summer is over' – fuelled his fears. But he conceded he would have to change his clothes. He did not believe that once the ties were undone anyone could retie them the same way. It was around this time that the circus owner started to talk of travelling south this winter.

The heat switched without warning to a dry, still cold. The fire was kept alight all day. As soon as he stepped out of the waggon the bound man felt the chilly grass on his soles. The blades were tipped with hoarfrost. The horses started to dream standing up, and the dangerous animals, poised to spring even in their sleep, seemed ready to burst with the sadness building under their fur.

On one such day, one of the owner's young wolves escaped. He said nothing to anyone, to prevent panic, but the wolf soon began breaking into pastures in the surrounding area. Although people first believed the excesses of a hard winter had driven it here from far afield, the circus soon came under suspicion. The circus owner was forced to put his people in the picture, and it was only a matter of time before everyone knew where the wolf came from. The circus folk offered the local mayors their assistance with the search, but all the hunts were in vain. In the end the circus was openly blamed for the damage and the danger. People stopped coming to the shows.

Even in a half-empty arena, the bound man's motions lost none of their unnerving grace. During the daytime he wandered under the hammered thin silver of the autumn sky along the surrounding hilltops, lying when he could where the sun shone longest. He soon found the spot where the dusk came last, and was loathe to get up out of the thin grass when it did. When he descended the hill he had to pass through the little wood on



the southern slope, and on one of these evenings he saw two green lights approaching from below. He knew these were not church windows, and was not for a moment under any illusions.

He stood on the spot. The animal came through the clearing towards him. Now he could make out its form, its neck slanting away, its tail beating the ground, and its lowered crown. If he hadn't been bound, he might have tried to flee, but now he didn't feel the slightest fear. He stood calmly, arms hanging and looked down at the bristling fur beneath which its muscles played, like his limbs within the ties. He still felt the evening wind between him and the wolf as the animal sprang at him. The man made sure he obeyed his ties.

With the care he had long been practicing, he gripped the wolf by the neck. Affection for a being his equal rose in him, for the upstanding in the lowly. In a movement like the swoop of a huge bird – and now he knew for sure that flying was only made possible by very particular bonds – he threw himself at it and brought it to the ground. As if intoxicated, he sensed he had now lost the deadly supremacy of free limbs which let humans be beaten.

His freedom in this fight was in harmonizing each twist of his limbs to the ties – the freedom of the panther, the wolves and the wild flowers swaying in the evening breeze. He landed lying with his head at an angle, gripped the animal's legs with his bare feet and its head with his hands. He felt fallen leaves gently stroke his hands, felt his grip increase to an incredible strength, felt no hindrance from the ties at all.

As he emerged from the woods a light rain began to fall against the sun. The bound man stayed a while at the edge, beneath the trees. Through the soft veils, denser only for a moment as gusts of wind blew in, he saw far below the campsite and the river, the meadows and pastures and all the places they had passed through. He thought perhaps he would indeed travel south with them. He laughed softly. It went against all sense. His clothes wouldn't survive the ties' abrasion much longer, even if he could rely on the scabs at his ankles and wrists, which burst and bled at certain movements, to remain intact.

His wife advised the circus owner to announce the animal's death without mentioning the bound man. Even at the time of the greatest euphoria no-one would have believed him capable of such a deed. Now that people were embittered, at a time of colder nights, they were less likely to believe it than ever. Not only would they fail to believe that he had killed the wolf, they would be unlikely to believe that the wolf, which only that day had attacked a group of children at play, had been killed at all. He owned several wolves and could easily hang a hide on the fence and offer free admission. But he was not to be dissuaded. For his part he was convinced



that announcing such a deed was just the thing to bring back the glory days of the summer.

The bound man's movements were uncertain that night. He stumbled during one of his jumps and fell. Even as he tried to right himself he heard whistles and gentle mockery from up above, like the cries of birds at dawn. And just as sometimes during that past summer he had tried to leap up too fast on waking, now he stretched the ties too tight and fell again. He lay still to regain his composure, and heard the clamour swell. 'So how did you kill the wolf Mr Bound Man?' 'Was it really you?' If he'd been one of them he wouldn't have believed it either. He reflected that they were right to feel embittered – a circus at this time of year, a bound man, an escaped wolf and finally this. There were a few groups who took the other side, but most of the audience clearly thought a bad joke was being played on them. By the time the bound man was back on his feet the din was so great he could barely understand a word.

All around he saw them jump up, like withered woodland leaves blown by a whirlwind round a hollow, its centre remaining still. He thought of the golden dusks and dawns of recent days and was seized with bitterness about the funereal light descending on all which had run wild on so many nights, about the golden jewellery the pious hung on aging paintings, about the whole decline.

They demanded he repeat the fight with the wolf. The bound man declared that such a fight had no place in a circus show, and the owner shouted that he didn't keep his animals to have them killed in front of audiences. But they had already stormed the enclosure and were pressing at the cages. His wife ran between the stands to the marquee door and succeeded in reaching it from the other side. She pushed aside the guard the crowd had forced to open it, but the spectators pushed her back so she could no longer shut the gate.

'Aren't you the one who lay with him all summer by the river?' 'How did he hold you in his arms?' She cried that if they needn't believe him if they didn't want to. They had never been worthy of the bound man, and painted clowns were all they deserved.

The bound man felt as if he'd been waiting since back in early May for the jeers which had now broken out. Everything which had smelled so sweet all summer now left a rotten taste. But if they wanted, he would take on every animal in the circus. He had never felt so at one with the ties.

The owner's wife was standing in his way, and he shoved her gently aside. My God, perhaps he really would head south with them. He stood in the open door and saw the animal get up, a vigorous young beast, and behind him he heard the owner, still bemoaning the loss of another wolf. He clapped his hands to draw the beast over, and once it was nearer he turned



back to close the door. He looked the woman in the eyes. Suddenly he remembered the owner's warning that anyone found with a sharp object in the bound man's proximity would be suspected of murderous intent – and at the same moment felt the blade at his wrist, cool like the river water that autumn, which he could hardly bear. The string fell away from him on one side and tangled as he sought to tear it off from the other. He pushed the woman away, but his movements were shooting out aimlessly. Had he finally failed to be wary enough of his liberators, of this sympathy which sought to lull him to sleep? Had he lain too long by the river? Wouldn't it have been better if she had slit the string at any other moment than this?

He stood inside the cage, ripping the ties away from him like the rest of a snakeskin. He was cheered to see the spectators all around shrink back. Did they know that he had no choice now? Or would there still be some small point to a fight? It seemed as if the blood in his body was sinking. He felt suddenly weak.

The wolf was more enraged by the ties, falling before it like a snare, than by the presence of an intruder in its cage. It prepared to leap. The man staggered and reached for the gun hanging on the wall in the cage. Then, before anyone could stop him, he shot the wolf between the eyes. The beast reared up, and touched him as it fell.

On the way to the river he heard the footsteps following him, the spectators, the tightrope-walkers, the circus owner, and for the longest while, his wife. He hid behind a clump of bushes and watched her running past, then a while later slowly walking back to the camp. The moon shone on the meadow. In this light it took on the colour of both growth and death.

Once he reached the river his rage subsided. In the dawn light it seemed as if the water was carrying ice floes, as if snow had already fallen on the meadows opposite, wiping memories away.