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The Wild Horse Under the Stove

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THE FIRST CHAPTER

where I meet Jakob Borg and hear about a shipwreck and a real old Secret Map.

I met Jakob Borg for the first time in April.

It was a Friday. I had parked my car on a little side street and walked to the post office to ask if anyone had sent me a letter, or at least a postcard. But nobody had thought to send me anything.

When I came back, there was a young lad standing by my car. He opened the door and slammed it shut again with a thud. He seemed to be having a good time with it. I sidled up to him.

“It makes a really nice bang”, he said casually, as he shut the door again.

“Ho hum”, I mumbled, not particularly pleased with the situation.

“Is this your car?” he asked me.

I nodded.

“Well, you must be pretty angry right now, I suppose?” he asked with interest.

“Well, I’m certainly not all that happy about it”, I told him.

He slammed the car door shut one last time and strolled around the corner. When I drove past him a few moments later, he was sitting on the footpath observing a titmouse that was trying to pull a worm out of the ground.

A few days later, I ran into him again.

It was raining.

It was really raining.

Jakob Borg was standing in front of the entrance to a building. He was wearing a green rain cape and staring gloomily into a puddle.

“How are you”, I asked, “you bored?”

“I never get bored”, he said, without bothering to look up at me.

He was prodding in the puddle with a stick, trying to pop the little bubbles.

“Don’t you have any friends to play with?”

“Of course I do”, he said.

“You mean your school friends?” I asked.

But he shook his head. “Nah, they don’t go to school.” And he thought for a moment before adding: “well, they don’t go very often. They’re not too interested in school, you know?”

“Right”, I say, I get it. “And where are your friends now?”

“Upstairs”, he said.

“Upstairs?”

“Yeah, up in my room. Katinka and Little Eagle Feather, the Fake Prince and Panadel the Vagabond, and Snout the Donkey.”

He placed a black beetle on a piece of wood that was floating in the puddle.

“My, you have a lot of friends”, I said, impressed.

“Yeah”, he said, and stared intently into the puddle, where a black beetle was travelling around on a boat.

“Where did you meet them all”, I asked.

Jakob thought for a moment: “Oh, all over the place. I found the Vagabond on a trail in the forest.”

“You found him?” I interrupted.

“Well that’s where I met him”, he replied, “but that’s a long story.”

“Will you tell it to me?”

Jakob tied a small piece of wood to the black beetle’s boat, which it could use as a life boat in an emergency. Then he drove the boat into the harbour and let down the anchor. Finally, he began to tell me the story:

How Snout the Donkey met Panadel the Vagabond and was discovered in the process.

One afternoon, Jakob Borg had headed out of the city with the Fake Prince and Snout the Donkey. They were walking along a path that led to Blabberholz, a little birch forest. The path was lined left and right with bushes full of blackberries and wild raspberries. Jakob Borg walked straight ahead, without so much as a glance over his shoulder, and the Fake Prince was struggling to keep up with him. The Fake Prince was a dark-skinned man from Africa who had turned up on Jakob Borg’s doorstep at some point and had been living with him ever since. He always wore a green turban, white silk trousers, and a red vest. He had a gentle, pleasant voice, and when he sang and accompanied himself on the piano – he was an excellent pianist –, Katinka would listen along, totally rapt. As far as she was concerned, he was a real artist. Nobody could really say how the Fake Prince got that name. If you asked him, he would say: “It’s simple enough. I am not a real prince, but a fake one. And that’s why I’m called that.” But of course, that doesn’t really explain very much.

So the two friends were walking along the dirt road, and Snout the Donkey was trotting along behind them at a leisurely pace. He had his pots and pans hung around his neck. He always carried them with him when he went on a walk, in case there was anything he could collect to keep as rations for the winter. Left and right he plucked the darkest, most beautiful blackberries, but he didn’t put them in one of his pots, he gobbled them up straight away. He was always hungry. He couldn’t remember ever having been really full. At least that was how

he saw the matter. And indeed, even after the most lavish meal, he would still never turn his nose up at a chocolate waffle or a caramel pudding if anyone were to offer him one. It's just that no one ever did. And so he munched away at the bushes and tried to not constantly think about his grumbling stomach. And now and then, when he'd fallen too far behind, he would gallop on all four legs to catch up to his friends. And as he ran, he shot mournful glances at all the blackberries he had to race past.

Jakob Borg stomped along with short, energetic steps, muttering away to himself. He was absolutely furious that afternoon.

"Five run-ins on one day. That's too much. First, the big boys shoved me against the wall. And then the building super yelled at me, as if it was *my* fault. And then the teacher and the whole class laughed at me because I wasn't game to walk along some stupid, stupid beam. And then at recess, a girl called me "four-eyes". And then, when I got home, Dad told me to just be quiet and not to bother him. Five run-ins in one day, can you imagine that, Fake Prince!" He turned around and glared angrily at the Fake Prince, and the look in his eyes was so terrifying that the Prince didn't dare say a single word.

"You're lucky you don't have to go to that stupid school!" Jakob griped. The Fake Prince hurriedly nodded his head. In truth, he would very much like to go to that school. He often dreamed of attending the school for a week or even just for a day. He thought about Katinka, who had stayed at home today. Katinka had said to him once: "School, my dear friend, is the most wonderful thing in the world. I wish I could go to school for the rest of my life."

As it was, Jakob Borg took her to class with him every morning, and in the evenings, she would help him with his homework. And the two friends chatted away about all the annoying things in life, and about how strange it is that different people can have completely different opinions about one and the same thing – like school, for example. And whenever the donkey managed to drag himself away from the blackberries and galloped after them, when he caught up to them, he would see that they hadn't missed him at all. They were still going on about school, and nobody was thinking about Snout the Donkey.

Snout was upset. If there was one thing that really got up his nostrils it was being ignored. And conversations about school drove him up the wall.

"I don't know", complained the little donkey, "as far as I'm concerned, people take school and all that way too seriously. I mean, there are plenty of other things to life."

The idea of going to class and doing sums in your head gave him goosebumps – well, as much as a donkey can get goosebumps. Katinka had been trying to teach him to do addition and subtraction. She would ask him unpleasant questions and be incredibly strict with him.

“So how much is two plus one?” Katinka would ask without a hint of sympathy.

And when Snout rolled his eyes and flicked his tail in despair and looked at his friends pleadingly, she’d say impatiently: “Well, Snout, can I expect an answer any time soon?”

The little donkey was never too sure about his answers.

“Well it couldn’t be much more than four or five”, he mumbled. And to appease Katinka, he quickly added: “I know exactly how much it is. I just can’t think of the number right now. – Maybe two?”

Katinka scrunched up her nose and acted completely outraged. But what was he supposed to do when just as Katinka started giving him maths exercises his stomach started to growl. And when you’re hungry, it’s completely impossible to think about anything else. Well, you certainly can’t when you’re a little donkey and you’re hungry in the way that only a donkey can be.

No, he didn’t enjoy conversations about school one bit. And being ignored was even worse.

So he had arrived on the edge of Blabberholz, where a river snaked along beside the trees. It was a small river. One step was enough to get from one bank to the other. It really was a tiny river.

Snout lay down in the tall grass and began to daydream.

“Oh well, they’ve forgotten about me. They’ve forgotten all about their little donkey”, he said gloomily. “I guess I’ll just keep lying here, nobody will miss me.”

He sat there thinking, getting sadder and sadder.

“Perhaps I’ll die here, and nobody will shed a single tear. Perhaps I’ll even starve, and nobody at all will look after me. Oh well, oh well.”

He really was in a rotten mood. Over and over he let out a mournful “oh well”, as donkeys tend to do. To console himself, he tried to conjure up the taste of a slice of raisin bread he had eaten last week. But that made just him even more miserable. The flies flitted about busily, and the bumblebees buzzed lazily, and the little river lapped along. And right

when Snout the Donkey was about to stick his right forehoof in his mouth and suck on it a little, because that's always the best way to forget about your worries, all of a sudden, a strange, croaky song rang out around him.

“A sail, a rope, and a blustering gale,
Hey ho, and a bottle of rum,
That'll make a sailor's heart sing without fail,
Hey ho, and a bottle of rum.”

Snout jumped up and lumbered tentatively in the direction the song was coming from. Lying in the grass in front of him, he saw a raggedy chap with a coat covered in patches and bulging pockets. He had a dented hat on his head with a poppy flower stuck in the band.

It was Panadel the Vagabond.

Vagabonds live in every corner of the globe, they're at home no matter where they go. They don't have money or possessions, not even a comb. Just a few rags. But they don't care. They don't want to own anything, they just want to live and be free. The thing they love most is rambling around all day long and lying in the grass, taking in the sun. They're always on holiday.

When you talk to them, they say they are the kings of the world. And in a way, they're right. They kind of are kings, just like pilots and train drivers, or the ringmaster of a circus.

They live from whatever they find, and survive on bread and cheese. They say that some vagabonds are millionaires, that they're rich. When you ask them about it, they just laugh. They don't need money, they say, at least they don't have any. And if they did, they'd just spit on it. Money is really good for that, they say, for being spat on.