

My soul is troubled by contradictory names

Naturally I was born in 1893. Everyone knows this as the proudest year in the Nordic nations' history of polar exploration. It was when Fridtjof Nansen set out on his world-famous voyage to the North Pole aboard the *Fram*. Mr Dreary viewed this as a personal honour and a sign that destiny had its eye on him. He immediately assumed I was born for great things and shrewdly realised that he ought to foster the same absurd fancies in my mind, too.

His marriage had threatened to take as ignominious a turn as his other enterprises: it had remained childless for a number of years. Not that Mr Dreary particularly craved offspring, but he realised that having once ventured into marriage, one should have some results to show for it, and anything else would be a fiasco. Admittedly he had no cause to reproach himself in this case, having personally not lifted a finger to bring about the marriage. He had merely become aware of the dreamy girl at carpenter Hearty's in Nystad. She was so dainty and pretty, so coy, and those big, sad eyes melted Mr Dreary's heart. He scarcely knew how it happened, but one day he brought the girl some flowers. And heaven knows, that was all it took. There sat her father, there sat her mother, and in agonies of embarrassment, Mr Dreary handed over his flowers to the girl. By the time he left, he was betrothed. He was rather surprised, yet at the same time relieved: the whole question of marriage had always hung over him as something one had to prepare for, weigh up, and make a serious commitment to. The fact that this, like everything else, appeared to take care of itself, was a good sign. Which made it all the more tiresome to encounter the subsequent

hitch over children who were, after all, part and parcel of it all.

But late in the autumn of 1893, when I let out my first cry, he instantly understood, of course, why it had taken so long. It would not do for the firstborn child of a man like him to arrive in just any year, the way other people produce their offspring. He was utterly engrossed in Nansen's expedition that year. He had minutely followed the preparations, rejoicing in King Oscar's generosity - 'there's a king who takes his duties seriously!' - and, around midsummer, when *Fram* had weighed anchor, he went about bragging as though he were the one actually setting sail for the far north and destinations unknown, into seas through which no vessel had ever ventured*. There was a perceptible change in him; he grew bold and manly, and assumed a stern tone of command, such as would be suitable on deck in rough weather.

But Nansen was away for a long time, nothing was heard of him, and fate offered Mr Dreary no clue as to the feats for which he himself had been chosen. He had an uncomfortable feeling that everything threatened once again to remain in its old rut, the shop to remain the shop, a little better one day, a little worse the next, and Mr Dreary to remain Mr Dreary, a little more cocksure one day, a little more subdued the next. Just as his sense of elation began to go decidedly flat, along came the baby girl in October! It did not take long for Mr Dreary to observe that something extraordinary was going on. Not only was the child born in that notable year, but it also first saw the light of day on the thirteenth. Now everyone knows that the number thirteen is linked to remarkable things, and in 1893 the number was even more remarkable than usual, because the members of Nansen's expedition also numbered exactly thirteen. In some unfathomable way, Mr Dreary connected my arrival with his own dreams of greatness, and he wasted little time in implanting them in my soul. Even as I lay in my cradle in my earliest days, the mysterious aura of destiny hovered about my head. A delightedly grinning face, mobile and surprising, was permanently bent over me; gestures, facial contortions and astonishing expressions found their way into

my dreams and drew my waking soul into the magic spell of singular expectations before it even had time to detach itself fully from the darkness from which it had emerged.

Mr Dreary threw himself body and soul into my upbringing. In actual fact, I gave him a very welcome opportunity to make some changes. The room in which I began my existence was altered beyond all recognition. No item of furniture was permitted to stay where it had been before; the rugs were rearranged on the floor; a special corner with a little desk, a little chair, a little bookcase and a little globe was set up for me long before I – a wriggling bundle – had the remotest need of these objects. In Mr Dreary's hands, a destiny began to take shape long before its bearer had any part in it. He had imagination, Mr Dreary, but of a rather singular kind. To my mother's horror and to ridicule from their entire circle of acquaintances, he decorated the wall above my white cot with pictures so far from appropriate for a child's mind that they could only be considered offensive. They were wild, thrilling pictures, which etched themselves into my mind forever. I have certainly developed a sense of personal ownership of them, and been influenced by them in a way quite different from the obligatory guardian angels and fairytale princesses deployed to keep other infants happy.

The most glorious of them all were the ships. They inhabited my imagination from my youngest years and I know they are slumbering for all time in the depths of my being, those beautiful, restless birds, the spirits of adventure, waiting for the wind to fill their sails. They were not just any ships, the ones with which Mr Dreary adorned my walls. They were ships of destiny, ships of heroism and conquest. Seeing them, one instantly knew that they were en route to something great and mighty and terrifying. I particularly remember a three-master with magnificently billowing sails, making landfall on a desolate Antarctic coast. Chill, glittering water around its keel, encircled by vast expanses of ice and snow, and the slender rigging against an endless grey sky. The uncannily suggestive aspect of that picture was the sinister and mysterious way in which the ship was pitching

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and tossing. Amidst such petrified, impenetrable wastes this impassioned tossing, an expression of its will to press forward despite the opposition of the elements and gods! In my mind I always linked this image with the most gruesome picture I had on my wall. Its backdrop was a towering, night-black wall of rock, a fantastical outline besieged by birds, an agitated mass of flapping wings, and on the ground beneath there were three small mounds of earth, rather comical in shape. Despite their amusing shape – they looked rather like three nesting ducks – these filled me with inexpressible dread. “The Three Graves on Beechey Island”* read the caption under the picture. I did not know what graves were, but I could still tell from the picture what was going on, and I had no need to ask anyone what the scene showed. It is truly terrible to think how much a small child knows.