



## PART ONE

**The old wagon** wheeled over the uneven country road, and above its crackling frame a boisterous laugh once again lit from its plump passenger. Though rich and full of life, the sound brought little comfort to the harness-imprisoned team, who at present were nipping each other's ears. The driver of this unfortunate carriage sighed and bent deeper into his already ruined spine. His hoary beard, stained by years of tobacco and resembling a dying dandelion, trailed down his chest and flared over his cantaloupe-shaped belly. A corn cob pipe jutted from the space once belonging to his tooth, and wisps of smoke licked at the underside of his withered straw hat before dissipating into the cloudless blue sky.

The old man's thoughts turned to the wide ridge he was traversing. He recalled the playful *eventyr* (tales) his dear departed father used to tell by fireside; namely, that this ridge (which had escaped the megalithic glaciers of old) was in actuality the carcass of a mountainous Troll who had fallen, face down, into an endless slumber; whose massive back, over centuries, had sprouted wild prairie grass and mixed oak woods; whose soil-rich flanks dropped

into watery valleys; and whose now exposed spine was the Territorial road. Well, one thing's certain, the old man thought. It was a terribly deformed spine, this damnable road, much like his own. He closed his eyes momentarily and tried to imagine the beautiful bluff-enclosed valley below, wherein coursed glorious spring-fed trout streams.

A rut in the road brought the old croaker back to reality. He glanced at his team, amazed not only by their unearthly stamina but also by the supernatural fortitude of his wagon. As reliable as it had been in the past, he knew with great certainty that it would not hold together for many more miles; though the fact that its wobbling right wheel was still in one piece was proof enough to convince the Godfearing elder that a higher power was involved. He snapped the reins in frustration, but the command was so reserved that the team duly ignored the gentle rap of rawhide.

The bout of laughter at his side finally began to recede. The old man angled a covert eye and at once glimpsed the full extent of the city man's corpulence. He had never, in all his life, been in the presence of a man as stout as this not also under the employ of Barnum & Bailey. He watched the city man's robusto ruminant between meaty lips, sending plumes of smoke from its fiery tip. The big man's luminous brown eyes seemed altogether enamored by the dramatic landscape. Without warning, he clamped down on the old man's frail diminutive knee.

"Now then, Skjeggebusen (Shaggy Beard)," he said, sweeping his free hand in a magnificent arc. "This is all exceedingly grand!" He paused to pull on the robusto. "With regard to serenity and scale, well, it certainly reminds one of the old country. What say, Skjegge?" The big man tapped the robusto at the edge of the wagon and then plunked the mighty cigar back into place. "You've not yet revealed your ancestral origins, old timer, though by appearances alone I would imagine your genealogy to stem from some wild acre of Jotenheim." The big man guffawed, squeezing the knee until it

popped like a chicken bone. The old man shivered, irritated not only by the ancestral slight but also the annoying sobriquet referencing his shaggy beard. Again he shifted his eye, watching now as the city man attended maternally to a magnificent black derby which rested comfortably on the curly black mantles of his hair.

“You may think it odd, Skjeggebusen,” the city man said through the cloud of smoke which had collected around his wiry beard, “but I find a leisurely jaunt through the countryside, such as the one we are now experiencing, to have a most cathartic effect on the inner workings of man. Though I must admit, I do miss the activity and the colorful individuals one inevitably encounters in the city.” The big man had moments ago related the specifics of his tiny abode, located in Bohemian Flats, in the very bowels of Minneapolis. “Now then, what is the word I am searching for? Ah, yes! Pan-ah-see-ah. This little excursion of ours, Skjegge, a mighty pan-acea, wouldn’t you say?”

The city man shifted his body to the side so as to encourage his suffering bowels. He hoped to rid himself of the gaseous entity which had slowly matured over the course of their long journey. Fortunately for him the wagon just then hobbled over a deep rut, encouraging the stressed alimentary canal into a sonorous song. The startled team fell into a fearful galumph, though in no time at all they knowingly reverted to the slow and familiar gait which each had agreed upon counties ago.

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And in this manner the crippled wagon passed from one county into the next. Soon, the old man surmised, they would arrive at the village of Norwegian Ridge. He longed for the first glimmerings of town. It would be an understatement to suggest that the old croaker was worried. He was terrified. The noon sun fell hard upon his poor rig, sucking moisture from its dung-stained boards and loosening its once snug spokes. Indeed, its creaking had risen to a fever

pitch. It was a horrific sound, bringing to mind some blighted coal cart crossing the chthonic countryside of Hell. Indeed, each revolution of the wheel seemed to shed days from what little time remained of the elder's life.

Truth be told, his converted manure wagon was not meant to carry so substantial a load. But he should not complain, for the city man had paid a generous, rather obscene, amount to convey him to town. And if by some blessed miracle they actually made it, he had already decided to acquire a new wagon with the proceeds. There would also be a grand feast accorded to his stoic team. The elder snickered, thinking: It takes all kinds. Fool of a man paid triple what it would have cost to take the train. They certainly don't come half so fatuous (or flatulent) as this one.

In his mind's eye the old man once again imagined the horrifically twisted wagon wheel, the spokes of which seemed no more substantial than the predictions of some wheel of fortune. He rose half an inch, all that his bent spine would allow. A sharp pain brought him out of his shell and he mumbled fiercely under his breath, "*Might well have taken the loco,*" more to placate his discomfort than to enlighten his garrulous guest.

Palms upon knees the city man stretched and exhaled like some grand bellows. His eyes shone moist and refreshed, as if he had just risen for the day. He had, of course, heard with perfect clarity the elder's silly suggestion.

"As I have stated, Skjeggebusen," the big man said, removing the robusto. "Many a benefit is to be obtained by the uninterrupted *utflukt* (excursion)." He paused to consider. "And as to comfort, old timer, do you find solace being imprisoned in an iron coffin? No, I thought not, dear Skjegge. And besides, you should feel proud of this fine wagon. Recall, if you will, the perceptive words of good Master Gynt: *På ridestellet skal storfolk kendes* (Great folk may be known by the mounts that they ride)." He returned the robusto to his lips.

The old man simply smiled. Oddly enough, there was something moderately charming about the big man. Indeed, he seemed to have the uncanny ability to suppress, to a very large extent, anything resembling anxiety. In point of fact, he was altogether oblivious of the catastrophe unfolding beneath his very feet, of how dangerously close the wheel was to implosion. The elder returned his attention to the team. Attempting to gain momentum, their long heads thrust desperately forward and back.

The city man examined his robusto as if a mysterious oracle burned at its tip. “Perhaps, Skjegge, you’ll not agree with such a simple *røverforfatter* (dime novelist) as I, but the species as a whole would do well to slow down.” He plunked the robusto to the side of his mouth. “Though I have, I am ready to admit, enjoyed the advances made in the area of electricity as well as the technologies that have allowed the outhouse to come in.”

The wagon quivered around a sharp bend and took up alongside a dry run that resembled the fossilized wake of an ancient snake. The team, Sisyphus slow, staggered, out of breath, up a slight rise. After what seemed an interminably long ascent, the land leveled out again, revealing a farmstead in the far distance. Near the end of a field stood an immaculate white house, and next to this a stately bridge-barn. A wooden windmill, rising sentinel-like from a copse of trees, seemed to scrutinize the wagon’s slow progress. The stump-studded field gave to the otherwise idyllic farmstead an apocalyptic appearance. Freshly cut trees, as if swept from the field by an unimaginable scythe, had been stacked for the sawyer. Nearby, a twisted pile of recently extracted roots awaited that evening’s bonfire.

“Ah, now there’s a sight for sore eyes,” the old man related, grateful after these many miles to see a sign of human habitation. “The residence of Ole Bornfluglen.” He nodded. “Proprietor of the brickworks in town. Richest and most generous soul in the county. Owns over 800 acres, old Ole does.”

In the field next to one of the few remaining stumps there stood a group of individuals in their Sunday best. They posed stiffly for a photographer who was at present dangling tiptoe from a hooded tripod. In the center foreground stood the elder Bornflugen. He jestingly sported an overlarge mattock, as if suggesting that he himself had been responsible for chopping down the final oak. His inability to lift the heavy implement even an inch from the stump sent the group into a fit of laughter. In response, the elder tapped his derby and pulled regally at his narrow white beard.

A moment later the lanky photographer extracted himself from his *camera obscura* and strode forward on fantastically long legs, determined to reposition the group. Bornflugen, back stepping, caught his heel on an exposed root and fell lightly to the ground, still gripping the mattock. A group of children, previously pre-occupied with chasing each other around the field, stopped to giggle and jeer at their bumbled *bestefar* (grandfather). A moment later their attention was drawn to the slowly approaching wagon. They waved and pointed, as if they had never before seen such a pitiful contraption as this.

The city man smiled exuberantly. "I must say that photography is another advance I can abide by." He tapped the robusto, sending ash into the elder's beard. "For instance, I find no harm in preserving, for historical posterity, such a fine looking creature as you, Skjegge." He paused to examine the old man more thoroughly. "You've the countenance of Bragi, old friend, though I don't imagine we'd find runes of a poetical nature carved into your tongue." The city man patted the elder's bent shoulder, the force of which nearly sent the old man soaring from the plank seat. The poor wagon shuddered as the city man's boulder of a belly shifted with laughter.

Suddenly, from the passenger side of the wagon, a high-pitched whiny voice begged to be heard. Mollerstuen turned to find a young boy skipping next to the squealing wheel. The child gazed, drop-

jawed, as if the monstrosity before him was the harbinger of some circus show soon to arrive.

“Say, mister,” the boy said excitedly, turning his attention to the severely cramped wheel. “What’s wrong with that there wagon wheel?” He extended a finger so as to almost touch one of its shivering spokes. Without pause the city man reached into his black suit coat, as though the answer to the boy’s query resided somewhere within, and then leaned over as far as his plump paunch would allow. Like some ridiculous magician he flashed a portrait card, instructing the boy to dispatch it with all possible haste to his father.

“Listen up now, you sweet foolish child,” the city man said. “You go on and tell your Pa something for me.” He winked. “You tell him that Mr. Mollerstuen has come to town! Yes sir, Mr. O. E. Mollerstuen’s the name!” The boy stopped in his tracks in order to examine the gift, which he soon realized was not a bar of chocolate or a toy trinket. His countenance changed from inquisitiveness to utter frustration and he bolted back toward the group. Once the card was delivered to its intended recipient, the distant man nodded respectfully toward the wagon as if it conveyed none other than St. Olaf himself.

“Ah, to be young again, eh, Skjegge?” Mollerstuen reflected as the wagon continued down the road. “To have *ungdom* (youth) once more!” He turned toward the old man, noticing that he had clamped his eyes shut and was direly whispering something under his breath. “Pray tell, Skjegge,” he inquired with some concern. Indeed, the elder was at that moment praying mightily. His head rang loud with a series of desperate pleas, mostly concerning the plight of his team. Nearly a mile down the road he was interrupted by a terrific explosion.

The old man’s startled countenance quickly reverted to a knowing smile. “Stump removal, by God!” he exclaimed, relieved that his wagon was still rolling. “Course, back in my day oxen

worked just as well as that stick of powder.” He shifted in his seat and a wave of excitement swept over his old bones. “We’ll soon be to town,” he said, thinking: Praise the Lord above. Without warning, the elder handed the reins over to the city man.

“Hold tight now, Mollerstuen,” the old man said. “Alsvid just might live up to his name and encourage old Bones into a sprint.” The excited old croaker used the reprieve to refill his pipe. He banged the cob against the wagon’s edge and then, from beneath his bushy beard, pulled forth a leather pouch. He dangled it like a talisman before his bemused passenger.

“Taken from a mean old Angus bull,” the old man proudly proclaimed before extracting a pinch of tobacco from the weather-worn sac. He packed the bowl of his pipe and, once the corncob was lit, took back the reins. His anxiety tempered some, the old man felt like conversing. “Tell me again, Mollerstuen, what it was you said you were in town for?” He surprised himself in the next moment by answering his own query. “Oh, yes, that murdered schoolteacher from Dead Hollow. *Gud velsigne henne* (God bless her).” He crossed himself respectfully.

For the moment the old man had forgotten the plight of the wagon’s wheel, which by now was beginning to sound like some warped torture wheel. “Sure is something, though, ain’t it,” the old croaker reflected. “The depravity of certain folk.” He attempted to straighten his spine but it merely clamped back like a tensioned trap. He sighed and then fell into a violent cough. Once recovered, he tapped a finger contemplatively to the side of his head. “Closest friend we have,” he said. “Though we never really get to know him all too well, now do we Mollerstuen?”

Mollerstuen nodded. “What you are referring to, in your own country simple way, is our pesky inner Troll. As my mentor Mr. Jonas Lie was wont to say: Trolldom in-habits the temperament of man.”

The old man thought for a long moment, unsure if he should

feel slighted or not. "Too bad about Inga Olson," he said. "You want my opinion, that Frost fellow deserves everything coming to him." The old man clamped angrily on the corncob. "Now then, Mollerstuen, as to this macabre interest of yours. I'll simply never understand it. And your writing volumes of books on the subject. Seems a terrible way to make do."

Mollerstuen grasped the dome of his belly. "I readily admit, Skjeggebusen, that I gravitate almost exclusively toward the morbid machinations of man. It is a subject which sells and one that I most heartily enjoy contemplating." He considered. "Take for instance the infamous Belle Gunnes — an utterly contemptible Norwegian." The robusto began to point like a lecture stick. "Though, one must admit, this particular Belle carried with her a certain undeniable charm, luring all those lonely men into her web." Mollerstuen smiled broadly. "Ah, the American Dream! Well, Skjegge, Belle Gunnes certainly earned it — one insurance policy at a time!" Mollerstuen returned his palm to the elder's abused knee, as if grasping the edge of a pulpit. "Be thankful, Skjegge, that you were not one of the unfortunates lured by this frightful Calypso, dismembered and subsequently buried in her back forty." He paused, removing his weight from the poor man's knee. "It's a strange world," he reflected, "and I mean to study its moral deviants to my dying day."

The city breeds all manner of Fool, the old man thought. He squinted desperately into the far distance, hoping for his first glimpse of that fine upstanding Norwegian town which he had been dreaming about these many miles.

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An enormous burr oak rose from the highest point of the ridge like some diminutive cousin of Yggdrasil, its thick limbs twisting and grasping like the Norns' withered hands.

The wagon continued its sluggish ascent, the only difference being that Alsviid and Bones had become noticeably excited. They

were now certain of two things: the leveling out of the land, as indicated by this stately oak, and the close proximity to town, which in their minds symbolized a paradisiacal watering trough.

Just moments ago the unstable wheel had finally shed its first spoke. The old man, whose intuition told him to stop for the necessary repair, knew full well that his team would never return to their duties if given a moment's rest. He had witnessed such defiance many times in the past, the team's muted conversation started the only solution would be to apply a series of fiery snaps to their flanks. The old croaker eyed the whip sockets at either end of the wagon's dash.

The team plodded forward with what seemed their last effort, tromping heavily up the rise. Midway up another spoke cracked and shot into the tall grass. A pair of flustered pheasants sprang from the spot, pumping themselves to a safe distance. The remaining spokes shifted like palsied pistons between hub and wheel rim. The old man immediately renewed his supplications.

Mollerstuen, meantime, pointed curiously toward the burr oak. Propped up against the tree was a haggard-looking individual who had the appearance of a sack of grain.

The old man sighed disgustedly. "By God, if it ain't Greip Ola," he exclaimed. "*Gammel vane er vond å vende* (Old habit is hard to change)."

The vagrant tipped a large jug carefully to his lips, all the while eyeing the wagon. His beard resembled a tumbleweed blown onto his chin.

"Bring you to town, Krogstad?" the old man said, using the vagrant's formal name. The jug slipped from the man's finger and rolled onto its side. *Clug, clug, clug*, it said. *Slurk, slurk*. "I can 'ear you my friend," he mumbled longingly to the displaced jug, "but I am unable to 'elp you." He hiccupped, gazing at his interlocutors with a childish grin.

"You, Krogstad!" the old man reiterated. "Well, would you

look at that. Damned fool can't even move." But in the next moment, and to the surprise of all, the vagrant suddenly found his feet and, wavering like a newborn contemplating its first step, dipped into a graceless bow. He stumbled widdershins toward the wagon, nearly collapsing as he attempted to tap his mangy hat in recognition of his guests. By some means he managed to hobble to the back of the wagon and, once there, toppled clumsily onto the bed. It was a drunken ritual performed many times in the past, as the old man well knew. The vagrant sniffed at the rancid air. Long-awaited Charon had finally arrived to cross him over the river Styx.

"Well, well, never thought I'd see the day," the old man said, astonished. "Last I heard, Krogstad had become such a nuisance in Norwegian Ridge that some townsfolk, the mayor included, all chipped in and bought him a ticket to the Dakotas. And that not more than two months ago." The old man stared in disbelief. "You don't suppose Greip Ola walked all that way?" As if responding to the question, the vagrant sang:

"It is morning on de hillseid  
der is sunshein on de knoll  
it is starfeit on de ocean  
but der's moonshein on my soul  
Tra la la la la..."

Mollerstuen glanced into the bed of the wagon, thinking: *Av barn og fulle folk skal man høre sannheten* (From children and drunks one will hear the truth).

The vagrant laughed himself to sleep after uttering a word that sounded vaguely like *nordakota*.

The old man snapped the reins. "What's that fool mumbling now?" he said. "Well, no matter. We'll get Ola to town. Have Doc Stabo fix him up some. Put him back to work at the brickyard perhaps." He paused to consider other possibilities of the vagrant's rehabilitation. "Now, git up!" he barked at the team, but it was just as he feared. Too much time had been allotted Alsvid and Bones.

“Get those old bones moving boys!” he croaked.

It was only when Mollerstuen shifted himself forward on the plank seat that the team saw fit to move. Indeed, this seemed all the momentum they required to initiate a strident, albeit wobbly, gait.

“Well, I’ll be,” the old man said, thrilled by the results. He gazed half pleasantly at the city man. Soon, he surmised, he would be rid of the burdensome load.

### §

The first glimpse of Norwegian Ridge brought tears of joy to the old man.

Moments ago the wagon had nearly burst in two when the rear wheel dipped into a particularly vicious rut. While not strong enough to wake the vagrant, the hellish sound sparked like a fuse up the old man’s spine. In his mind’s eye he saw with perfect clarity his vertebrae popping free like brittle spokes. Out of desperation he focused on the distant water tower, as though it were some fateful buoy which might save him from drowning in his own despair. In fact, the sound was now so loud that neither the old man nor Mollerstuen heard the brooding whistle of an approaching train. The locomotive scuttled across the earth like a dark centipede with what seemed a thousand legs.

The wagon shuddered and the old man bent so far into his chest that he thought he could hear the death throes of his aged heart. When he finally glanced up he saw the locomotive staining the clear sky with plumes of inky smoke. Exhausted, the old man cursed the vagrant, who snored contentedly in his bed of dried manure. When the caboose finally came into view the old man simply glared at the sprightly brakeman.

“There’s your town,” he said, nodding. “Norwegian Ridge, in all her glory.” He watched the train’s slow approach into the depot, hidden from view behind a cluster of trees. The locomotive shrieked and soon disappeared into the western edge of town.

An explosion echoed in the old man's skull and he knew at once that another spoke had been lost. It arced through the air like some Fourth of July firework. Unable to contain his rage any longer, the old croaker fell into a violent denunciation of the wagon.

The impulse to throttle the city man suddenly struck him as the only course of action that remained open to him. But instead of succumbing to his inner Troll, he simply clamped down hard upon his corn cob and focused on the approaching town.

### §

The wagon crept into town, heaving up and down like some circus car with a square wheel. The first thing to catch Mollerstuen's attention was a magnificent cruciform church occupying a commanding position at the farthest end of Main Street. Its steeple was scaffolded from top to bottom. The author smiled, thinking that it resembled the largest *kransekake* he had ever seen. Two men, barely discernible at this distance, worked just below the stately golden cross, which was plunked directly atop the hallowed ring cake.

The old man explained that ever since the holy shrine had been built a never-ending series of repairs had cursed its structure. "What Reverend Lee needs is a Master Builder like the one commissioned by St. Olaf," he said. "But the damned fool cares more about his congregation car than his congregation."

Mollerstuen was by this time sweating profusely, as he did not do well with heights. Indeed, the tiny hammering figures on the spire made him inordinately queasy. There was much to distract him on Main Street, though. Surreys and spring wagons wheeled lightly past, stirring up the dry road and lightly dusting storefronts and wooden sidewalks. Nearly every establishment contained a Norwegian flag as well as intricate *rosemaling*. Many townsfolk had already halted in mid-stride to eye the nightmare wagon.

Three women, wearing top-heavy ostrich feather hats, whispered and nodded in disbelief at the monstrosity. All the while their parasols spun like protective shields. Mollerstuen tapped his head-

piece in kindly fashion. “Afternoon fair ladies!” he said jubilantly. “Glorious weather, isn’t it?” The big man smiled contentedly, feeling himself among friends.

Two boys on black bicycles veered dangerously close to the wagon, as if attempting to run the rig off the road. They stuck out their tongues at the author and then, swerving around a large clump of horse manure, ducked expertly in between two buildings.

Mollerstuen’s attention was drawn to an establishment appealing to his inner gourmand. Meaty block letters painted on its storefront window proclaimed: EVENSON CAFÉ. In front of this restaurant a heavysset man was roasting coffee beans in a noisy red contraption.

Intuitively, Mollerstuen glanced up to the second-story window, where he noticed a bosom-heavy woman leaning forward to catch a light breeze. Her plump cheeks glowed and her thick forearms worked the window sash like a hefty dollop of dough. The goddess’s hair was pulled back into a radiant chignon, and she gazed skyward like some veritable giantess of old. Mollerstuen suddenly recalled a passage from *Havamal*:

I doubt that I would yet have come,  
Out of the giant’s lands,  
If I had not had use  
of Gunnlod, the good woman,  
Around whom I put my arm.

For a long moment Mollerstuen felt himself floating above the plank seat. Indeed, the vicissitudes of the wagon seemed to have greatly dissipated, as if a weight had suddenly been lifted from its frame.

“That would be Miss Claribel Evenson,” the old man announced, breaking the author’s spell. “You would do well, Mollerstuen, to acquaint yourself with such a fine lady.” Just then the wagon wheel resounded, startling the sweet soul in the window. She turned her attention toward the unearthly disturbance, fixing on Moller-

stuen's big brown eyes. The goddess blushed, dropped her gaze and quickly withdrew from the window.

The wagon wobbled past a brick building on the opposite side of Main Street. STATE BANK was carved into a striking panel of limestone, and just below this in smaller type: 1908. "Newest addition to Norwegian Ridge," the old man proclaimed. "Built not two months ago, and containing the largest vault in the county. That's old Doilie there, our homegrown Midas." Near the wooden sidewalk a brass-trimmed, bright yellow automobile idled. Behind its wheel Doilie glared incredulously at the passing wagon. Indeed, the banker's inverted longhorn mustache drooped a full inch after glimpsing Mollerstuen.

Out of nowhere, two ragged-looking dogs began to bark and snap at the threatening wagon wheel. Mollerstuen smiled broadly and attempted to bond with the animals. This seemed to do the trick, for the mutts soon disappeared down the nearest alleyway, tails between their legs.

"Well, I'll be," the old man said. He was gazing up at the sky. "Would you have a look at that."

All along Main Street children of all ages had stopped in their tracks and were pointing excitedly at a hot air balloon hovering over the church. After a long moment the pomegranate-shaped cynosure finally inched forward, pulling an enormous shadow with it. Just under the balloon, in a fancy wicker basket, a man waved contentedly to the crowds below, his enormous mutton chops flaring out like tiny wings.

"One of those aerial fellas from over at the county fair, I should imagine," the old man surmised, directing the team toward the blacksmith's shop. Almost there, he thought, sweating profusely. By God we're almost there....

Townfolk would recall what happened next long after it occurred. Not so much the memory of the astonishing balloon, but rather the bombastic arrival of one O. E. Mollerstuen. For just as

the wagon pulled up to the smithy, its wheel finally gave way.

Being that the crowd's attention was focused intently above, the explosion seemed to have originated from the vicinity of the balloonist. A collective scream filled the air, but it took only a moment before the clever townsfolk realized the true source of the detonation. They turned in unison and gawked in utter disbelief as the famed author was carefully set to earth, as if by some elephant bending its knee to accommodate a precious *maharaja*.