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Peinlich Sigurdssdóttir, senior lecturer in German at the University of Hellendam in the Southern African Republic of Onania, sat back in his chair and gazed at his life's work. He was in good time. He had bathed, shaved, washed his hair, and was wearing his favourite dark suit with his favourite white shirt and his favourite University tie – the one bearing the coat of arms with an albino aardvark rampant above a supine meerkat. And, as his mother had always instructed him, he had been sure to put on clean white underwear, just in case he was run over on the way and had to go to hospital.

Peinlich shifted his bottom on the chair in order to feel the starched crease between his buttocks that was for him firm proof that his underpants were still pristine. In a quarter of an hour, he would leave for the *Buchfest* at the University, where the publication of his first book would be celebrated with a panel discussion chaired by the renowned Onanian philosopher Stan Pousse. There it lay, on the table in front of him. It would probably be his last book, too. More than forty years it had cost him. But every day, every hour, every minute invested had brought returns far more satisfying than he ever could have imagined.

Siegmund Graupenfett. A Creative Biography.

He turned it over, and looked down at the dust jacket text that bore the name of Siggie Snödgård, his colleague from the German Department. "A groundbreaking achievement, not just in the history of Graupenfett studies, but of our discipline itself. The author has here penetrated to the heart of the mystery that binds a writer to his text. This will be the last word on his subject for many years to come." As his lips lingered whisperingly on every phrase, he closed his eyes. He knew each word by heart. In fact, he had known each word by heart before committing it to paper for Siggie to sign. How lucky to have caught him at an inopportune moment at the Vaseline shelf in the local *apteek*. Siggie would sign anything while still making up his mind whether today was to be orange or cherry flavoured.

Peinlich looked at the photo on the back cover: a small, mirror reflection of himself, wearing the same suit, shirt and tie. Even the underpants had been the same, though they were naturally out of sight of the viewer. He smiled at his cleverness: a nice metaphor for the book and its subject, really. He turned the book over once more to look at the front cover. He had chosen every detail, from the portrait of Graupenfett

to the font of the title and the shade of brown of the background. His grandfather would have been proud of him. Peinlich's family history was not unlike that of many others here. They had come to Onania along with the main wave of Icelandic immigrants fleeing British oppression in the Cod Wars of the early 1900s. They had assimilated swiftly, abandoned cod fishing for mealie farming, joined the local parish of the Icelandic Reformed Church, and adopted the local language and culture within a single generation. But the memories of the Cod Wars remained vibrantly bitter. Like many of his peers, Peinlich grew up believing that a metaphor for skirmishes over Atlantic fishing rights was in fact an actual tale of courageous Icelandic cod engaged in flights of derring-do against evil, colonialist British shoals. A hatred of the British was indeed actively cultivated down the generations, and had led many to support Germany in both World Wars. Peinlich's family was no different. Indeed, it was Grandfather Sigurdsdóttir who had first inspired his love of German culture. He still remembered fondly, as if it were yesterday, how so many years ago the family would sit round the kitchen table to hear Grandfather recite from his own Icelandic translation of *Mein Kampf*. How they would laugh at Hitler's cross-country skiing anecdotes. Not to mention the charming tales of adolescent salmon-tickling that came just after the chapter on venereal disease. Some thirty years later, rumours began to circulate that Grandfather had unduly embellished his translation with incidents from his own biography back in the old country. Peinlich had investigated the matter thoroughly, of course. But he had reached the conclusion that Grandfather had merely uncovered potent layers of latent poetic truth in the *Führer's* prose, rather than having applied additional, erroneous meanings. To this day, Peinlich preferred reading the book in Grandfather's translation, convinced that it was closer to the spirit of the original than was the original itself.

Although he still read it fluently, Peinlich himself had more or less ceased to speak Icelandic upon leaving to study in Germany back in the early 1950s. Only his Tourette's Syndrome had retained a strange muscle memory of it, for he would uncontrollably exclaim obscenities in his family's native tongue at climactic moments, usually of sexual or literary release. It did not disturb him unduly; and even the postman had grown used to having "Húsdýraúrgangur!" screamed joyfully at him each time he delivered the next batch of book proofs from the publisher.

Peinlich had been the first graduate of the University of Hellendam to be awarded a Fumboldt Fellowship to study in Germany. In Heidelberg, he had worshipped at the feet of the renowned Graupenfett scholar Gerhard Hendrikssohn, which wasn't so bad as long as you breathed through your nose and remembered to swallow. His fellow students had shied away from biographical investigation of their idol, restraining themselves to abstruse hermeneutics and empirical textual analysis. Peinlich had wanted more, convinced that the key to the work lay in the person of the author. Hendrikssohn had been a member of the writer's inner circle. So, whenever Peinlich found him in

affable mood, he would elicit any and all personal anecdotes that his professor was willing to divulge. The student was utterly in awe of his mentor, so could not help but think how imposing must have been Graupenfett himself to have left an indelible mark on a man as remarkable as Hendrikssohn (so indelible that Peinlich was almost convinced he had seen it, once, when he had dropped his tissue). But Peinlich became sure that Hendrikssohn was remaining silent about far, far more. The experience was for him not unlike reading only every other chapter of a novel. And so he had embarked upon his own biographical quest to fill in those missing chapters, neither suspecting that it would be over forty years before he would reach journey's end, nor that the end would be vastly different from the one he had first imagined.

Graupenfett had died relatively young. His coming of age as a writer had coincided with Hitler's assumption to power, and he had died in 1941, before Germany's fortunes had turned. He had married the daughter of the local leader of the Hitler Youth in 1938, though no children had issued from the union. The then extant sources mentioned only that career pressures had led to a separation, and that Graupenfett had drowned accidentally while leading a troop of the Hitler Youth on a swimming camp in Saxony. Rumours circulated amongst Peinlich's fellow students at Heidelberg that Graupenfett had been a member of the SA. But since he had been taught by his grandfather that valiant German stormtroopers would one day fight alongside Icelandic warriors to free homeland and from the evils of British imperialism, Peinlich alone had remained unembarrassed by the revelation. Indeed, he had been positively delighted. In the first draft of his book, he had even given this fact particular prominence, and that draft had sufficed to ensure his appointment to a lectureship at his *alma mater*. But that was back in the Good Old Days when penning hymns of praise to heroic Germanic hordes fighting for racial superiority was a sure guarantee of academic success.

Peinlich had subsequently been unembarrassed, too, by his discovery that Graupenfett had dedicated his first novel to Hitler; equally unembarrassed that his poetic masterpiece, the *Sonette an Adonis* – dedicated to his wife in their first, posthumously published edition – had in fact been addressed to one of his young charges in the Hitler Youth; and even less embarrassed when he realized that the boy in question had been none other than his former mentor, Gerhard Hendrikssohn. But the reactions of his fellow Graupenfett scholars at even the hint of deviation from what they considered accepted post-War norms of behaviour had sown the seeds of doubt in his mind that an unadulterated treatment of his subject might in fact detract from his undeniable greatness. The last straw was his discovery that the author's drowning had been no accident, but suicide – probably assisted by Hendrikssohn's unsympathetic parents in connivance with the author's estranged wife. In fact, Hendrikssohn had all but admitted it himself in an unguarded moment, once, when Peinlich had come up for air. But matters had long since been compounded for Peinlich by the more recent political upheavals in his native Onania. The demons of political cor-

rectness now ruled almost everywhere except in the hallowed halls of his University, where the white aardvark still stood proudly rampant, defended in word and deed by valiant colleagues such as Siggie and Stan.

Peinlich had never for one moment felt that his idol's work was in some way sullied by the biographical truth, for all that was human in the man was transfigured and purified by the beauty of the work. Life and work were for him as inseparable as cod and chips. But how to reconcile the two for an unthinking public without causing injury, both to the memory of the genius, and to the reception of his oeuvre? He knew that the reading critics would seek nothing but filth, and find it even where it was not. Even worse: there were those who wanted only to identify the biographer in his own work, and to sully him with the same dirt they sought in his subject. How, then, could he uphold the truth while ensuring that only the deeper truth he alone understood would be conveyed? How could he remain faithful to his task while at once exonerating both his subject and himself, too, from the reader's prying eyes? He had often pondered it under the shower. He would wipe the mist from the transparent glass door with his free hand and, in hope of inspiration, gaze on the posters of his cricketing heroes that lined the far wall of the bathroom. What, he wondered, would Hansie have done? Then, one day, five years ago, while bending over the frozen fish at the local supermarket, he had experienced the revelation that had unravelled everything in an instant, solving every conundrum in a manner so quite, so startling, that he knew his work would never be the same again. "Húsdýraúrgangur!" he had twitched as he threw back his fillets, closed the freezer door and hurried home, codless, to his red pen.

He had spoken about it all just the other night to his graduate student, Paul. "We must regain the moral high ground in historiography," he had said. "Too long now has our discipline in the West been the slave of those who everywhere see sexuality, depravity and dirt. We must reclaim the great and the good in a finer cause, we must rescue our literature, music and art from the deconstructionists who see in it nothing but a mirror of their own, pathological, sexual obsessions." A sweet, cherry scent hung in the air. Paul listened patiently, then looked at his watch and said: "Hurry up and stick it in or I'll have to charge you more than usual."

"Húsdýraúrgangur!"

Yes. His work would change the art of biography in Hellendam ineradicably, and its repercussions would be felt throughout the world of Graupenfett scholarship for decades.

But it was time to leave. He had to hurry down Tuynstraat or he would be late for the panel discussion. Peinlich picked up his book and opened it. As he now flicked through its 702 pages, all of them blank, he was filled with an unutterable pride. It had taken forty years, but he had at last done justice to his subject, to himself, and to his University. This was truly the last word on them all.