

Rolf Bagger

HAPPY NEW YEAR, AKSEL

Translated from Danish by Valerie Kristiansen

short story

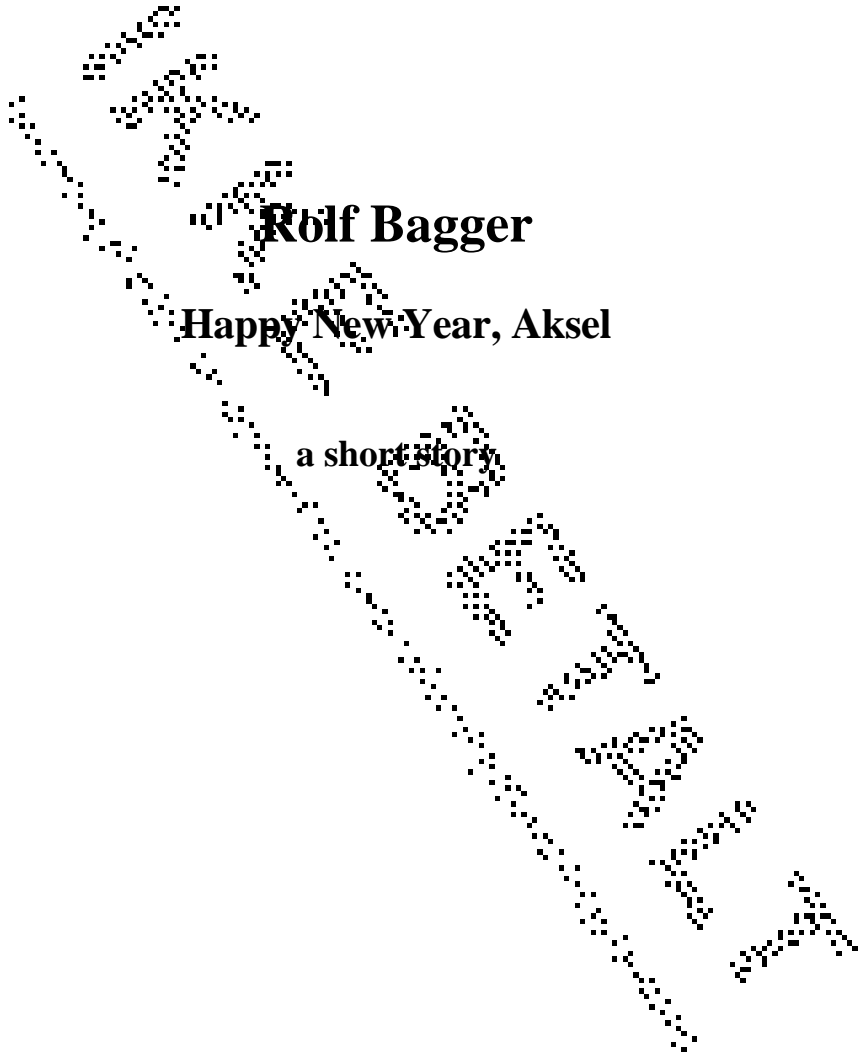
Net-Bog-Klubben  
(autografisk manuskript)

ISBN: 87-90511-87-5  
Copyright: Rolf Bagger  
år: 1998  
Server: Cybercity

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Antal sider: 18



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## Happy New Year, Aksel.

by Rolf Bagger.

The first of the innumerable rituals of Christmas was when their daughter, Agnethe, and son-in-law, Aksel, visited them on December 23 with the grandchildren. Naturally everybody had to behave as if it was a great surprise. So, when they opened the door and saw who was standing outside, he and Agnes appeared to be seized by the appropriate joy and spontaneous confusion as if on command.

The grandchildren, Alice and Atlas, were appropriately well-behaved, and if they found it embarrassing to be immediately called Grandma's Christmas girl and Christmas boy, once again they were too well-mannered to show it. Of course not, they would never be too big for that, they protested in chorus as she gave them each a big Christmas hug.

But the visit was never lengthy. That was also part of the ritual. Alex and Agnethe would just deliver the obligatory Christmas flower, and were, naturally, completely immune to Agnes' energetic attempts to persuade them to have another little glass of port and the children to have some more sweets.

- But we'll see each other tomorrow as well said Agnes, with suitably happy resignation in her voice. Should we say twenty to three outside the church? Or should we say half past two to be on the safe side?

For a moment everybody looked at each other questioningly. Nothing was as risky as if they suddenly disagreed on even the slightest thing.

- It'll be a shame for the children if they can't see anything, Agnes announced. You do remember that time, you know, don't you? she added, and looked lovingly at the children.

Yes, they all remembered much too clearly that year when they were late and had just been able to squash themselves into the back of the church. Agnes and Agnethe had sat on a bench right next to the organ with the children on their knees and from where they could only see the backs of those who were standing near to them, whilst Alex and himself had to be satisfied with standing room. Little Allan had soon become fretful and noisy so Alex had had to lift him up and put him on his shoulders so that he could see a little bit of what was happening. But that hadn't settled the boy down, on the contrary. So in the middle of it all Alex had had to take him outside and stay there until it was finished. Every year they talked about that experience.

They all agreed that it was important that the children could see properly, but on the other hand twenty to three must be alright; it had been for the last couple of years, so it was left at that.

They all got seats, but it was difficult because the church was nearly full already. For a moment it seemed as if panic would break out because Agnes and Agnethe had to sit on a row by

themselves with the children between them, whilst Alex and he got places on the opposite side of the aisle and a couple of rows further back.

From there he could freely observe how Agnes was all over the children with smiles and signals and small nods which didn't seem to have any other meaning or intention than to keep their attention tied and bound to her person. He was filled with a mixture of admiration and discomfort at seeing how they made an effort to live up to the roles of her polite and hopeful grandchildren the whole time.

Maybe it was this experience that made a little devil spring up in him when it was finished. He knew that on the way out of church he was expected to give the children a few coins to put in the collection box. He also knew that they knew it and expected it, but in any case something made him pretend that he had forgotten what he ought to do.

But of course Agnes had been watching him, and was all over him straight away.

- The money, she whispered almost soundlessly back at him between the other churchgoers.

When he still pretended that he didn't understand what she meant, the pitch of her voice rose noticeably.

- The money for the children, they must have it now she almost hissed, while those standing near discreetly made room so that the message could be delivered.

As he still acted as if he didn't understand, he saw that she began to search in her bag with angry, demonstrative movements, while an ominous cloud of threats of bad moods surrounded her. At that moment he knew that he couldn't be bothered to have a fight with her.

Quickly he felt in his coat pocket for the change which, naturally, he had put there for that purpose before he left home and offered it to the children while the people moved even more to one side. He whispered discreetly that the money was for the collection box, and the children nodded in agreement and were naturally not the least bit surprised. They didn't thank him for the money either because it wasn't for themselves and therefore there was nothing to say, thank you for. They put the money into the shiny brass box near the entrance, and looked back for approval, and naturally received smiles of acknowledgement from the whole family.

The sight of Agnes' attack of anger had made him lose heart. For the rest of Christmas he would, on the quiet, be satisfied with studying the strange drama he was involved in. He hadn't got the energy for more hopeless attempts to change its course. This was the last time he had tried to stop the sham.

Even Christmas Eve at Agnethé's and Alex's was, as always, a terribly strained event. Agnethé's parents-in-law, Albert and Alma, were also there, and the mere presence of the competing teams of grandparents made Agnes stiff and inhibited and she

swung unforeseeably forwards and back between inhibited happiness and poorly concealed dissatisfaction, especially with her own role in the performance.

The height of the evening was the orgy of presents around the lit Christmas tree following a hasty Christmas dinner. The highlight of highlights took place when Allan and Alice unwrapped their presents from their parents whilst silence descended, close and heavy. Everyone knew that in this situation it would take only a single rash remark to create an embarrassing atmosphere, or even open confrontation.

Alice's big prize this time was a new harness in thick, black leather for her horse, Superboy, which she cultivated with all the shameless, undisguised erotic of pre-puberty. Jubilantly she threw her arms round her parents' necks and drowned them in a flood of kisses and exaggerated praises and thanks both from herself and Superboy, as if they had given her a complete bridal outfit for her imminent wedding to the hero of her dreams.

At that moment Grandmother Alma looked across at him shyly and gave him a cautious, searching smile. He knew that she was utterly opposed to the yearly gift orgy, and he knew that she knew that he felt the same. For a moment he felt tempted to show that he was on her side, but he restrained himself. In agreement with his decision just to play his part in the Christmas show dutifully and with discipline, he was content with a non-committal smile.

But things went wrong a moment later in any case. Unlike his sister, Allan had sunk into the speechless self-consciousness of

a ten-year old over a new advanced colour laser printer for his computer, and just sat there paralysed with joy with the electronic wonder in front of him.

Until his grandmother Alma remarked dryly:

- One could at least say thank you.

The remark made him smile instinctively, only slightly, and he even avoided looking over at her. But Agnes had noticed it, and her expression left no doubt that she both disapproved of her grandmother colleague's poorly concealed criticism of their mutual grandchild, and, most of all, him supporting it. Without relaxing her touching sympathy for the children's happiness for a moment, the side of her that was nearest to him darkened and sent waves of pure and unreserved hatred of his behaviour over to him.

The children, of course, noticed nothing. Alice spent most of the evening on her father's knee with Superboy's leather harness gliding sensually forwards and backwards, ceaselessly through her hands while she radiated shameless, joyous expectation. And Allan sat all evening in front of his computer with bliss radiating from his face while he produced gory science fiction drawings from the science fiction -and horror cartoons- drawing programme which he'd also received. After that the new colour laser printer squirted them out, twisted and turned and viewed from every possible angle, in every possible enlargement and in the most brilliant print quality that the computer market could possibly present.

Of course they observed all the countless rituals of Christmas Eve, both large and small, as if everything was total bliss. The most unimportant subjects which didn't involve personal points-of-view were discussed, Christmas port was sipped from very small glasses, and sweets and home-made chocolates, which Agnethe was loudly complimented on repeatedly, were eaten. Also eaten were fruit and figs and dates and various kinds of nuts which were discreetly and extremely carefully cracked with the nutcracker hidden in the hollow of the hand so that neither the sound nor the shells could disturb the well regulated Christmas spirit.

But all that was pure routine. The evening was ruined, not officially, of course, but under the surface. On the stroke of eleven thirty Agnes announced that it was about time to go home "after such a wonderful evening" as she put it. Agnethe naturally tried to play the part of the one who tried to make the guests stay for a little longer, but no-one was in any doubt that Agnes was serious. They were going home. Christmas Eve was over. Ruined and over.

She didn't utter a single word on the way home, and she was out of the car before it stopped moving in the carport. When he came in and was going to set the burglar alarm from empty house to outdoor surveillance she had already gone without having said goodnight, and when he went into the bedroom to undress she appeared to be sleeping.

On Christmas Day she went round the house with an expression of constant suffering and consistently excluded him from the slightest and most ordinary things. Now and then she made

small half strangled noises of pain, as if to demonstrate that what she was busy with was a terrible burden and something he should immediately jump to and help her with. But he knew that if he tried to offer to help - and actually there was nothing she wanted more - her reaction would be silent and ice-cold rejection. With hard, resolute movements she would continue her work as if the renewed awareness of his existence could fill her with lots of new, hateful energy. He should feel unwanted and homeless in his own home so that it would be hers and hers alone.

Every time she talked on the telephone, and she did so three or four times during the course of the day, all her despondency disappeared as if by magic. She brightened up and demonstrated loudly that she lived in a much happier world when she was free of him. But the moment she put the receiver down all happiness was switched off and her whole manner became suffering and tragic as before.

Of course he knew what it was all about. First he should show that he was ready to surrender unconditionally. To achieve this he should grovel and be humble never minding how long she ignored and humiliated him. When she at last overcame her demonstrative loathing for him, she would first hold a long moral sermon full of violent reproaches and give a description of all the suffering his behaviour had caused her. He wasn't allowed to protest or even comment on this speech. Here he was only allowed to listen remorsefully and look devastated.

Only after this would the time come where he must give her the great ritual apology. It should be unconditional and it should be

accompanied by a stream of self-reproach and remorseful confessions of how illoyally and cruelly he had behaved. If he went slightly astray from pure and total submission she would return to a state-of-war immediately and make the price of his future surrender even higher.

But this time he would not give in. He hadn't provoked and he hadn't wanted any disagreements. If she wanted trouble, then she could have trouble. He talked to her when it was natural without waiting for an answer though, and, all considered, acted as though everything was beautiful and good and quite normal. This time she wouldn't be the one who was triumphed. This time it was his intention not to give in until he could be triumph.

They were at their son, Agnar's, and daughter-in-law, Anne's, that evening. That was also one of the fixed rituals of Christmas, but it was always more relaxed than Christmas Eve. First and foremost the orgy of presents was over, so that at least couldn't stir the emotions and cause sudden quarrels. Apart from that, Agnar's and Anne's children were much smaller than Alex's and Agnethe's and couldn't yet add their own individual contribution to conflicts.

Finally, Agnar's parents-in-law were both dead and had been for several years, so there were no competing grandparents for Agnes to fight with for the children's attention. She didn't need to restrain herself and therefore didn't do so, and five-year-old Annita and three-year-old Annika let themselves down unresistingly in her unrestrained love without protesting.

Not for a single moment did she forget to carry on her battle with him, and her terror tactics in the middle of all the Christmas festivities were just as surprising as they were simple and discreet. She simply did not look at him, she did not talk to him and when he said something, which he naturally did throughout the evening, she ignored it completely. He laughed and enjoyed himself, and all the time took part in the conversations eagerly and behaved as if nothing had happened. Not for a moment should she be allowed to think that victory was within reach.

So she suddenly escalated the terror and made it less discreet. She began sending him undisguised angry looks and wove sharp and unpleasant asides to him in the middle of the conversation. She pulled faces full of displeasure and scorn every time he said something, and she tossed her head or turned her back directly on him when he didn't let it get him down.

In return he was satisfied with smiling to her and laughing at her wicked little remarks when he didn't actually answer in a mild cheerful tone so that Agnar and Anne would get the impression that he was trying to save the evening from developing into a complete catastrophe.

And even so he was completely taken by surprise by her final, desperate countermove for some time she had been sitting on a cushion on the floor under the pretext that she was still just as preoccupied with the grandchildren, even though for some time they had shown that they were not satisfied with their grandmother's lack of attention and this had made her even more hectic and irritable.

Suddenly she stood up and looked around her, bewildered.

-This makes me feel sick, I have to go home, now, at once, she announced in a tearful voice with eyes full of panic, and made it look as if she was on the point of fainting.

Anne stood up immediately and put her arm around her mother-in-law and asked considerately if she was ill, but Agnes freed herself with a plucky look and was already getting ready to leave.

- I really don't know what is happening, I must go home, thank you for having us, thanks to both of you, she said and sent a fleeting, tearful smile to her son and daughter-in-law.

Then she also smiled bravely and tragically down at her grandchildren, who remained sitting silent and amazed on the floor, and rushed out into the hall ready to leave. Anne's consideration for Agnes continued until they had gone out of the door, but neither Anne nor Agnar revealed what they were thinking, and everyone, as far as possible, avoided looking at each other.

On the way home Agnes was silent and impassive, but had remarkably little difficulty in keeping the tears in check which had otherwise been so close to overpowering her when they took their leave. Not unexpectedly, she moved out of the bedroom as soon as they came home and moved into the guest room, but there was no sign of surrender. He knew very well that she had only changed the battlefield to get rid of onlookers.

Before he went to bed he took a last look at the road from the window in the hall. It seemed to be empty and peaceful out there

just then, but, as usual, he couldn't see if there was something happening over on the other side of the road out of range of the street lights. So, to be on the safe side, he left the two halogen lamps on the facade lit so that the front garden and the drive were lit all night.

Agnes continued the war with undiminished strength on Boxing Day. Luckily they never did anything on that day. It would have been completely impossible to be with others. She was cooped up in the guest room and suddenly didn't seem to be worried about anything concerning Christmas traditions. A couple of times during the course of the day he heard her moving about in the kitchen, but he didn't go out there. He also heard her talking on the 'phone several times, but he didn't know to whom she was talking. She talked so quietly that he couldn't catch the words through the closed door.

Undaunted she continued the war in the days between Christmas and New Year. He neither saw nor heard her when he got up in the morning, and, as a rule, when he came home in the evening he just managed to hear the door to the guest room being closed. However she had begun to put food out for him in the evening. His place was set at the table in the dining alcove in the kitchen, and the food was on the cooker like a command, and he had no choice than to obey.

When he had eaten he watched television, but it became more and more difficult for him to concentrate on what he was watching, and at the same time the sound hindered him in hearing if

she was talking to someone on the telephone. Once he thought that he could hear her crying in the guest room, but when he sneaked out and listened at the door there was complete silence.

When he finally switched the television off in order to go to bed he felt that he was completely alone in the world. The only sign of life around him were the small red light diodes up under the ceiling which went off and on when he went through the different alarm zones in the house. The war couldn't continue for ever. Agnes must be forced to show what she wanted. So it must be kill or cure.

As usual on New Year's Eve they were going to a big get-together at Agathe's and Andreas' in the neighbourhood. But even later on in the day he had no idea if Agnes had thought about going at all, and if she didn't want to go anywhere he would have to stay at home too. First when late in the afternoon she fetched a dress, which she apparently was going to wear, from the bedroom, he realised what she wanted to do. But at the same time he saw that she wasn't radiating her usual fighting spirit or coldness but only grey gloom, and suddenly it was very clear to him that maybe she didn't have the energy to go on with the war. The question then was how would the surrender take place?

She appeared grey and careworn all the evening and spread dejection around her at the party, and many meaningful looks were passed in the corners when people thought that no-one was looking. She sat lost in a corner for long periods while most of the other people made a noise and laughed just beside her. Her

unhappy appearance seemed to frighten people away. It was quite clear that she was finished. He would be able to make peace with her quite easily if he just chose the right moment.

That moment came when it was twelve o'clock. At the same moment as the clock finished striking he came from behind and stood beside her and laid his arm on her shoulder and gave it a little squeeze, neither specially loving nor comforting, only forgiving and tolerant, and the effect did not fail to appear. She immediately put her arm around his waist and surrendered. She hung on to him so that he could hardly move, and when he squinted down at her he could see that she also had tears in her eyes.

Now the only thing that mattered was to tread carefully.

- Shouldn't we go home?, he whispered, as soon as the solemn wishing each other a Happy New Year was finished .

She nodded eagerly without looking up, and without anyone noticing it, they vanished out of the room.

They didn't look at each other while they rummaged for their coats in the hall, and they didn't speak to each other on the way home. But he held his arm loosely around her shoulder during the four-five minutes it took them to walk home, to show that he wasn't one to hold a grudge, and as soon as they got home, she moved back into the double bed again. She hurried forward and backwards between the guest room and the bedroom, with her bedclothes and her things, and it didn't take her very long to be

finished in the bathroom. He, on the other hand, took plenty of time, and when he came in again she had turned off the bedside lamp as well and seemed to be asleep.

But he had only just managed to lie down and turn off the light before she moved over and snuggled up to him.

- We'll never be like this to each other again, will we? she whispered in the dark.

He remained lying on his back and contented himself by being a bit stiff and unapproachable.

Even the slightest movement would be regarded as a rejection and trigger off a new wearing war and he couldn't be bothered with more trouble. He wasn't even sure what she was up to. She had one arm over him on top of the duvet and he could feel her breath just beside one of his ears.

- Shouldn't we promise each other that? she continued.

- Yes, let's do that, he answered finally.

Suddenly she put her arm under the duvet and began to caress his shoulder, nothing special, just a few careful touches, but it felt as if she offended every single fibre in his body. If she started to touch him in other places and simply set the scene for making love, it would end in a total catastrophe. He wouldn't be able to handle anything of that kind just at the moment.

- They have been some awful days, she whispered after a while.

He nodded silently and hoped that she she would understand that they had been some awful days for him too.

Then suddenly she was leaning on one elbow and holding his head with both hands, gently of course, but it felt as if she was holding him in a vice, and he could feel that she was right on top of him now.

-It was so beautiful when you got the better of yourself, she whispered down towards him.

At that very moment she kissed him but continued holding his head with both hands.

- Therefore everything is forgiven, she added hardly letting her lips leave his, and then she kissed him again.

But it was all too late. When she finally lay down beside him she kept her arm over him under the duvet as if she was afraid that he would escape, and now she also captured his free hand and put hers on top of it.

- Happy New Year Aksel, she whispered just beside his ear.

It sounded like the slamming of a cell door.

- The same to you, he answered.

- And thanks, she added.

A moment later she slept.