

A Young Dane Named Bjarne

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There was once a sculptor named Alfred, who having won the gold medal and obtained a travelling scholarship, went to Italy, and then came back to his native land. He was young at that time – indeed, he is young still, although he is ten years older than he was then.

H.C. Andersen, *Beauty of Form and Beauty of Mind*,
in translation

There was a young Dane named Bjarne, who having won the golden post of lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, settled in the city's New Town and moved into an office at 18 Buccleuch Place. He was a young man at that time – indeed, he is young still, although he is thirty-four years older than he was then. Glimpses of what went before these decisive steps in Bjarne's life, and where everything started, will be related below.

September was an unusually mild month in 1955, the year when Bjarne, the second child of Gerda and Hugo, was born in North Jutland. Although described by his mother as 'a happy child', as a young boy he occasionally suffered setbacks. For example, when he was learning to speak, Bjarne for a while

struggled to pronounce the ‘r’ sound. He and his sister used to visit a local seamstress who made new clothes for them – her first name being Sørine – and she used to challenge him to pronounce her name, with the promise of an ice cream for them both if he got it right. Luckily, we learn from his sister that Sørine was a very forbearing lady.

Bjarne spent his formative years in the environment of the family grocery shop. With its large expanse of exciting names and slogans printed on the product ranges on the shelves, this was a world of wonder for a boy with an early fascination for letters. ‘Valo’ was the brand name of a Danish washing powder which promised to give ‘a new brightness to your clothes’, being in sharp competition with the brand ‘Snevit’ (or snow white) which promised to make your laundry ‘white enough to be hung out to dry in the town square of Copenhagen’.

On a warm day in August 1961 and holding his mother’s hand, Bjarne set off for his first day of school in the small town to the east of Aalborg where his family had moved. A brand-new satchel in his other hand, he was too impatient to stay by his mother’s side and skipped along well ahead of her.

Bjarne loved school. He stayed at the first one for seven years, before taking his warm feelings on to another school for the next two. However, as his change of school required him to travel there by bus, another misfortune befell the young boy: he was obliged to get up extremely early in the morning, an activity which has never been Bjarne’s cup of tea! All the same, it was a challenge he met with composure – as indeed he still does. On the way home from school, one of his fellow students was playing around with a ball in the school bus, when it happened to hit the back of the driver’s head. As the young culprit would not admit the offence and his classmates would not tell on him, every single one of the youngsters had to leave the bus and cover the remaining eight miles on foot.

In his leisure time as a child, apart from reading books, Bjarne loved playing football and frequently played around the family house with his friend Ove. Not infrequently one or other of the window panes was smashed in the process. Bjarne later joined the Romdrup-Klarup Gymnastikforening, where he was considered quite a football talent. Rumour has it that a coach of his back then very much regretted seeing him stop playing. Bjarne still enjoys using his dribbling skills whenever an opportunity comes his way, despite having been injured and having to visit A&E after a match with students at a summer course in Denmark. As we all know, Bjarne has not lost his love for the beautiful game, and his disappointment is discernible whenever 'his' team loses a match.

When they came home from school, Bjarne and his elder sister used to assist in the family business, for instance by delivering shopping that had been ordered by local customers. The goods were usually placed in a basket on the back of their bicycles. One of the children's favourite regular customers was a certain Mrs Luther, who used to tip the youngsters twenty-five øre for their service. Deliveries to another customer were held not in favour by the siblings – in fact, they were slightly afraid, as an aggressive Alsatian dog tended to 'welcome' them at this address. The most popular activity in the shop occurred in the run-up to Christmas, when they were asked to assist by transferring particularly yummy sweets from large glass jars into small cellophane parcels, which they then sealed using an electric device which to their eyes seemed positively magical. It is rumoured that a not inconsiderable quantity of the Christmas sweets ended up in small 'containers' other than the fancy cellophane parcels.

For his upper secondary education Bjarne headed to a respected school in the city of Aalborg. This was a famous and very traditional seat of learning; on the very first day of

term, during assembly, the staff made their ambitions plain to the students by urging each one of them to bring a suitcase to school the next day to accommodate all the books needed for the upcoming year's studies. One tradition in Denmark is for students leaving secondary school to mark the end of this period of intense learning by wearing a formal type of hat. However, at the time of Bjarne's graduation in the 1970s, there was a wave of protests among young people against this tradition, with many of them, as was the case with Bjarne, refusing to don this head gear.



Photo: Jakob Thorup Thomsen

Bjarne was keen to get his driver's licence at the age of eighteen, something which served him well in the summer following graduation, when he and three of his friends planned to spend several weeks travelling across Europe, taking turns to drive. They set off in a VW camper van, a popular vehicle of the time – known in Denmark as 'rye bread' – owned by the father of one of his friends. On approaching Paris, the three brave boys headed straight for the main attraction of the city, the Champs-Élysées, where, unsurprisingly, they were soon caught in a mire of traffic and ended up being escorted to a safer place by French police.

When the time came for him to apply to university, Bjarne had the choice of going either to the university of Aarhus or that of Copenhagen. His parents would probably have preferred the former, which was closer to home, but on the advice of one of his teachers, he decided on the latter, leaving for the capital in 1974 in the company of two of his friends. After that, his parents contented themselves with receiving frequent calls from Bjarne's new base courtesy of one or other of Copenhagen's phone boxes, and regularly welcoming him home at weekends. A new member of the family at this time, one that everybody adored, was Kasper, a Labrador. Rumour has it, Bjarne spent so long saying goodbye to the dog before leaving for Copenhagen that he more often than not risked missing his return flight.

After completing his cand.philol. in Scandinavian Literature at the University of Copenhagen, Bjarne bought a flat in Reberbanegade in Aalborg and returned home with a view to spending a semester honing his pedagogic skills at the local Danish Teachers' Training College. Later on, his younger brother joined Bjarne in the flat upon his own graduation, chipping in to cover the household bills. They were both serious about physical exercise, their main choice of sports being running, which they practised together. When taking part in

amateur running competitions, Bjarne wasn't too happy to see his brother sometimes overtake him in the sprint.



Photo: Jakob Thorup Thomsen

Academic posts in Bjarne's field were few and far between in his native country at this time, but on widening his perspective, Bjarne soon spotted a position of interest to him in the UK – not in Scotland yet but very close by. This led to him moving to the North of England in autumn 1986 to take up a post at the University of Newcastle. Although he struggled to keep his rented room in the Gateshead area of the city warm enough during the winter, Bjarne thoroughly enjoyed his new life in Newcastle and might very well have stayed on, had the university not suddenly decided to close down its Scandinavian Department, just one year after his arrival.

As luck would have it, a crucial decision was made at the University of Edinburgh, leading to a new Department of Scandinavian Studies being set up less than two hours' drive north of Hadrian's Wall. Bjarne was invited to join the new department together with two colleagues from the University of Aberdeen, where Scandinavian Studies had also closed down that year.

This is how Bjarne came to settle in Scotland's capital, where he moved into an office at 18 Buccleuch Place in the autumn of 1987. Which just so happened to be where the writer of these lines would meet him for the first time upon moving into the office next door some two years later.



Photo: Jakob Thorup Thomsen