

The Bergen Story

By Peter Dale

The bus edged slowly around the bay, dropping off its passengers one by one. An elderly lady with shopping trolley stood and chatted in lilting Norwegian to the driver before getting off, her coat buttoned up to her nose.

The bus reached the terminus and pulled alongside a small shelter. The engine came to a halt. The driver stretched and turned to the remaining passenger half way down the bus.

‘This is the end of the line, Sir. The next bus leaves at 12.25. You have twenty minutes if you wish to get out and walk.’

To the passenger, who could not speak a word of Norwegian, the information came out like ‘Bilty bolty buider come tee too.’ He fumbled for his phrase book, tried to leaf through it to the right place, and gave up. He put up his hands in apology and waved his Bergen Bus day pass.

‘I’m very sorry, but I do not speak your language,’ he said in English, his face anxious and uncertain.

The driver did not hesitate. ‘It is I who should apologise, for you do not look Norwegian. We have reached the terminus and will not leave again for twenty minutes. Would you like to get off for a walk? I can give the horn a blast a couple of minutes before departure.’

It was the informal “couple of minutes,” that sounded almost like home to the man. ‘Do you mind if I stay and chat?’ he asked, studying the driver’s face; leathery middle age, slightly dark, creased around the eyes, thin nose with flared nostrils, full lips, about forty five, very neat. Something about the face.

‘Not at all, Sir. It is very quiet at this time of the day. Do you like soup?’ He held up a flask, eyebrows up. ‘We can sit in the shelter.’ His English came out like an irregular user, but faster and more fluent as he began to think in it. He studied the passenger; burly, broad shouldered, weather beaten, slightly flattened nose, been broken by the looks of it, clear eyes, large hands, late thirties, used to leading.

‘I have some roll mops, bread and cheese from the market if you would like to share,’ said the passenger gratefully.

The two men descended to the shelter and looked out over the fjord with high barren cliffs rearing away on three sides. In the act of pouring the soup the driver froze and looked worriedly at the man.

‘Er, ah, we Norwegians have some strange ideas about soup. Perhaps it might not be to your taste. I have coffee in the other flask.’ He put the flask down, and reached in his bag.

‘Not at all. I’ve tried many soups all along this coast, especially in Lofoten, where we had delicious whale meat soup,’ said the man with a smile.

The driver beamed. ‘That is what we have today!’ and poured. He looked again at the passenger. ‘Allow me to introduce myself.’ All formal now, he lapsed back into Norwegian accented English. ‘I am Johan Anderson. I live in Bergen with my family. My bus run goes from Breiviken to Bergen and back. If you wish you can join me for the rest of the run, it takes about one hour and a half.’

‘And I am Peter McLeod from Whitianga, but now of Wellington, New Zealand. I have been at a climbing school in the Lofoten Islands. Just got off the Hurtegruten ferry, and have to wait until tomorrow for the ferry to Newcastle to join my family.’

They shook hands eye to eye.

‘You are a long way away from home, Kiwi,’ he said, adding in a whisper but without pausing, ‘Hei Maori koe?’ and watched for any effect.

‘Well, I do have a small Maori ancestry, but I’ve grown up as a Pakeha.’ It was said unselfconsciously before realising it. Then he realised where he was. He looked in surprise at the driver. ‘And you, hei Maori koe?’

‘Ae. And quite a lot more than you by the looks of it. Tena koe, Peter. Ko Sonny Anderson, mai Whakatane, Te Iwi Whakatohea. Where are you staying?’

‘At the Youth Hostel. Cheap and cheerful.’

‘Not tonight, you’re not. You’ll stay at my place, have dinner, meet my wife and neighbours who still think I might be a one-off. We will have a couple of quiet beers and talk of home.’

Peter watched as Sonny reached for his cell phone and spoke for a time, his voice warm, squeezing love through the wires and getting a similar shot through his own ears, like touching.

‘It’s fixed. No more questions until we get home. Enjoy the rest of the trip, Peter. I am about to become Norwegian again.’

‘Bilty, bolty, builder, come tee too,’ said Sonny Anderson, Maori bus driver, all politeness, winking at Peter in the rear vision mirror as the passengers bought their tickets

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Shoes off at the door, hands washed in the basin, dried on fluffy towels.

‘My dear, may I introduce Mr Peter McLeod. He is a little bit Maori from New Zealand and eats whale soup. Peter, may I introduce Ingrid Anderson, my wife of twenty years.’

Peter shook hands with a brown haired woman of medium build, hazel eyes direct, smiling. She bobbed as she shook firmly.

‘I am pleased to meet you, Peter. Welcome to our home.’ The same lilting but fluent English. ‘Come. We will take tea, and our children will introduce themselves.’

He was led into a spotless room with scrubbed table, tea poured through a strainer, and shortcake. Three children filed quietly in, stood smiling, a little uncertain, formal.

‘Children, please meet Mr McLeod from New Zealand, said their mother. Their eyes widened a little, then, ‘I am Birgit, Mr McLeod,’ shook hands, bobbed, a nineteen year old image of her mother.

‘I am Johan, Mr McLeod,’ a strapping young man of maybe seventeen, also bobbed.

‘Mr McLeod, I am Moana,’ softly, a smaller version of her sister, a gentle handshake. ‘It means sea. Haere mai ki te kainga.’ Slowly and shyly, looking at her father, who nodded with warm pride. He watched his children leave.

‘They will join us for dinner, but right now they have jobs to do. Finish your tea, Peter. Ingrid will show you the house, then I will show you the garden.’

They strolled through the timber framed two storey house all impeccably clean, preserves row on row in the pantry, delicious smells from the kitchen.

‘A fish pie,’ said Ingrid. ‘A rare luxury.’

‘The fish pie?’ asked Peter politely.

‘No, the cooking! Sonny does it all, and the housework. And the preserves. He works part-time and looks after us.’ She spoke fondly, looking at her husband. ‘He says that I wear the pants in this house. I am a paediatrician in Bergen Hospital. When Sonny called me, I raced home to beat him to the stove. Go now to the garden. Sonny will no doubt have something to show you.’ Smiling. Men dismissed.

The vegetable garden took up most of the small space behind the house. Sonny showed his guest enormous cabbages, cauliflowers, brussel sprouts, carrots. ‘Short growing season but the sun stays up for 20 hours a day at the moment. Makes great vegetables. Keep walking.’

They came to a neat shed with the same thick timber framing and double glazed windows. Inside, shelves of bottles, lying on their side. Other bottles stood upright, clean and empty. Flasks and retort tubes and a stove were arranged on a small table. Above that, a shelf full of what looked to Peter like baking essence bottles. Two chairs. A fridge.

‘What about a beer then?’ said Sonny. ‘Home brew, but as near to Waikato as I can remember. Cheers.’

At \$15 a glass of beer, Peter had been too outraged to drink in Norway. Even Jim Beam which he enjoyed, was more than \$100 a bottle. He tasted the homebrew and quaffed the rest appreciatively.

‘Fantastic!’ was all he could say. With his second glass in hand he listened as Sonny showed him his still and his wine making gear.

‘All made from kits,’ said Sonny. ‘White wine and any kind of spirit you like. All the same process, just add the essences. I make some vodka for my neighbours as well, just for the fun. Grog is expensive here, and stills are supposed to be illegal, but every shop sells the flavours.’ He picked up a bottle of unlabelled white wine, two bottles of beer and a bottle of what looked like vodka. ‘Finish your beer Peter and we will go in and you can ask questions. Then you will meet our guests and have dinner, Norwegian style. Oh, and by the way, here in Norway, we just sip when the ladies are around.’

They sat in a sunny bay-window, drinks in hand. Ingrid looked at her guest.

‘This is a big thing for Sonny, Peter. You are the very first New Zealander he has ever brought home. He has been homesick for some time. Teaching Moana just a little Maori language has made it all the harder for him.’

‘How long have you been here, Sonny?’

‘Twenty years.’

‘And you’ve never been back?’ He could see Sonny’s eyes were troubled.

‘Never.’

‘Why not?’

Sonny looked into his beer, and then up at his visitor. ‘You tell him Ingrid.’

Ingrid sipped her wine and put it down on the place mat. ‘Sonny was a cook in the New Zealand navy. His ship was in Belfast for a refit and he was part of the skeleton crew. He was allowed off the ship once his duties were finished and in the afternoons he would walk in the hills with one or two of his friends. That is where he met me. I was travelling around Ireland with two girl friends on a walking tour. Very Norwegian. I was a medical student here in Bergen. We stayed in a Belfast youth hostel for a week. By the end of that Sonny and I were in love, but we parted and promised to write.’

She put her hand on her husband’s arm which brought his head up a little. She looked at Peter again.

‘Sonny jumped ship and went to Scotland. A week later he knocked on the door of my parents’ house and told them he wished to marry me. Both were doctors and predicted that the sky would fall in. They told us that it would never work, but they had great faith in me. Sonny found a small apartment in a single-men’s house and started work as a casual bus driver for cash. He went to Norwegian classes and dug our vegetable garden, and thus his way into my father’s heart.’

By this time, Sonny was smiling and confident enough to continue the story.

‘I tried all the time to be the gentleman, eh, but within three months Ingrid had got her own way and became pregnant. We married and lived with her parents. Ingrid continued with her studies and when the baby arrived I took over the house and later on became a house father. That’s the way it has been. Now, after twenty years I’m a Norwegian citizen and proud father of three children, with a fine wife. Even though I suspect she votes for the wrong party.’ This last mischievously at Ingrid.

Peter mused over the story.

‘Why have you not been back home, Sonny?’

‘I can’t. I’m a deserter from the NZ Navy. They never give up.’

Dinner was a long, noisy affair of toasts and chatter, with all paying attention to the New Zealander guest. The neighbour men drank vodka steadily throughout the evening, toasting everything and anything, but especially Sonny the brewer and his guest. Peter took his lead from Sonny and sipped at his beer. The women drank their wine and, after a while, their conversation got noisier.

‘You talk about Ingrid wearing the pants, Sonny, but you are just one in a long line coming from Whakatane,’ laughed Peter, referring to the history of the name of the town.

Sonny told the history to the women, of how the women had paddled the waka like men to get it to the shore, whaka tane, like men. The women loved it and Peter for knowing about it.

After dinner Sonny brought out his guitar. ‘Ten Guitars’ and ‘By the Devil I was Tempted’ filled the room, women singing. The other men became quieter and quieter until one by one their heads dropped to the table. The women carried on, laughing. Peter played a couple of songs badly and handed the guitar back to Sonny. In a pause Sonny nudged Peter, and indicated the men with his guitar.

‘There you have the Norwegians, Peter. Men and women separated by ten thousand years of civilisation. The men get serious and sad. The women laugh and giggle. No wonder the young women all go down to Italy to get their bum’s pinched in the summer time!

At the end of the night, Peter went to his guest room walking on air and clear headed.

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Over breakfast, with Ingrid and the children gone, Sonny sat down at the table with his coffee.

‘Peter, I want you to do me a favour.’

‘Sure, if I can.’

‘Actually, we would like you to keep the business of me being a deserter to yourself. Except for one person. I wonder if you would go to meet my mother in

Whakatane? And give her this.’ He held up a piece of whalebone. Nothing fancy but well handled, wrapped in a cutting of velvet. ‘Ingrid writes to her every now and then but I never have. Tell her Moana is learning a bit of Maori, that sort of stuff.’

They shook hands at the Newcastle ferry, parting.

‘I love this country, but it’s not mine. I love these mountains but they are not my mountains. It’s not easy being an immigrant. Papatuanuku isn’t here but I’m Norwegian now. Getting that whalebone to my mother will make things a lot better for me.’

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He knocked on the open door and called in, ‘Hello? I’m looking for Sonny Anderson’s mother.’

‘Who wants to know?’ A woman in her forties appeared in the hallway, apron on, smile lines gone from her face, arms folded.

He understood her defence and smiled as he spoke. ‘I’m Peter McLeod from Wellington. I was recently a guest of Sonny Anderson at his home in Bergen with his wife Ingrid and his three children Birgit, Johan and Moana. He asked me to bring something to his mother.’

‘Not from the government, then?’ She was wary.

‘I’m just here as a private person but Sonny told me all about how he came to live in Norway.’

‘Mum, come out here quick, there’s a man says he’s been at Sonny’s place, wants to talk to you.’ Over her shoulder, excited, all smiles.

A small elderly lady, also in an apron, appeared around the door and looked enquiringly at her daughter and the stranger. The daughter repeated the story.

‘Well then, you had better come in, Mr McLeod.’ Her eyes shone for her son’s fingerprints on the stranger’s hands as they shook. They showed him into a sitting room for tea, and Peter told them his tale. He handed over the whalebone. The mother looked at for a long time and then folded it into her lap. Peter’s eyes wandered over the walls with rows of pictures of Ingrid and the children and a shoe box with ‘Letters from Ingrid’ on the shelf. It was full. He saw the yearning in the mother’s soul.

‘There was one more thing, Mrs Anderson,’ he blurted. ‘Sonny gave me some money for you to go to Norway to see the grandchildren. And your daughter too,’ he added, seeing instantly that she would never travel alone. ‘Perhaps in July when it is nice and warm up there.’ He wrote out the cheque. Christ knew what his wife was going to say!

The daughter looked at the cheque. ‘Three thousand dollars! Whaddaya reckon Mum?’ she drawled. ‘Fancy a bit of a face to face with the mokopuna?’

The mother’s eyes misted into time, proud and tearless in front of the nice stranger. ‘I reckon! And a stick to give that Sonny a good hiding when I see him.’

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He read over the letter.

Dear Sonny,

I have been to see your mother and gave her the whalebone. She was delighted. She is in good health, and was very happy to hear from me about you and her grandchildren.

I have to confess to you that I have done something that you might be unhappy about. I told her you gave me some money to go over to see her grandchildren. She has agreed, and your sister will travel with her, probably in July. No doubt she will mention it to Ingrid, as the house is full of letters and photos of the children. You will have to square that up with Ingrid yourself.

Sonny, I don’t know what made me do it; just your mother’s feel when I shook her hand, and you putting so much trust in a stranger. In any case, think of it as a present from a grateful fellow Kiwi.

Let’s keep in touch.

Ka kite ano,

He typed in his name and grinned as the computer automatically inserted

Rear Admiral

Chief of Naval Operations

New Zealand Defence Force.

He deleted it, printed the letter and called through the door, ‘Lieutenant Brown, would you mind putting this in a plain envelope with a stamp and take it into town somewhere for posting?’