

[Cover]

NOVELIST JOSEFINE KLOUGART

“It's as if I was born old and it's just gotten progressively worse with each passing day”

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## IT'S AS IF I WAS BORN OLD

Josefine Klougart is just 26 years old but already she ranks among Denmark's unrivaled literary stars. Perhaps because she skipped her youth and is growing old at a pace that her body can't quite keep up with. She took *Ud & Se* on a trip back to the hilly regions of Mols Bjerger where she grew up — a landscape that still marks her thoughts and her books.

TEXT: RUNE SKYUM-NIELSEN

PHOTOS: PETER HELLES ERIKSEN

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It was the summer of 2007 and Josefine Klougart had just landed a job as a kindergarten assistant on a camp trip for young children from Århus. One evening, the young blond woman was left in charge of putting a group of the most unruly kids to sleep. It almost seemed like an impossible task. Just getting the kids to come in from the large grassy area had taken her more than an hour. Perhaps a horror story might do the trick, she thought. That might make them lie still in their beds. Although an avid reader, Josefine wasn't exactly well versed in the horror genre, but she decided to make up a story herself. She figured she would be alright as long as the story was dramatic and there was plenty of death and horror to hold the boys' interest.

It didn't take long before the troublemakers disintegrated in their sleeping bags crying for their parents to come get them.

“Maybe the scenes weren't exactly suited for the boys' age. After all, they were still in kindergarten,” laughs Josefine Klougart as her east Jutland dialect gives way to a hearty laugh.

“Hahaha... It was so mean, how terrible!”

Josefine Klougart knows why the bedtime story went so horribly wrong. Despite the fact that she is only 26 years old and already an established author with prizes, public acclaim and her third novel in just three years right around the corner, her imagination is not at all suited for macabre improvisations:

“Actually I have a really poor imagination. Either that or it just doesn't interest me very much to put together a story like that so it really 'works'. And to be sure, I probably overdid it a bit with the fake blood.”

Her long limbs buckle over in laughter once again on the front seat of the small passenger car, weaving its way towards the Odden ferry berth in the Northwest of Sealand. From here, we cross

the Kattegat towards her home region, Mols Bjerger (Mols Hills), described in her debut novel *Stigninger og fald (Rise and Fall)* from 2010. In her third novel *Én af os sover, (One of Us is Asleep)* to be released this February, the hilly region also takes center stage. This time she uses the region to describe how everything is in a constant state of change; the landscape, the love between two people, and 'the life you carry around in your memory', as she phrases it.

The author does this in a language reminiscent of poetry. One long sensuous poem lined with poetic flowery expressions from start to finish.

“I'm not interested in telling a good story *per se*, I'm interest in writing good sentences. True sentences.”

### **Four beers and no campfire**

Josefine Klougart devoured her youth; page after page in a never-ending rush. In some 'odd inexplicable way' she knew that she was going to be a writer, from the moment her parents started reading to her when she was very little. From even before she knew the alphabet and became a permanent fixture at the Esbjerg Municipality Bookmobile.

It was a focused effort. She started attending Aarhus University at 15. Although not officially enrolled, the teenager determinedly attended all lectures in History of Ideas while still attending regular school. About the same time, she was attending university extension courses in History of Literature as well as classical drawing one night per week at Århus Kunstakademi (Academy of Fine Arts in Århus).

When she turned 16, she succeeded in convincing the principal at Testrup Højskole (Testrup Folk High School) to give her dispensation to join the older students for half a year.

“Not once did I sit around the campfire. All I wanted to do was to sit in that attic and write. I was a bit manic about it already at that point, and between you and me, I think I drank four beers during the entire six-months. I don't think I felt left out by the others, I have never really felt that, it was more like a self-imposed exile. The literature pulled me into a kind of sanctuary bubble. It's always been like that. When I attended Forfatterskolen (the Danish Writer's School) I sometimes struggled with feelings of loneliness, like I was the sole survivor of a plane crash,” explains Josefine Klougart.

The strong metaphor echoes somberly but does not affect the author's flow of words. This is normal for her image-laden language. As the small Peugeot rolls off the ferry on to the eastern part of Jutland, Josefine Klougart is relating the story of a friend twice her age who recently lost her battle against cancer. The author tends to get along better with people who at least on paper are much older than she is.

“I'm just so old. Old and lonely,” she exclaims. “Does that sound very sad? It's as if I was born old and it's just gotten progressively worse with each passing day. For every great book I have read, and every book I have written. The language is so much older than me. The more language runs through you, the older you get too. I am displaced in time and it just keeps escalating,” she says matter-of-factly while the fog wraps the car and Mols Bjerger in a dreamlike, muddy haze.

[Caption]

The landscape of Mols Bjerge and her upbringing here have left their mark in Josefine Klougart's sensuous language. But the landscape has changed.

“I feel like the sole survivor of a plane crash”

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“I don't think I can write about something I haven't experienced myself”

You could perhaps say that Josefine Klougart skipped her youth and plummeted straight into loneliness. At least that is how she feels it and she doesn't try to hide it either. The night before this trip, she gave one of her frequent talks, this time to a folk high school in Humlebæk. The message was clear:

“There are always 10 people in the audience who want to become writers. I always tell them that it is a very bad idea. If there is one other thing they'd like to do, they should pursue that. It's because on some level, being a writer is a lousy job — it's a lonely job. I started reading the great works of modern literature when I was 14 years old. These books are filled with life's hardest lessons and almost violate you if you're open to them. And just like that, you're 10 years older.”

It wasn't until she was in her mid twenties that Josefine Klougart even started to wonder if she has been missing out on something in the rush. That maybe she hadn't danced enough or kissed as many boys as she should at her age. So for a short while she took her revenge.

“My younger sister teased me and told me that I was acting like a 15-year-old. It was something about some red wine and a couple of crushes. My sisters have had a steadier dose of that. But we have so many other things in common; retroussé noses for instance, and the fact that all three of us were — and are — serious workhorses.”

Even though the parents of the Klougart sisters are not careerists in the traditional sense, they do hold a great part of the honor for their enterprising offspring.

“To me it probably has a lot to do with a fear of not living enough, of not succeeding in living before I die. This hurriedness within me causes me to feel that I constantly have to perform and produce something at a ridiculous pace and at a neck-breaking level of ambition. Clearly it's connected to our upbringing too. Our parents are quite ambitious and very conscientious people, not least in their desire to create a nice home, an open home where people would come, settle in and participate. Everything was possible: I could easily have four horses, ten chickens, a hamster and a dog, but I had to take care of them, of course, take on the responsibility. I had to make sure the horses had their hooves trimmed, haul water out to the paddock, carry home rolled oats from the neighboring farm, etc.”

### **The more personal the more universally human**

Even though the 16-year-old Josefine Klougart may have been slightly antisocial during her stay at Testrup Højskole, she still managed to meet people who would prove key to her further journey. Each one of them opened a door for her to enter. There was Jacob, her great love for the next eight years, the mentor Hans Otto Jørgensen, and the American author, Virginia Woolf.

At one point, the teenager despairingly told Hans Otto Jørgensen that she basically lacked a story to write about. At the same time, she felt the burning need to write. Mr. Jørgensen, who was thirty years her senior, a poet and teacher advised her to dive into Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*.

“And then it all made sense. For real... it was as if someone pulled the sheet off a statute — a shock! This is a novel about nothing and everything all at once. Believing that a story must follow a traditional straight line is an insult to life. That is not how life is; you can't draw a straight line

though a series of events — from A to B to C. Instead, life is a stream of emotions, of people and landscapes, of arrivals and departures, all in one movement. If you only see one story in that you diminish life. Virginia Woolf wrote with a respect for the floating character of life.”

The new role model also taught Josefine Klougart that personal experiences can be a driving force. In the same way that it is for some of her Norwegian colleagues, Tomas Espedal and Karl Ove Knausgård. Both are currently celebrating great triumphs in the Nordic countries, and the same can rightly be said about the old, lonely woman from Mols Bjerger in the beautiful package. Her novel *Stigninger og fald* was even nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize, an unusual recognition for a debut novel:

“Knausgård and Espedal also insist on using personal experiences. I don't think that you can write about something that you haven't experienced yourself. The closer and more uncompromising you are in your writing to your own personal experiences, the more touching it becomes to others too. Art is about daring to be lavish with yourself and to go all out. It's a funny reverse logic that the more personal it gets, the more universally human it also becomes. Perhaps you could say that this is what realism has come to.”

### **The past lives on**

Josefine Klougart describes her mother as an unusually loving and self-sacrificing woman. She called from the village of Agri in Mols Bjerger this morning to let her daughter know that the fog was lying heavily around her childhood home. As she welcomes us with open arms later on, many details from Josefine Klougart's body of work begin to make sense. The smell of freshly-baked Dutch Christmas cakes emanates from the large kitchen making its way through the comfortable living rooms, past the photos on the walls of three daughters with retroussé noses, all the way to the sitting area where the latest additions to the family, two nephews still young enough to enjoy a bedtime story, are building a cave. Nothing here hurts the eyes, this is a cozy place and it seems familiar.

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TIME HEALS MOST WOUNDS, she lies. No, he just says. It will probably not pass; I wouldn't count on it if I were you. No, she says. You probably know what you're talking about, she says. Somebody forgot something inside him. No spring on earth will ever remedy this; the cows being put out to pasture for the first time, stumbling through the gate, through the yard and across the road. Their stiff legs almost breaking into a thousand pieces whirling like bone meal under their stomachs; the field still soft and just on its way up. What good is it anyway? You still have to sit here again, on the ground that used to house the stable. Now it's just an open space with the sky tumbling straight down upon it.

FROM THE NOVEL *ÉN AF OS SOVER*, (ROSINANTE, 2012)  
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Josefine Klougart is what you would call a perfectionist. She discarded 32 covers for her debut novel *Stigninger og fald* before finding the right one.

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“When love falls apart you not only lose your foundation; you also lose yourself and your entire past”

It would be easy to think that Josefine Klougart always writes about her own life — that her writing is autobiographical. However, that is not necessarily how things are done at the Klougarts.

“The relationship between reality and literature, my reality and my literature, is very complex and can't be reduced to numbers. How much of it is real? How much of it is 'life lived'? This is the type of questions you always get as a writer.”

“But seen from a broader perspective, it's relatively uninteresting. What is interesting is awareness! As a private person I am not very interesting. The mother in my novels is not my mother. 'I' is not 'me', Agri is not Agri. I haven't experienced everything that I write about but I have learned it all, if nothing else then through the language.”

“What is interesting is the transcendental potential of literature. As soon as you put something down in a literary language, it becomes something other than reality. The language is not transparent. When literature is great art it is because the poetic language creates awareness. It is a bit like when you see what you already knew existed but just didn't have access to. And this often happens when a novel manages to draw connecting lines between people, things, images and emotions in the world — and in this way transforms reality into an entity that makes us able to experience it as human beings. And maybe even for a minute or two makes us feel at home in the world.”

In Josefine Klougart's latest novel, the female narrator returns home to Mols Bjerge after two failed relationships that have left her reeling. She seeks refuge in the familiar surroundings of her childhood landscape. Yet nothing is like it used to be. A large once wooded area is now bare, all the trees are gone. The narrator can't find the familiar comfort in her mother's arms because a mother neither can, nor should, fill the void of a lover. And because the narrator's own memory is not stable. Not surprisingly, Josefine Klougart has gone through a similar experience of her own:

“Everything changes, the past is not dead. You drag it along with you like a block of ice on a small wagon, it melts or it freezes, constantly changing its shape, moving with you through life. I have gone through periods in my life where I've completely disintegrated. After the failure of my first real relationship I was very close, well actually I did completely fall apart. The only thing I could think about was finding a place where I felt at home.”

“When love falls apart you not only lose your foundation; you also lose yourself and your entire past. Your memory changes because your point of view is different, you have fallen and your entire history comes crashing down with you. You have to find a new vantage point from which to tell your story; a new home in the world that is. Now. This is probably what I depend most upon, what I appreciate the most about being in a relationship of one form or another: that the relationship offers me the immediate feeling of being at home; in the presence of the other person's gaze, simply. Being seen by the other person and being recognized — that's what brings out the feeling of home in me.”

## **A taste of great loss to come**

Back at her childhood home, it is once again time to pile into our small car and head towards the ferry berth, towards Molslinjen, Odden and Copenhagen. The fog may still be covering the hilly landscape but it is being displaced by the heavy blanket of the deepening twilight. The next time Josefine returns home and the fog lies heavy once again, her perception of it may be essentially different. The exiled writer still remembers how shocked she was to find that Mols Bjerger no longer looked like they used to after her second failed relationship in two years:

“It was as if grief changed everything. I've always felt very intensely that I carried this landscape within me. Very literally, in my face and in my language; within me, simply. But everything had changed: the parish stable had been torn down. And all my memories of summer afternoons spent there had been taken down in the fall; the minutes before the cows would come in; all the shadows and dust dancing in the sun. They were all gone. And in their place was this image of a barren field. It was like looking at a ruined face. The two images that merged — that of my memory and that of my eyes — were horrible. Freud talks about 'Das unheimliche': when something is familiar yet foreign at the same time – that was the feeling I had after my failed relationship. My entire life was unheimlich.”

While an author like Karl Ove Knausgård writes to empty his being of personal stories, and long ago warned of the end of his authorship, the opposite holds true for Josefine Klougart. She cannot imagine that she will ever stop writing. One of her motivations for writing is to keep her fear of death at bay, she says. Yet she knows that she will never quite escape it:

“When for the second time in my life I had to realize that my relationship was falling apart right in front of me, it brought me right back. Back to the feeling of loss, which in the end is a taste of the great loss of everything; death, simply. This was last winter and it was as if a lot of the sorrow and disillusionment, loneliness and fear of not having loved enough before I must leave this earth came together and formed a knife that cut straight through me. Laughing at me: 'Ha! Postpone what?', it said. And in the midst of the realization that even though I had grieved, and even though I had figured out how to work my way through the sorrow and the fear, I had to realize that it was still right there. I had only just begun. There is an ever-present loneliness that takes a hold of us as humans, uproots us. And there we lie, flopping on the ground like a fish out of water. To me it was a shock, as if it was the first time,” states Josefine Klougart. Still 26 years old, and she adds, ironically:

“And I was supposed to be so old!”

[Inserts page 21:]

Josefine Klougart is a marathon runner. Every morning, year round, she goes for a run, always along a route that includes a spot where she can take a swim as well.

### **QUITE BUSY**

Josefine Klougart, born in 1985 grew up on Mols.

She is the second of three children (all girls).

Released her debut novel *Stigninger og fald* in 2010. The novel was nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize 2011.

Published the novel *Hallerne* in 2011. The novel opens as a theater play at Århus Teater in February.

Her latest novel *Én af os sover* is scheduled for publication this February.