



Tostein
Gaarder

FROM THE
AUTHOR OF
SOPHIE'S WORLD

The
ORANGE GIRL

Praise for Jostein Gaarder

The Orange Girl

‘A whimsical, thought-provoking story, with more than one surprise in store’

Good Book Guide

‘It should be read by all’

Vogue

Sophie’s World

‘A marvellously rich book. Its success boils down to something quite simple – Gaarder’s gift for communicating ideas’

Guardian

‘Challenging, informative and packed with easily grasped, and imitable, ways of thinking about difficult ideas’

Independent on Sunday

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Daily Mail

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TLS

The Ringmaster’s Daughter

‘*The Ringmaster’s Daughter* confirms [Gaarder’s] status as one of Scandinavia’s finest literary exports and as a novelist and storyteller of

outstanding caliber'

Herald

Jostein Gaarder was born in Oslo in 1952. He is the author of the international phenomenon, *Sophie's World*, which has been translated into 55 languages and sold over 30 million copies worldwide.

By Jostein Gaarder

The Orange Girl
The Ringmaster's Daughter
Maya
Vita Brevis
Hello? Is Anybody There?
Through a Glass, Darkly
The Christmas Mystery
Sophie's World
The Solitaire Mystery
The Frog Castle

THE ORANGE GIRL

Jostein Gaarder

Translated by James Anderson



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My dad died eleven years ago. I was only four then. I never thought I'd hear from him again, but now we're writing a book together.

These are the very first lines of this book, and I'm the one doing the writing, but my dad will get his chance a bit later. He is the one with most to tell.

I'm not sure how well I remember my dad. I suppose I only think I remember him because I've looked at all the photos of him so often.

The only thing I'm really sure I can remember is something that happened when we were sitting out on the patio looking at the stars.

In one of the photos I'm sitting next to Dad in the yellow leather sofa in the living room. It looks as if he's saying something nice to me. We've still got that sofa, but Dad no longer sits in it.

In another picture we've settled down in the green rocking-chair in the conservatory. That picture has hung out here ever since Dad died. I'm sitting in the green rocking-chair now. I'm trying not to rock because I'm writing in a large exercise book. Later on, I'll enter it all on to Dad's old computer.

There's a tale to tell about the old computer, too, but I'll come back to that later.

It's always been strange having all these old pictures around. They belong to a different time from now.

In my room I've got an entire album of photos of Dad. It feels rather weird to have so many images of a person who's no longer alive. We've got Dad on video too. I think it's a bit scary listening to his voice. My dad had a really deep voice.

Maybe watching videos of people who aren't here any more, or who've passed on as Grandma puts it, should be made illegal. It doesn't feel right to spy on the dead.

I can also hear my own voice on some of the videos. It's squeaky and high-pitched. It reminds me of a little chick.

That was how it was in those days: Dad was the bass and I was the treble.

In one of those videos I'm perched on my dad's shoulders trying to snatch the star from the top of the Christmas tree. I'm not much more than a year old, but I very nearly manage to yank it off.

When Mum's watching videos of Dad and me, she'll sometimes sit back and laugh out loud, even though she was the one who held the video camera and did the filming. I don't think she should laugh when she watches videos of Dad. I don't think he'd have been happy about that. Perhaps he'd have said that it was breaking the rules.

In another video Dad and I are sitting in the Easter sunshine outside our cabin at Fjellstølen with half an orange each. I'm trying to suck the juice from my half without peeling it. Dad's mind is possibly on some very different oranges; in fact I'm pretty sure it is.

It was shortly after that Easter that Dad was taken ill. He was ill for more than six months and was frightened he was going to die. I think he knew he was going to die.

Mum has often said that what upset Dad more than anything was that he might die before he managed to get to know me properly. Grandma said something similar, only in a more mysterious way.

My grandmother's voice always takes on an odd tone when she talks to me about Dad. I suppose that's not so strange. Grandma and Grandpa lost a grown-up son. I don't know what that feels like. Luckily, they still have another son who's alive. But Grandma never laughs when she looks at the old pictures of Dad. She stays quite solemn. Those are her own words.

Dad had sort of decided that it wasn't possible to have a proper talk with a boy of three and a half. I understand why he thought that now, and you, the reader, soon will as well.

I've got a photo of Dad lying in a hospital bed. His face is very thin in that picture. I'm sitting on his knees while he grasps my hands to prevent

me falling on top of him. He's trying to smile at me. This was just a few weeks before he died. I wish I didn't have that picture, but because I have got it, I can't throw it out. I can't even stop myself looking at it.

I'm fifteen now, or fifteen years and three weeks to be precise. My name is Georg Røed and I live in Humleveien – 'Bumblebee Road' – in Oslo together with my mum, Jørgen and Miriam. Jørgen is my step-dad, but I just call him Jørgen. Miriam is my baby sister. She's only eighteen months old and much too young to talk to properly.

Obviously there aren't any old pictures or videos of Miriam and my dad. Jørgen is Miriam's father. I was Dad's only child.

There will be some interesting revelations about Jørgen right at the end of this book. They can't be divulged yet, but if you read on you'll find out.

After Dad died, Grandma and Grandpa came here and helped Mum sort through all his stuff. But there was one important thing that none of them found. It was a long story Dad had written before he was admitted to hospital.

At the time no one knew that Dad had written anything. The story of 'The Orange Girl' only turned up on Monday. Grandma had been into the tool shed, and there she found a complete story tucked in the lining of the red push-chair I'd sat in when I was little.

Just how it got there is a bit of a mystery. It can't have been totally accidental, because the story Dad wrote when I was three and a half had connections with that push-chair. I don't mean it's a story about a push-chair, it isn't, but Dad had written the whole of that long story for me. He wrote the story of 'The Orange Girl' so that I could read it when I was old enough to understand it. He wrote a letter to the future.

If it really was Dad who stuffed all the pages of that story into the lining of the old push-chair, he must have had a lot of faith in the notion that post always gets there in the end. It's occurred to me that for safety's sake it's a good idea to examine all old items carefully before giving them to a jumble sale or simply chucking them into a skip. I can't imagine how many old letters and suchlike might be found in a rubbish tip.

This is something I've thought about quite a lot over the past few days. I think there should be a much simpler way of sending a letter to the future than cramming it into the lining of a pram.

Occasionally we want someone to read what we have written in four hours', fourteen days' or forty years' time. The story of 'The Orange Girl' was just that. It was written to the twelve- or fourteen-year-old Georg, a boy my dad hadn't yet met, and who perhaps he'd never live to know.

But now it's about time my story had a proper beginning.

A little under a week ago I got home from my music lesson to find Grandpa and Grandma had paid us a surprise visit. They had suddenly driven up from Tønsberg and were staying until the following morning.

Mum and Jørgen were there too, and all four of them sat looking eagerly expectant as I came into the lobby and began to kick off my outdoor shoes. My shoes were wet and muddy, but nobody took any notice. They had something else on their minds. I could feel it in the air.

Mum said that Miriam was in bed, and that seemed right somehow because Grandma and Grandpa were there. Well, they're not Miriam's grandparents. Miriam has her own Grandma and Grandpa. They're nice people too, and sometimes they come to see us, but people do say that blood is thicker than water.

I went into the living room and sat down on the carpet, while everyone looked so solemn that I thought something serious had happened. I couldn't remember doing anything wrong at school during the past few days, I'd got back home from my piano lesson at the normal time, and it had been months since I'd last taken a ten-kroner coin from the kitchen sideboard. So I said. 'Has something happened?'

At this Grandma began to describe how they'd found a letter Dad had written to me just before he died. I felt the pit of my stomach heave. I wasn't even sure if I could remember him. A letter from Dad sounded really formal, almost like a will.

I noticed that Grandma had a large envelope in her lap, and now she handed it to me. It was sealed and on the outside all that was written was 'To Georg'. It wasn't Grandma's handwriting, or Mum's, or Jørgen's either.

I ripped open the envelope and pulled out a thick wad of paper. What a shock I had when I read the first line:

Are you sitting comfortably, Georg? It's important that you're at least sitting tight, because I'm about to tell you a nailbiting story . . .

My head was reeling. What on earth *was* this? A letter from my dad. But was it genuine?

'Are you sitting comfortably, Georg?' I thought I could hear the deep rumble of his voice, and now not just on video; I heard my father's voice as if he'd suddenly come alive again and was sitting in the room with us.

Even though the envelope had been sealed when I opened it, I had to ask the grown-ups if they'd already read the long letter, but they all shook their heads and said they hadn't read a word.

'Not a syllable,' said Jørgen. He sounded a bit bashful, and that wasn't exactly his style. But perhaps they'd be allowed to read Dad's letter after I'd finished, he suggested. I think he was very keen to know what was in the letter. I sensed that he had a guilty conscience about something.

Grandma explained why they'd jumped into the car and driven to Oslo that afternoon. It was because she believed she might have solved a long-standing puzzle, she said. This sounded pretty mysterious, and it was.

When my dad was ill he told Mum that he was in the process of writing something to me. It was a letter I was to read when I got older. But no such letter had ever come to light and now I was fifteen.

What had happened now was that Grandma had suddenly remembered something else Dad had talked about. He had insisted that no one should take it into their heads to throw out the red push-chair. Grandma thought she could recall his exact words as he lay in hospital. 'Don't ever get rid of the red push-chair, will you?' he'd said. 'Don't, please. It's meant such a lot to Georg and me these last few months. I want Georg to have that push-chair. Tell him that sometime. Tell him, when he's old enough to understand, that I really wanted to take care of it for him.'

And so the old push-chair was never thrown out or given to a jumble sale. Even Jørgen got instructions about it. Ever since he moved into Humleveien he'd known there was one thing he wasn't allowed to touch, and that was the red push-chair. In fact he showed such respect for it that he insisted on buying a brand new push-chair for Miriam. Perhaps he didn't like the idea of wheeling his own daughter around in the same push-chair that my dad had walked me in many years ago. But it's also possible that he wanted a newer and trendier push-chair. He's quite fashion-conscious, not to mention affected.

So, there was a letter and a push-chair. But it took Grandma eleven years to crack this puzzle. It had only just dawned on her that someone might go out to the tool shed and take a closer look at the old push-chair. And Grandma's suspicions were fully justified. The push-chair wasn't just a push-chair. It was a letterbox.

I wasn't quite sure if I believed this story. It's never possible to tell if parents and grandparents are telling the truth, at least not when 'sensitive issues' as Grandma calls them, are at stake.

Looking back now, I think the biggest riddle of all was why nobody had the sense to get Dad's old computer working eleven years ago. That was what he'd written the letter on! They'd tried to get it going of course, but they hadn't got the imagination to guess his password. It was a maximum of eight letters – that's what computers were like in those days. But even Mum never managed to break the code. It's unbelievable. So they simply dumped the computer up in the attic!

But Dad's PC is something I'll return to.

Now it's about time to hear from Dad. But I'll be slipping in a few comments of my own along the way. I'll also add a postscript. I need to do this because, in the course of this letter, Dad asks me a serious question. It makes a lot of difference to him how I answer it.

I got a Coke and took the letter into my room. When, for once in my life, I locked my door from the inside, Mum made a fuss, but she knew it was no good.