

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history is produced for audio and specifically designed to be heard. Transcripts are created using human transcription as well as speech recognition software, which means there may be some errors.

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Four

Mehmet and the Wild Boy

By David K. Barnes

Mehmet: “The boy won’t keep his clothes on,” they told me.

So why was that my problem?

I had enough to be getting on with. I dress the King. He does not disrobe in public, or walk around on all fours. And if he ever tried... well, I’d stop him.

But Peter was not the King.

Peter was the King’s new pet.

And Peter would not keep his clothes on.

~~~~

The King brought the boy from Germany, as he had done with me. Though I am not a German, and as for Peter, who could tell?



My name is Georg Ludwig Maximilian von Königstreu, but you will know me as Mehmet. Yes, I am a Turk, and yes, I serve the King. Apparently, this may annoy you.

With my colleague Mustapha, I assist the King in all things, from dawn till dusk, from the manner of his dress, to the contents of his chamber pot. You wrinkle your nose, but remember this: we are closer to him than anyone at court. We know his every thought, and we protect him from the thoughts of others.

Though that is not the only reason we are disliked.

The more we smile at people, the more they shy away, as if we conspire to some abominable purpose. Yet when we do not smile at all, they call us inscrutable, or worse: they say we have no sense of humour. And if I ever did impregnate the Princess Caroline – as is sometimes rumoured – I certainly can't remember doing it.

Yes, as Turks we are despised, but it could be worse. We could be Catholics.

Anyway.

“The boy won't keep his clothes on,” they told me.

“That is not unusual,” I replied, but I understood the issue, and why today it was especially important.

To reach the King's apartments, one must ascend the King's staircase. Should you do this, you will see the many faces that gaze down upon you – for painted on the walls are the members of the court. I am up there. So is Mustapha. What an honour it was to be so represented, I thought. Long after we have departed



from this world, our image will remain! The great men and women who attend upon King George: presented for posterity!

Oh, and one wild boy.

Peter.

Because the King wanted Peter up there too. In the painting. To mark his place at court, with the rest of us. It did not seem to fair to me. I'd given decades of loyal and diligent service. Peter had been here for a few weeks, and all he'd done was run around and defecate on the floor.

I mean, anyone can do that.

(Did I mention the boy's hygiene? It wasn't very good.)

So why was I being summoned? I will tell you. Because Peter was being painted. And something had gone wrong.

As I made my way to the artist's rooms, I predicted the excuses that would fall upon my ears.

He won't keep his clothes on.

He won't sit still.

He is impossible to paint.

Tough luck.



If the King wanted that boy in the painting, the King would get that boy in the painting. And I wasn't going to let anyone weasel out of it. Even Mr William Kent. He'd transformed the King's apartments, he'd created works of artistic genius, and he'd caught my best side in that mural. But he wasn't going to wriggle out of this. He'd have my sympathy, but nothing else.

"Your Majesty, Mr Kent says he won't paint your wild boy for you, because frankly it's too much bother."

I'm close to the King, but not that close.

So as I approached the rooms designated for Mr Kent's full use, I was a very determined man. Nobody was getting round me that easily. I wasn't about to be made a fool of.

I grasped the handle of the door. I pushed it open...

And I felt something rush between my legs.

I whirled around, thunderstruck, but caught neither sight nor sound of it. And then Mr Kent appeared, looking a dishevelled wreck.

"You idiot!" he said, "You've let him loose! The Wild Boy's gone - and it's your own damn fault!"

~~~

Who was Peter the Wild Boy?



He'd been found in a German forest, in which he'd lived for all his life, it seemed. His parents were unknown, and he spoke not a word of any language discernable by man. It was said that he'd been raised by wild beasts. I could well believe it.

He was ten or maybe twelve, or possibly even older. He was amusing, at first. Scampering around. Making noises. Stealing things from people's pockets. The Princess Caroline finds him very funny. She keeps asking the King if she can have him - to which the King says no, because he loves to keep things from her. Even, at times, her own children.

People came from miles around to view him in the court. To see this sprite of nature in all his naked barbarity. To watch him run and climb, and sleep in his nest made from furs and people's jackets. Including one of mine! But he disgraced himself once too often, when he befouled the King's dinner. It was time to tame the royal pet.

Dr John Arbuthnot took the job. A proud and portly man. Physician, writer, and inveterate gambler. He would civilise the boy. Make him speak, make him dress, make him sleep in a proper bed.

"Will he be ready to have his portrait painted?" I asked.

"Oh yes," said the Doctor, "I can't see any trouble there."

~~~~

Peter had escaped into the grounds, and we had no idea where he was.



The three of us scanned the area.

“He can’t have got too far,” said the Doctor.

“Yes he can,” said Mr Kent.

We bowed to his superior logic.

The afternoon was waning, for Mr Kent had spent the best part of five hours trying to paint the boy, with support from Dr Arbuthnot. But Peter had clearly run rings around them both all day, leaving the two men in a piteous state.

“We must catch him before nightfall,” the Doctor said, “Or we’ll never catch him at all.”

“And we can’t ask for help!” said Mr Kent, “You know what the staff are like. Within minutes the whole palace will know we lost the King’s favourite pet – including the King himself.”

The Doctor mopped his brow, and trembled audibly. Which is not an easy thing to do.

“Well,” I announced, “I shall expect you both to return the boy unharmed by dinnertime,” and prepared to leave them to it. Mr Kent put his hand on my shoulder.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he said.



I remonstrated. I had to attend to the King! It was almost time for me to administer his laxative, and that's a very sensitive matter to delay.

"Three men are better than two," replied Kent, tightening his grip, "Otherwise, we'll have to tell the King who it was that released the little sod in the first place, won't we?"

I was about to argue back when the Doctor interrupted. I had been stitched up good and proper, as the English sometimes say.

"Look!" cried Dr Arbuthnott, "There he is!" He immediately set off towards a nearby tree, waddling with alacrity. Mr Kent and I followed in hot pursuit.

Sure enough, Peter had climbed the tree and now sat within its branches, looking down at us with merriment, and whooping like a fiend. The three of us swore at him and shook our fists, but it was to no avail. He was staying up that tree. Would we dare do something about it?

The Doctor chuckled quietly.

"He'll get bored eventually," he said with confidence, "Then he'll come down. You'll see."

~~~~

[If we do have SFX, an owl hooting here would be great.]

As night fell some hours later, it seemed the Doctor might be wrong. Peter showed no sign of relinquishing his post, and the three of us began to feel silly.



We were tired, and hungry, and we were definitely missing dinner. I'd sent word to my colleague Mustapha that I was ill, and that the Doctor was attending to me. The absence of Mr Kent required no such comment. Artists are eccentric, which is explanation in itself.

We had tried everything to encourage the boy to join us down on terra firma. We'd yelled at him. We'd laughed at him. We'd tempted him with food. We'd even tried ignoring him – we made a big show of turning our backs, and talking amongst ourselves. But it turned out Peter could be patient and we weren't fooling him.

The obvious solution would have been to fetch a ladder, but we had no excuse to give if any of us were caught. Staying out of sight was taking all our ingenuity. Have you ever seen three men trying to hide behind one tree? It takes a lot of effort, let me tell you.

“Perhaps we should chop the tree down,” Mr Kent suggested.

“But then we'd have nothing to hide behind,” I replied.

And then, at last, the Doctor ran out of patience. He puffed out his chest, stared up at Peter, and raised his voice as loudly as he dared.

“Peter!” he barked, “I have tried to reason with you – I have tried to show you kindness – but you leave me with no choice! I am your master! You will obey my command! And I command you to come down – immediately! At this very instant! Without delay! Now!”

He jabbed a finger towards the ground, to leave no room for misinterpretation. It was very impressive. We held our breath.



From the tree came a stream of urine that hit the Doctor in the eye. I agreed with Mr Kent that the precision was remarkable.

Peter was delighted. The Doctor was simply drenched. He groped around blindly and tripped over an errant root. Soon he lay sprawled in the grass, sobbing with frustration. This friend of Isaac Newton, this patron of Handel's opera, was wiping piss from his eye with a monogrammed handkerchief.

Having eventually stopped laughing, Mr Kent tried to pick up his fallen friend, but being of a lighter build, he was pulled over in the attempt. So distracted was he by this – and so blinded was the Doctor with Peter's urine – that neither of them saw our quarry jumping down from the tree and haring off into the night! I realised if anyone was going to catch the boy, it was going to be me.

Friends, I have never run faster than I did that night. Which, at my age, is no mean feat. I had been humiliated enough for one day and I was going to see an end to it!

Not that I could see much of anything. Day had long since passed, the stars were out, and only the moon could light my path. But I could hear rapid feet on the grass ahead of me, and the strange, half-formed cries of the wild boy. So long as they continued, I had half a chance.

So, of course, the noises stopped.

I didn't notice at first. I don't know how much longer I continued to run. But I was suddenly aware that the night was silent. The blood pounded in my ears, and I gasped for breath. I was perspiring terribly.

I wanted to go home.



And that is when I saw him. A few metres away from me. Laid prostrate upon the ground. Not moving.

If I'd been thinking correctly, I would have crept towards him quietly, to ensure I did not scare him off. But I wasn't thinking correctly. To my surprise, in retrospect, I was actually concerned for him.

So I stumbled towards him quickly, and sank to my knees beside his body.

He was alive and well. His eyes were wide and shining green, and he was smiling with great joy. But not at me. He hardly seemed to notice me. His attention was fixed on the sky. I looked up to follow his gaze.

The stars.

The moon.

The night.

It was calm.

It was... outside.

It's all he'd wanted, really. To go back home. Or the closest thing he knew. Just for a while. I had no doubt then that he'd return to the palace with me, and be his usual, difficult self the following day. But he had never asked to come here. It was not the world he knew. And all that trying to be like other men - to sit up straight, to wear the right clothes, to speak the correct words - it just wasn't him. It bored him.



He saw through it.

Mr Daniel Defoe, the writer, was drawn to the tales he'd heard of the Wild Boy. He paid us a visit the other day, to see Peter for himself. On the way out, he said he would write a paper on him, about the nature of the soul. For Peter was the most sensible person he'd ever met.

At the time, I thought he was joking.

But perhaps he had a point.

~~~

By the time Mr Kent and the Doctor had found us, Peter was asleep, and I was nodding off myself. We carried him back to the palace and up to his room, and laid him down on his pile of furs. The boy looked so serene in his sleep that Mr Kent decided to sketch him there and then. He sent for candles and his canvas and worked throughout the night. He used it as a reference for the painting he completed. So when you ascend the staircase, you will see Peter, the wild boy: wide awake, and wearing clothes.

However, the boy himself has left us. He is no longer here. Princess Caroline took him in after all, and he now lives out in the country. The King had got bored, you see. But that was no bad thing.

After all, people were never meant to be pets.

