

# THE LAST SPEAKER OF SKALWEGIAN

by David Gardner

## EXCERPT

*“Why document the Skalwegian language?” Charlie Fox asked. “The answer to your question should be obvious: I want to save the language of my Scandinavian ancestors and preserve their culture for future generations. I’m no longer young, and if I don’t act soon, Skalwegian will disappear forever. And give Professor Lenny Thorson a lot of the credit. He’s a linguist—I sure couldn’t do the job without him.”*

The Last Speaker of Skalwegian, Newsweek

Chapter 1

*Weegan*

A word in the Skalwegian language loosely translated as *butthead* (impolite usage)

Lenny Thorson watched the red pickup roar into the parking lot, a statue propped up in back. It was the Ghurkin College mascot, an eight-foot-tall gerbil.

Charlie nudged Lenny. “You sure you want tenure at a college with a rat for a mascot?”

“It’s a gerbil. And yes, I do. Jobs are scarce.”

Gerry Gerbil stood on his hind legs and stared into the distance, a football clutched in his right front paw, his rat-like tail draped over his left. He looked hot and humiliated.

Lenny too felt hot and humiliated, and he guessed that Gerry hated parades as much as he did. Lenny tugged his sweaty shirt away from his chest. It was a sunny September afternoon, with heat waves shimmering off the blacktop in front of the building where he lived. He badly wanted the day to be over.

The pickup swung around with a screech of tires and backed up to Lenny’s beat-up Chevy. Two college students in matching black muscle shirts stepped out. Brothers, Lenny guessed. They were a wide-shouldered pair with mussy brown hair and long ears.

Lenny reached out his hand. “I’m Lenny Thorson and this is Charlie Fox.”

“Yeah, I know,” the taller one said, glanced at Lenny’s outstretched hand, then climbed onto the back of the pickup and untied the statue.

Lenny and Charlie dragged the wood-and-papier-mâché gerbil from the bed of the pickup, boosted it atop Lenny’s car and stood it upright.

One brother thumbed his phone while the other fed ropes through the open doors and around the mascot’s ankles.

The boy was careless as well as rude, Lenny told himself, and he was tempted to order him to untie the ropes and start over, but Lenny hated confrontation. Once he was around the corner and out of sight, he would stop and retie the knots. He didn’t want anything bad to happen to Gerry Gerbil.

On second thought, did he really give a damn?

Charlie threw his right leg over his motorcycle, gripped the handlebars and bounced once in the saddle. He wore jeans and a T-shirt that read ‘So Are You!’ He nodded toward Gerry. “He looks like a *weegan*, and so will you when you parade him through the center of town.”

Lenny hadn’t yet learned that word in Skalwegian. “*Weegan?*”

“Butthead.”

Lenny nodded. He was a *weegan*.

Charlie looked particularly worn and shrunken today, Lenny thought, especially astraddle his beefy black Harley. His hair was gray, his skin leathery, his chin neatly dimpled from Iraqi shrapnel. He was fifty-one—seventeen years older than Lenny—and eight inches shorter.

At six feet four, Lenny was always embarrassed by his size. He wished he could go through life unnoticed. He wondered if Gerry Gerbil ever felt the same.

The shorter brother slapped the mascot’s foot. “Have fun at the parade, professor.”

Both brothers laughed.

Lenny didn’t expect to have fun. His gut told him that the day would go badly.

\* \* \*

Bob One wasn’t happy about whacking a professor. He specialized in crooked bookies, wise guys who’d flipped, and casino managers caught skimming. But never a civilian. Bob One believed in upholding the ethics of his profession.

He parted the tall tan grass at the side of the road, pinched a mosquito off the tip of his nose and peered westward. No cars yet, but the guy who’d hired him had said his target always took this

route on his way into town and would have to slow to a crawl here at the switchback. Bob One figured he'd have plenty of time to pop up, rush forward, blast the guy at close range, then get the hell back to Chicago where he belonged.

\* \* \*

Lenny eyed the brothers, now slouched against his car's front fender, both lost in their phones. He couldn't remember ever seeing them on the Ghurkin College campus, the fourth-rate institution an hour west of Boston where he taught French and linguistics. "I didn't catch your names."

The taller one glanced up. "You don't know who we are?"

Lenny shook his head.

The boys exchanged puzzled looks. The taller one said, "I'm Tom Sprocket, and that's my brother Titus."

The names sounded familiar, but Lenny didn't know where he'd heard them. He could memorize entire pages of the dictionary in one sitting, but he was terrible with names.

Tom pocketed his phone and looked Lenny up and down. "Did you play football in college?"

"No," Lenny said.

Tom snickered. "Afraid of getting hurt?"

"I was afraid of hurting someone else."

Tom snorted. "Man, that's all the fun."

No, it's wasn't, Lenny told himself. Hurting someone wasn't fun at all. Twenty-one years ago, while fighting underage with a fake name, he'd killed an opponent in the boxing ring. Guilt still clung to Lenny, ate into his soul.

Tom gestured with a thick thumb over his shoulder toward the office building behind the parking lot. "You live on top of that thing?"

Lenny nodded.

"You're weird, man."

Lenny stiffened. He did feel weird for living in an abandoned rotating restaurant atop a ten-story insurance building, but didn't particularly enjoy being told so.

But in spite of Tom's rudeness, Lenny wouldn't let himself get angry with the boy or even with Dean Sheepslappe who, for some reason, insisted he participate in the Gerry Gerbil Alumni Day Parade, even threatening to block his tenure if he refused. Lenny had grown up angry, had fought with rage in the ring, but after that last fight, he'd promised himself he would never again lose his temper.

Some people found this strange, Lenny knew, some sweet. Others used his good nature as a way to take advantage of him. Lenny knew that too.

Titus Sprocket smirked and said, “I heard the place starts up running sometimes all on its own.”

The Moon View Revolving Restaurant had failed financially in just six months, when its motor took to speeding up at random moments, knocking staff off their feet and sending diners sliding sideways off their booths and onto the floor. Lenny moved in shortly afterwards. He was paying minimal rent in the abandoned restaurant in return for serving as its live-in caretaker. He found it oddly comforting to be the world’s only linguist who inhabited a rotating restaurant. “Sometimes it makes a couple of turns in the middle of the night,” Lenny said, “then shuts down. It’s no problem.”

It was in fact a problem. When the deranged motors and gears got it into their head to noctambulate, they did so with a terrific bellow and jolt that made Lenny sit up wide awake, and which frightened Elspeth so badly that she’d stopped staying overnight.

But Lenny wasn’t bothered by the smirking Sprockets. In fact, he felt sorry for the boys, regarding them as underprivileged lads from some sunbaked state where children ran barefoot across red clay all summer and ate corn pone for breakfast.

Lenny wondered what corn pone tasted like and—more importantly—what was the origin of the word *pone*? A Native American term? Spanish? Skalwegian even?

He turned to Charlie, astride his motorcycle and fiddling with one of its dials. “Is *pone* a word in Skalwegian?”

“It sure is,” Charlie said without looking up. “It means ‘He who makes a big *weegan* of himself by driving an eight-foot rat through the center of town.’”

“You’re no help.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

Lenny drifted off to ruminate on *pone*. The campus newspaper had labeled him the most distracted member of the faculty—misplacing his briefcase, forgetting to show up for class, walking into trees. But he’d also been one of the most popular until he’d flunked a pair of star football players. The school newspaper excoriated him, and fans called him a traitor. A few students considered him a hero, however. Lenny wanted to be neither.

Charlie tightened his helmet and slipped the key into the ignition. “I got to get back to the farm because Sally must have lunch ready by now. Besides, I don’t want to stick around and watch my good buddy make a big *weegan* of himself.”

“Can you come over tomorrow? We got only halfway through the G verbs this morning.”

“Tomorrow I got to work on the barn roof. Maybe the day after. Or the day after that.”

Charlie started the engine, leaned into the handlebars and roared away in a blast of blue smoke.

Lenny watched him go. There were times when Lenny felt like quitting the project. Charlie used him as resource—“What’s a gerund? Where do hyphens go? What in hell is a predicate complement?”—but had given him no real role in documenting the language itself. Although this was frustrating and puzzling, it was never quite enough to force Lenny to drop out. He took great pride in helping save a language, not to mention that it was a hot topic in linguistic circles and would go a long way toward saving his teaching job.

Tom and Titus simultaneously tucked their muscle shirts into their waistbands. Titus said, “We was football players.”

“Oh?” Lenny said. He paid no attention to team sports but closely attended to subject/verb conflicts.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Titus said. “But we got cheated and ain’t never going to get our whack at the NFL.”

Distracted, Lenny tugged on Gerry’s ropes. Yes, they’d definitely need retying. It pleased him to hear someone say *ain’t* so naturally and not merely to make an ironic point. He said over his shoulder, “NFL—that would be the National Federation of... uh...?”

“Holy shit on a shingle!” Titus said. “I’m talking about the National Football League—big money, fame and all the poontang a guy could ever want.”

Lenny had read somewhere that *poontang* descended from New Orleans Creole, from *putain*, the French word for *prostitute*, but he wasn’t absolutely sure. He would look into this later, along with *pone*. He turned to the brothers. “Something went wrong?”

The Sprockets looked at each other in wonder. “Yeah, you could say that,” Titus said. “We got screwed.”

“Yeah, screwed,” Tom repeated.

Lenny said, “That’s a shame.”

“Yeah, well, we’re gonna get payback,” Titus said and patted Gerry’s foot.

Lenny climbed into his car and eased out of the parking lot. Ropes squeaked against the door frames, the statue’s base creaked on the Chevy’s roof, and Lenny was sure he heard Gerry groan in anticipation of the dreadful day ahead.

In his rearview mirror, Lenny watched the diminishing Sprocket brothers waving and laughing. What an odd pair, he thought.

Lenny decided to take his usual route through the arboretum on his way downtown. The beauty and isolation of the place soothed him. He hoped it would today.

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Bob One spotted a car approaching and got to his feet. It was an old black Chevy with a maroon right front fender. Don't all professors drive Priuses?

But it had to be the guy on account of the statue on top like he'd been told to look for. What was that thing? A squirrel? A rat? Look at how the damn thing wobbles! About ready to tip over.

Bob One slipped closer to the road, crouched behind a bush, pulled his pistol from his belt and slapped a mosquito off his forehead. He examined the bloody splotch on his palm. Shit, stick around much longer, and the damn insects would suck him dead.

\* \* \*

Lenny was scared.

In two days, he had to go on live television with Charlie and discuss their Skalwegian project—not easy for someone wanting to go through life invisible. Would he make a fool of himself? Say dumb things he'd later regret?

Probably.

Lenny's thoughts turned back to the Sprocket brothers. Strange last name. Scholars could trace *sprocket* back as far as the mid-sixteenth century as a carpenter's term but hadn't yet located an ancestor.

Tom and Titus Sprocket!

Of course!

He'd flunked them in first-year French because they never showed up for class, which cost them their eligibility to play football. The dean had been furious with him but not with the errant guard and tackle. Jocks normally took Spanish with Juan Jorgenson—the other candidate for the language department's one tenured slot. Juan automatically gave A's to athletes just for registering.

Lenny reached over and cranked up the radio for the boisterous ending of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, then glanced up to see he was driving much too fast into Jackknife Corner.

Panicked, he jammed on the brakes and twisted the steering wheel hard left.

He felt the car tilt to the right and heard a loud Thunk! just as Beethoven's Fifth swelled to a crescendo. Puzzled, Lenny drove on, with the Chevy pulling to the right. Probably something to do with tire pressure, Lenny guessed. He'd have that checked later.

\* \* \*

Bob One lay on the side of road. Blood flowed out his left ear and down his cheek. His head buzzed, and his eyes slipped in and out of focus. He pulled himself to his feet, wobbled, then toppled into the ditch. He crawled into the marsh, still gripping his unfired handgun. Puddles soaked his knees and elbows. A possum trotted past. An airplane roared low overhead. Or was that inside his skull?

Bob One's left temple hurt like a son of a bitch. That damn rat had toppled over and whacked him on the side of the head. Or was it a guinea pig?

Bob One curled up beside a bog. Half-conscious, he watched a fat snapping turtle waddle toward him, stop two feet from his nose, look him up and down, then open its jaw. Shit, Bob One said to himself, the thing's got a mouth the size of a catcher's mitt. Bob One didn't like animals or much of anything else in nature. He tried to crawl away, but things started going dark—warm and dark—not such a bad feeling, actually.

Bob One awoke to see the turtle biting his right forefinger off at the second joint. Bob One felt no pain and noticed that one of his shoes was missing. As Bob One slipped comfortably into his final darkness, he wondered if a missing trigger finger would hinder him professionally.

\* \* \*

Lenny reached the parade route late and swung in behind the school bandmen in their sky-blue uniforms with "Skammer's Fine Meats" embroidered in bright yellow across the back.

Spectators to Lenny's right shouted and pointed. Some ducked, some knelt, some even dropped to their stomachs. Lenny shook his head in disbelief. Had students and townspeople taken to prostrating themselves before the college mascot? Did he really want tenure at a batty place like this?

At the end of the block, a policeman holding a Dunkin' Donuts cup stepped into the street, raised his palm, and forced Lenny to brake.

As Lenny stepped from his car, he realized that he'd forgotten to retie the ropes.

Gerry Gerbil lay sideways across the car's roof, projecting five feet to the right, the ankles tied precariously in place. Someone took a photo. Someone fingered the slack ropes and spoke of slip knots. Lenny touched a patch of something red and damp on the mascot's forehead. Lenny rubbed thumb against forefinger. The stuff looked like blood.

Since when did gerbil statues bleed?

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