

Stina Stoor

# BEASTS

AND OTHER STORIES

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## Synopsis

*The sun shines in all the squash glasses making all the squash sparkle. Rubies, red campion, rowan! Kind of like that. Like magic!*

Bli som folk consists of nine short stories, all set in the border districts of Västerbotten and Ångermanland, in northern Sweden. But also in the border area of present and past, and of childhood and adulthood. Girls trying to become women, boys having to become men. And then there are the mysteries of nature.

Bli som folk is rich in detail as well as in suggestive images of a Västerbotten in change. Stina Stoor moves along paths already trod upon by great writers, but she brings us – in this unique debut – to places where we have never set foot before.

Sample translation *Ojura/Beasts* by Nichola Smalley

Outside the house there's gravel laid that's constantly sinking down into the mud. Sometimes she picks bits of sharp quartz out of the gravel. There's something special about them. Half-clear crushed mist with edges. Always in need of a wash.

Another day he's there. Dead as green glass and kind of fragile in his own way. First she just pokes with a finger but then she leans her whole child's body against the slightly concave windscreen of the Gustavssons' Saab and picks off the poor little Green-that-gleams. The dragonfly.

He'd got stuck just under the sun-warmed rubber windscreen wiper and his eyes shine metallically. Reflectively. Then the dragonfly gets to lie all gangly in her left hand and she holds the other one over him like a roof. Not to hide but to protect him from getting knocked and falling apart. The wings are extraordinarily thin, like flakes of dried yogurt.

Green-that-gleams is too big for her hands, hanging over a bit, like, so she has to reverse through the worst bits and walk slowly, with her back as a shield. Not round the corner of the house or over the lawn of course, but through the fireweed. That deep pink jungle realm of hers. Sandra's own, special realm, in the rubbish patch.

There are a thousand narrow paths between the tall stalks, and she takes him in there with her.

Near the ground, the fireweed's stalks are almost bare, you can't see it from the lawn, from there you hardly see anything of all this. Up towards the minxish sunlight, the surface is all flowery and gaudy and summery, but underneath, in there under everything, a load of old junk is hiding, stuff that someone's thrown away. There's bottles and plastic bags under a brown covering of everything that's withered away and landed on top. In the rubbish patch you can find flat tins that once had cured meat in, and round ones with grooves in that might make you think of frankfurters. Though it's all meant to be forgotten, it's kind of careful about that.

In the fireweed there are raspberry bushes that scratch at you if you haven't got many clothes on, and all the way in, with its roots in the cold beck, there's a knotty old currant bush that has sour red currants every year. They're Sandra's special sourcurrants, it's all hers.

So there.

Seven-league. Singular. Shy and safe. Stable.

She has her safe in the wood-stove by the rowan. There's white and rose quartz in there, mica, marbles with a little twist of colour through them. And

more. All that's worth keeping. Like lickety-split Marit's amber bangle and grandma's yellow-white false teeth with their semi-transparent gums. Sandra's compared it with a photograph, so she knows they're right. They were in a buckled zinc pail with no bottom between the bottles and other things from the kitchen.

It's been a long time since anyone baked buns behind the heavy oven door, and in the dark chamber Sandra prepares his court. Then little Green-that-gleams can lie there, so light and fragile, with his chin on the amber bangle. Afterwards she crouches in front. Looks in and thinks about death. Is sensitive, as Dad puts it.

Everything's really bushy and pink at head height, but she hasn't got there yet. Her tummy is soft and childish in the gap between her vest and her blue jogging bottoms. Her shoes fasten with Velcro instead of being tied and every day they get wet through in the little beck. There's nothing to be done about it.

Big sister Anneli has spots. On her breasts and back she has ugly, yellow-headed lumps. In the shower she almost scrubs away her scary teenage body with the long-handled brush (the one with dark dirt in between the white bristles). She scrubs so hard the heads bleed and then little sister Sandra has to come into the steamy bathroom and put little bits of loo paper onto the bits of Anneli's back she can't reach, otherwise her clothes might get stained. The bits of paper have fuzzy edges. The whiteness sucks up a dark red pupil and looks out. Anneli's whole back fills with eyes while Dad stands hammering on his bathroom door.

"For God's sake, kids!"

If you take too long in the shower he goes down to the cellar and turns off the water. But that wouldn't help now. Not when Anneli is standing naked, dabbing her face with green alcohol from a little bottle, or painting over all the red-raw patches on her nose and chin with an almost skin-coloured pencil that's perfectly orange.

Sandra fumbles with the latch but can't open it, not when Anneli's giving her a look like that, the death-threat look, which says that you just try it you little suck up. Just so.

And down the inside of Anneli's leg, the bad one that's skinny and twisted so the heel pokes out and the toes in, there's a rivulet of blood. Just a red streak. A little. Just a little blood. But Sandra gets a lump in her throat and has to turn away and pick at the join in the wallpaper with her nail. The wallpaper is soft and bumpy and in the joins it's dark brown like rust. And the join in the wallpaper is a good place to poke in bogies. The pattern is blue four-leaf clover. Blue, which was Mum's favourite colour. The clovers are evenly spread throughout the little room. In between are the white areas, they're most of it. Carefully spaced white space.

Dad slams the outside door when he leaves. The whole house jumps and cupboards rattle.

“And now e’s figure out there’s a privy outdoors ‘n all.

Says Anneli while she’s leaning towards the mirror and sorting that face of hers.

Sandra opens the door and creeps out. It’s cooler out in the house and full of breathable air. Sticky yellow fly strips hang from the ceiling collecting small black bodies. The cupboard doors in the kitchen are blue. Not like blueberry jam, because that’s actually purple, but like forget-me-nots or bluebells. A big bumblebee is climbing around of the wrong side of the mosquito screen behind the kitchen bench. Sometimes it buzzes and gets cross.

Sandra climbs up and stands on the bench to let the guest out by loosening the green rubber band around the upper window catch, but then Anneli shouts and says Sandra has to go out and ask Dad if he’s bought tampons, like:

“Has he?”

And Sandra puts her foot up in the window and presses the bumblebee a little instead.

The green net dents where she presses it and the bumblebee falls down and starts crawling round on the windowsill in a scary way.

“But!”

And Sandra doesn’t want to. But she goes anyway, you just have to.

They’ve mowed all the way up to the privy this year, but the old track still shows, brown and well-worn in the middle. It’s there, kind of age-old, with needles and cones. She forbids herself from stepping on the cropped green alongside. Forbids herself from wandering off into the green and getting summer-smitten and just existing, the way she can.

Walking in the tall grass of the acre with fingers outspread, letting the tufts of the grasses catch on her hands. As though she was stroking the world, taming it.

Or rebuilding the sound in the rubbish patch beck by moving the stones and making small dripping waterfalls and deep thundering ones.

No, in the middle of the old track she steps, carefully, as though on a wire between the roofs of the houses. Because that’s the only way to get there in time.

Dad sits with the privy door open and looks pretty good-natured. He squints out at Sandra and the sun so that his whole face turns pitted and stripy and he has to shade his eyes with his big fist. He has blue figures on his arms, women with round tits and bottoms. There are white threads hanging from the bottom of his cut-off jeans and he has no shirt under his brown waistcoat and the sun bores into the hair growing up towards his navel.

Sandra stands there outside with the light warming her back. Dad grins at her in a special way and then he holds out something from behind his back and says a:

“Here Sandra.”

With the kind of Here that means this is for you.

“Here Sandra! ‘e’s a plump one and no mistake!”

And Sandra takes a half-step in and takes it. Prince-Plash-Into-Your-Heart, like. Kind of sudden, a creature of paradise.

“He’s so big! So...!”

The froggy belly is mostly pale yellow but a little speckled. Between the long toes, there’s rust-red webbing and the frog has proper fingers with joints that bend. Mechanical parts. Froggy hands like a little baby, the kind that grabs your fingers and holds on tight. Sandra smiles and Dad looks perfectly proud. The Big Hunter. The Big Man. Although Anneli probably would have said Bonehead, so Sandra hides herself a little in the frog when she’s about to say that:

“Ah Anneli has got her period again now Dad did you buy them there tampons?”

Then:

“Not been buyin’ nowt me!”

He replies.

“‘er pocket money’s gone up since that started! You go tell ‘er what the doings are wi’ that!”

And Sandra looks down at Dad’s black clogs which are scuffed a bit grey on the front of the leather. There on the floor of the privy lie the remains of some old wasps’ nest, it looks like paper strips. In the paper strips there’s a big flying ant crawling around which Dad squashes with his foot.

“Y’know, them there ants Sandra, they’ll go eat our ‘ouse up one day.”

He takes the roll and with his right hand starts gathering the outdoor-wrinkled loo paper to wipe himself with.

Sandra balances on her tightrope back towards the house. The creature of paradise filling her hands. The yellow eyes, the mouth as wide as its whole head. Its stomach is so pale and bulging.

When she gets round the corner of the house, Anneli’s already out on the veranda with just her pants on and she has some kind of ponytail but strands of her blonde hair still hang down over the orange-painted patches on her breasts.

Anneli has lit one of Dad’s John Silvers and says:

“It’s Jack and John and me, right?”

So you hear she's trying to sound like Dad, but she's in pain or something so instead of coming out the right way it's whiney, though Dad never says it like that.

Anneli's breasts are like the teats of Ove Jonsson's bitch with their marks and patches and swellings, and the way they're naked is kind of similar. Naked without looking nice. Like when the bitch had her pups around her and the pups pulled and tore at her and crawled over one another and they were blind and black and squeaked and whined and the teats sagged out of her doggy body, which was otherwise the way you'd expect, with its fur and wagging tail and everything. Hairless saggy sacks with squeals.

"Look what Dad gave me!"

Says Sandra, and Prince Splash is naked as the day, smooth and lethargic. He moves his froggy legs a little, although it's not as though he's struggling, he's just like, moving. Then he settles again and becomes calm and heavy in her small hands. The froggy legs are longer and thinner than you'd think when they're hanging there. His belly is smooth and pale as the lining of the purse in Anneli's drawer. Just so. Special.

"Had 'e bought 'em then?"

"Nah. It's probably nowt to do with 'im anyway,"  
says Sandra.

"It bloomin' well is! Can't even get into me jeans with this fuckin' nappy on me arse! Look!"

And Anneli turns around so I can see. On her back there are still a few little paper squares with dark eyes but her pants are mostly just blue with elastic lace on the edges.

"This what 'e calls parenting eh?"

"Er, nah."

Anneli puts the cigarette out in the empty flowerpot that hangs on the railing.

"Fuck!"

Sandra stays out on the verandra when Anneli's gone in to tear all her hopeless clothes out of the wardrobe. She sits there on the bottom step, stroking the angular bony bumps the frog has on his back.

"So. There, there."

She comforts him.

He's mostly brown anyway and Sandra's hands always have brown streaks in the creases. It fits somehow. Belongs.

Later when Dad comes he has a ten litre bucket with him. The frog can live in there. They put him under the veranda and Dad's happy, whistling his never-ending Harder Gold song. He calls the frog all kinds of fine.

“What a grand son-in-law ‘e’ll be, if I may say so! We can only hope he don’t lure you into no scrapes, eh Sandra lass!”

And like he always does, Dad touches Sandra’s chin. Puts his thumb in front and rubs his rough index finger underneath. And he grins right in her face at close range. And Dad’s stubble is like short copper wires. He’s sun-tanned but white in his wrinkles. His nose is where he’s reddest. It has dimples just like a strawberry but without the green dots.

When Dad goes in to make coffee Sandra tramps round the acre picking red clover heads for the frog. Then she creeps in under the veranda and drops them into the bucket. Under the veranda it’s like underground. There are old maggot tins with little square holes made with a nail, cigarette butts, beer cans, old plant pots and two old spades without handles. The ground is trampled in the shadows and nothing grows. The light coming through the gaps makes everything stripy.

Under the boards of the veranda, there are webs with small insect wings inside. Remains. The attercops don’t always eat the wings, or else the small flying bugs tear themselves loose and fall down outside, for a new life as creepy-crawlies.

Sandra’s cold. The frog is jumping round on the clover, round and round in the white bucket. He’s as big as half the bottom, more or less. It’s no comfort to watch after a while.

While Dad drinks coffee and reads ads for cars and hunting dog puppies in the paper, Sandra sits next to him with her legs dangling, dipping sugar cubes from the copper box into his coffee cup. Occasionally she leans her ear against the blue tit-lady on his upper arm.

“If only I’d got me hands on one o’ those, eh.”

Dad says, pointing at something good in the paper.

“Oh me lass, that’d be a thing!

And Sandra hmms with sugar cubes that crumble all over her mouth.

“Hmm.”

Sometimes she almost says yes.

And the yellow-striped oilcloth has small burnholes that it’s fun to poke down old breadcrumbs into. It’s almost like a kind of game. And it gets really lumpy underneath, kind of forever, so the glasses won’t stand up straight. But it doesn’t matter because it’s only Anneli that complains.

They can hear her crashing about upstairs. On Anneli’s bedroom wall there are marks where she’s thrashed and banged with her stick, she kind of has that sort of temper, like an old bag, pernickety.

When they’ve looked at the personal ads too:

“WLTM tall, non-smoking academic, well I’ll be damned lass.”

Sudden-like, Anneli's standing there in the kitchen, ruining things. She wants to know why Dad hasn't done the washing, and. The and list is as long as can be.

Then all hell breaks loose for a while and Sandra has to slip down out of her chair and look at her pink bubblegums under the table. They're hard, some of them have poke-marks and small nail gouges.

"But what the fuuuck 'd you think she were goin' to wear to the party then?"

Anneli asks when they've calmed down. And:

"Which bloody fuckin' party?"

Dad's forced to ask in return. Then Anneli has to stand there and explain everything. Blah, blah, blah as though she knew absolutely everything in the world ever. She's always like that. Always knowing best all the time.

Sandra pulls the threads on Dad's shorts and sticks up a hand for him to dip a sugar cube in his coffee and pass it down to her, but he pretends not to notice. Then she pulls a little on one of the dark hairs on his leg instead and he stubs his big toe on the table leg.

"Fuuuck! Bugging little buggers!"

Then, fuuuck again, as the chair tips when he jumps up and goes out:

"Fuuuck, fuuuck Sandra."

In the rubbish patch behind the house the fireweed grows. Up in the sunlight, in all the pink and the swaying in the wind, the horseflies buzz, but down on the ground where the frogs roam, the stalks are bare and brown and there you can find beetles stuck on their backs and slithering worms. Sandra has brought the bucket along and bits of rubbish fall in as the edge pulls through the fireweed and the raspberry bushes. Chaff and bits and fluff that stick to the frog.

Far down winds the beck, slurping water. As she's about to wash the frog, he kicks himself free and disappears under a stone, but she crawls after and brings him back. Prince-Plash-Into-Your-Heart is still kind of a comfort. The yellow froggy eyes. The water's made him shiny. Sandra gives him a little kiss on the nose but he still looks the same. A big one, kind of plump, that kind. She places him back in the bucket and jiggles it so a little water runs in over the sides. Then she puts it in a hollow between the roots of a spongy stump while she gathers even more frogs and kisses them. Prince Plash swims in his water. He's swimming his summer swim in his pool. The other frogs are smaller. The two smallest look like round beetles when they have their legs tucked in and big attercops when they spread out. Plash, splash. Now there are four frogs. They all have small fingers that want something, the kind that grip on. Clambering hands. Feet like water birds when they spread out.

The beck water is cold spring water. Wild water that is a glittery jumble and is completely clear. Invisible kind of. Just so.

It comes up by the old well and disappears down into the earth again below the old sheep fence that no one's bothered to sort out. Just a short time above ground, through the sun in Sandra's rubbish patch, simple as that, and then down into the whole between the big rocks again.

In her pocket Sandra has sugar cubes but no coffee. Crunchy sugar that's hard. It's covered in blue fluff from her pocket but that comes off in the frogs' water.

"Here!"

She says.

"Here!"

And she means this is for you but the frogs don't really understand and the cubes float down, coming to rest on the bottom of the bucket.

Anneli's the kind that shouts. She's been shouting and shouting from the edge of the lawn for quite a while, but when her little sister finally comes out of the fireweed Anneli's just angry and grabs her arm hard.

It's probably the same for Dad. To be honest. To be honest, neither of them should show their faces anymore, maybe that would be best.

Dad's quiet in the woodshed. Or, presumably he's in the woodshed and he's kind of quiet. A 'bloody nonsense', maybe, but kind of quietly, and maybe there's a shot of Jack or two in the mustard jar and a John he ashes in the coffee tin among the bent nails. He's not the kind to arrive early. In that way he's wise.

Anneli has put pistachio green plastic hoops in her ears and pulled on a jeans skirt with elastic at the waste and flounces. She has one of lickety-split Marit's old tops on but knotted so her tummy shows and she smells so strongly of hairspray it makes you dizzy.

Anneli says:

"Fuuuck Sandra."

And then it's straight to the shower with her and soap in her eyes. Then little sister has to sit in the kitchen and eat filmjölkk with crispbread crumbled over it with just a Betty Boop bath towel round her.

There.

But at one point Sandra has to climb down off the chair and look carefully at the windowsill and the floor behind the bench. The bumblebee is completely gone now. Disappeared. Deserted. Done with. That's good, now he won't disturb us anymore.

Then she has to pull on a pair of clean white knee socks, the red shorts with stripes on the sides and a pale blue t-shirt with a picture of a little cartoon rabbit. Anneli chose it all herself and says it'll do. That it's ok and nice. As a party outfit.

When Dad comes in again he's feeling better, and he has an idea. The idea's so good that he's whistling the Harder Gold song the whole time. He's even brought

in a box that's been in the Saab's boot since last month. In the box there used to be a motor for a red hydraulic pump that's in Ove Jonsson's basement and sounds like drrr (when the water pressure sinks under two bar). The box is as big as a shoebox and of no use now since Dad's already changed the motor. On a yellow label there are black numbers and symbols, otherwise it's brown and solid-looking.

"This'll be grand. They ain't got no fur so it's not like the younguns'll get ellergies an' all you lilluns likes to 'ave yer own beasties sometime."

Sandra fetches the bucket and slowly lifts the four frogs, one by one, into the brown box. She starts with Plump Prince Plash himself and then the others. The sugar cubes have dissolved in the water and vanished, otherwise the frogs could've had a packed lunch to take with them. Both Dad and Anneli follow each froggy journey with their eyes. Then Dad tapes up the box with the brown tape while Sandra holds it closed with dripping fingers.

"Right then."

He says then, and yet it's like he can see that Sandra's a bit sad, because he goes on:

"You shouldn't grudge 'em this, lass, they ain't got same plenty in the town as what you've got at home you know."

And he pats her on the back with his big fist.

"And then you'll get summat nice in return when it's your birthday, just think!"

In the cupboard under the stairs Anneli finds a roll of wrapping paper. It's the kind you have for Christmas with a pattern of Santas pulling overloaded sleds across a snowy landscape, but no one could find anything else and anyway it's not what's on the outside that counts. Sandra's heart jumps when Dad tips the box round and round to get the paper in the right place. It has to go all the way round and be folded in at the sides. He bites off bits of brown tape and makes it come together somehow and then he looks proud.

Later, Sandra has to sit there on the back seat with the box in her lap. Of course Anneli always gets to go in the front where it's more grown-up and sensible. But Dad's the kind whose driving makes you whoop and bump about and be happy again anyway. Just so.

Advancing in a way. So you can shake it all off and leave it behind you.

Along the gravel track, one-inch, two-inch and three-inch pipe lengths rattle around the boot. Off-cuts that might come in handy. There are t-joints, hose clamps, tubing, couplers and pale fluffy wadding that looks like doll's hair or the tufts of the

fireweed in the autumn. The gas canister is solidly bulbous blue with its snaking tube. Alongside Sandra on the back seat there are pools coupons, empty cigarette

packets and hand-written receipts, and all manner of things. And even more puffs of wadding. In the car, there are things that are downright impossible and just look like rusty junk too. Treasures, Dad grins if she asks:

“That’s me treasures, lass!”

And there’s lubricant in the little black-speckled metal can with its narrow spout. The little tin bird.

Then when the Gustavssons’ Saab swings out onto the old 92, the rattling stops because that road is tarmacked. That’s the first time you notice how awful it sounded just a few moment before.

Along the old 92 the telephone lines run from post to post. Mostly there’s only forest along the side but now and then there are clearings or fields behind those wires instead, and then the lines become a black streak that rises and sinks as though breathing against the sky. Just so. Up and down and up.

In the little town Dad just has to sort something out at the kiosk. Just quickly, now. Real quick. And there’s nowt to nark about.

Anneli winds down the car window in the front while they wait. Small flies come into the car and are very interested in Sandra’s nose so she has to rub it the whole time. The brown wall of the kiosk is a bit cracked and flaky and the wasps crawl around between the newspaper bills where the wood is visible and they feed off the wood in their summer way.

A girl with a side-swept fringe smiles down from the front pages. Smiles so kindly, beatifically. The girl’s been on the news too and is called Murder, or The Victim, or Raped, or Body. But mostly Marlene from Burträsk was only sixteen when.

That girl’s future would have been wonderful, that’s what makes it so special, and now she’s famous but still keeps smiling kindly and hasn’t got full of herself at all.

Everyone loves her of course, just as should be. A while ago no one knew she existed and now, now she’s smiling and is The Victim and Marlene to everyone. She’s the kind people like. Special, not like Anneli with her awkward twisted side and masses of bad temper, but pretty, cuddly, the kind you can love to bits or want to be like.

Dad’s stayed by the kiosk and lit a John. He stands there discussing this and that with some guy in a cap who’s fiddling about in a snuff tin, with that Marlene magazine, or some girly magazine, or something, under one arm.

“Hey!”

Anneli roars:

“Hey?”

And then of course Dad mumbles that:

“Hey kids, you sit int’ car and wait for me...”

Or something, and then he flicks his John away and comes back.

It’s starting to get really hot in the car so when he’s sat down, he asks Sandra if she thinks the little princes in the parcel will be getting cooked, and she answers more or less that:

“It’s only princesses, cos girl kisses kind of didn’ ‘elp.”

More or less like that. More or less.

But it’s still too much, because Anneli turns round and glares. And:

“You’re fuuucking sick Sandra! Tell me you didn’t kiss all o’ them bloody froglips? And, fuuuck! Think I’m gon’, like, puke!”

She carries on.

Because that’s what she’s always like. Someone who never understands. Someone who shouts and screams and complains and who no one would want to rape, or for that matter touch at all, however much she paints herself and sprays her hair.

Though Dad laughs at everything. He winds his side down and rests his elbow there. He starts and playfully presses down the gas so the Gustavssons’ Saab sounds like a rally car, like Vroom-Vroom! Though it stays on the spot. Just Vroom!

And:

“Fucking idiots.”

Mumbles Anneli then, but without looking at Dad or Sandra.

“Bloody fucking idiots.”

And her spotty neck is proper turned away stiff with rage and spreading ill-temper the whole time as they move off and pass by the blue and white signs of the Co-op, the green and yellow BP garage and the red-brick three-storey school with the aspens out front. The wind blows in through the window up front and flutters Anneli’s blonde ponytail a little and both the flax puffs and the pool tokens dance on the black seat beside Sandra.

The party house is white with a red roof and lies beside a church that’s just as white. A few balloons hang swaying from the door, which makes Sandra really shy (a long green one and a red one that’s round). The present is both light and heavy, kind of uneven, and over the paper the little Santas are still plodding round with their sleds. Sandra realises they forgot to put curly ribbons on.

Then a party dress mum, the kind with big glasses, comes to the door and smiles and is happy that Sandra and Anneli could come.

“But oh!”

And:

“Come in, come in! ...oh!”

When Dad drives off, the Saab leaves two deep marks behind it in the crunchy gravel of the driveway, but Party Mum doesn't notice anything, just puts her hand on Sandra's back and shepherds her. Anneli stays behind. She just stands out there in the sun and leans on her stick and calls:

"I'm just going to pop down to the grave first! And water... and so on."

And Party Mum turns around and nods and says something about how Anneli's holding out so well. Although it's not at all hard to water something, because all you have to do is pour water over it, but with Anneli it's always like that. Like everyone always cares.

In the hall it's twilight and full of shoes piled up willy-nilly. Sandra's white socks have already got brown-flecked and wet from the rubbish patch shoes. She moves, fumbling her way forward. But in the kitchen door she kind of comes to a halt. Everything's full of light again in there, so much sun her eyes are almost flooded. On the dark green doors of the kitchen units, masses of coloured drawings are taped up and the floor is covered with striped rugs. On all the chairs flowery cushions are tied with tapes that hang down the seat backs, and from the lamp, balloons dangle in almost every colour there is. There's a cacophony of gateau-happy children clattering china and yelling round the table with paper hats on their head. The other three girls are pink and white in their summer dresses.

Like sugar-foam Santas. Just so. Exactly so.

A short-haired mum tries to conduct an intimate chat with another who's flustered and red. The red one has got undressed and put one of her breasts in the mouth of a baby to make it be quiet. She's tanned apart from her breast which is white as china and that breast might make you feel shy too, because it looks so soft you'd want to lay your cheek against it, a little. Or poke it, like a froggy belly, almost.

Sandra doesn't know which of the children's birthday it is, so she doesn't know what she should do with the present now.

In the end she puts her box down on the floor right beside the edge of a striped rug and sits on the chair Party Mum pulls up for her.

Two boys have to shove each other hard because otherwise the breast might just make them too quiet, and one of them falls off his chair but it's ok and he clambers back on again to do more shoving.

"Here!"

And a slender elastic band under her chin and some kind of hat on her head. And:

"Oh, oh what a little princess you are!"

Party Mum says.

The sun shines in all the squash glasses making all the squash sparkle. Rubies, red campion, rowan! Kind of like that. Like magic! And Party Mum carefully slices the cake so that Sandra's bit comes out beautiful and very large, almost scandalous, and it stands up in the middle of a flowery plate. The other children get cream-clogged spoons on the tablecloth but Party Mum is so kind she doesn't even say anything about it.

Sandra dangles her legs carefully and hums the Harder Gold song in her head. When she presses the little spoon through the cake, mashed banana and raspberry jam squidge out between the sponge bases. Mashed banana and red jam, so delicious! And the cream is piped in patterns and everything is absolutely beautiful, like in the magazines.

The Coffee Mums' mouths are mostly full of Marlene. The girl. The girl this and the girl that.

"And, I've hidden a body too, just because he's pretty..."

Says Sandra.

But Party Mum suddenly stands behind her and rubs Sandra's upper arms a little.

"Don't you listen t' them Sandra. It's only grown-up talk."

And the grown-up talk bit is almost scolding so the mums magic away that girl out of the conversation and replace her with:

"Doesn't time fly?"

And other things, which Sandra can hardly say anything about.

There are a few cream-smearred candles on the edge of the cake plate. The kind that measure time. Cake candles, clocks and the Northern Forestry calendar on the kitchen wall at home, which Dad writes all his different jobs on with a special red timber pen. In this kitchen there are flowers. Flowers on the curtains and in pots and in a blue glass vase on the table. And the clock in the corner, the kind that's as tall as an old man, that's flowery too. Everything. Everything. Like a fairy meadow.

A boy with dimples knocks his squash over and it runs over the edge and down onto the white-dress-girl sitting opposite. Then Party Mum has to dab the girl's dress with several brand new napkins coloured blue and yellow like the Swedish flag and it's kind of a waste because the napkins are quite nice. The little girl cries and makes a fuss and

"Come, come!"

The mums say.

"It'll all be ok, it'll come out in the wash, you'll see."

But:

"It's not what's on the outside that counts, and..."

Sandra says.

But then the short-haired coffee mum gives her a harsh snort that means just-stop-now. And Sandra stops her inside song and kicks her legs and just eats and eats, and they can just mind their own business.

Some jammy sponge-crumbs-covered kid brings Sandra's present up onto the table and starts ripping the paper apart and pulling off the bits of brown tape until he gets it open.

In the box the frogs are lazy and kind of sticky from the sugar. A little one has stuck to Plump's back and kind of fainted.

"Sandra?"

But Sandra's eating her piece of cake. It's still standing. Cream, red jam and banana. She's eating carefully, because she'd rather it didn't fall over. Sponge crumbs in the cream. Cream with jam and banana. So delicious!

"Sandra Gustavsson?"

And the mums say don't you touch 'em to their party kids:

"Don't you touch 'em!"

And no one touches. No one touches.

A little frog and a slightly larger one tumble out of the box and hop down onto the party-stained tablecloth. The sun shines and the glasses are all sticky from children's hands around them and have marks from mouths on the rims. It's a new world and the brown creatures fumble their way awkwardly over flowery china, spoons and used napkins.

On the way home when Sandra leans back in her seat she feels that crown on her head and a slender elastic band under her chin. The crown is made of thick paper, golden on the outside and white inside. A kind of toy. She takes it off and leaves it there. Among the ice cream wrappers, pools coupons and wadding.

She asks:

"Can I drive?"

And Dad replies:

"Later."

Because she hardly ever gets to, out on the big road:

"Later Sandra, when we're more closer to home."

## Reviews

“The perforation between saga and realism brings the Moominvalley to mind, and the stifled implicit pain is superbly dealt with /.../ An author to keep a close eye on!” *Hallandsposten*

“the short story seized me. What a language, what a storyteller! Purely addictive!” *Sydsvenskan*

“Magnificence in dialect. /.../ from the language given to her by her origin, she [Stina Stoor] has designed a literary idiom, which gives forceful poignancy to people and situations, coupled with a delightful freshness to what would have been banal in common Swedish. /.../ a fairly irresistible, sharp humour, which remains even in serious moments. /.../ *Bli som folk* is a debut that really makes me happy” *Aftonbladet*

“[Stina Stoor] makes her debut with a collection of short stories depicting a deeply human northern Sweden. Tales about everyday life, about children's adventures in nature, about the longing, love, grief and loss of ordinary people. In truth, no extraordinary or revolutionary stories. They just contain everything that is most important in all of our lives. /.../ This is a debut that makes you want more.” *Vi Magazine*

“Sadness , sorrow and darkness – balanced with a generous-spirited humour and a rare strained pomposity. It is captivating and fascinating. Stoor’s greatness has been previously recognized with her award-winning individual short stories. It would disappoint me, but above all surprise me, if this roaring success-debut does not result in at least an August Prize nomination.” *Västerbottens-Kuriren*

“To read Stina Stoor is a bit like coming home to your very best childhood friend. The one you had forgotten but suddenly miss. /.../ To me *Bli som folk* will be one of this year's truly great reading experiences. /.../ With a sharp eye and a lot of empathy Stoor shows us that everyone’s everyday reality can be transformed into condensed poetry. An achievement out of the ordinary!” *Folkbladet*

“[I] am experiencing tears of joy because there are still new images, analogies and metaphors to be made. Stina Stoor’s is the most remarkable and beautiful debut of the year.” *Expressen*

“Stoor narrates with evident authority in a language strongly characterized by dialect, which sings and paints its way through the text. Her attention to detail as well as the affection for the characters shine through the stories and allow the collection to become a convincing whole, where none of the stories are overshadowed or feel the least irrelevant. I want more from the pen of Stina Stoor.” *Svenska Dagbladet*

“Stina Stoor writes in the same spirit as the great writers of the same landscape. I think of Sara Lidman, of course, but also of Torgny Lindgren and Per Olov Enqvist. The dialectal tone permeates the stories. It is a language offering resistance, forcing the reader to do retakes, to immerse in the text and to let the laconic formulations effect deeply. /.../ We have probably witnessed a new literary star being born. Make a mental note of the name Stina Stoor.”

*Dalademokraten*

“Stina Stoor follows the linguistic tradition that made and makes Västerbotten to an almost mythical literary environment, different from the rest of the world /.../ It is a quietly beautiful debut, fragrant with sweetgale and wild rosemary, with endurance and a frantic roll-up-your-sleeves-mentality.” *Dagens Nyheter*

“It is from here [Västerbotten] that Stoor derives her material and her language. And it’s putting me in a very special mood. As if the northern idiom, the rhythm of the language with its raw, poetic tone /.../ settles in my body. You can hear an echo of Sara Lidman, but also of something completely unique; with made-up words and original metaphors. /.../ an unusually strong reading experience. And it may sound solemn, but I would argue that a significant Swedish storyteller is born.” *Sydsvenskan*

“Stoor writes as if she is composing music, with full stops and phrases that makes a rhythm of its own. Reading becomes a bodily experience. /.../ Stina Stoor’s stories are not like anything else I’ve read, which is a liberating feeling. In her fiction human beings become strikingly visible with all that this involves.”

*Arbetarbladet*

“if you’re looking for a cultural revenge from northern Sweden, you will definitely find it in Stina Stoor’s debut *Bli som folk*, a collection of nine condensed short stories.” *Katrineholms-Kuriren*

“Her writings will reach, if not unthinkable, yet *thinkable* heights.” *Göteborg-Posten*

“Stina Stoor succeeds well in creating the strong, summer warm sense of presence, but she also weaves in threads that lead somewhere else, sentences that complicate the story and make the world behind it much bigger. Through it, one senses that there is a background to everything /.../ This makes the taste and smell and sense of this world much stronger while reading, and it also makes it bittersweet: not knowing what it consists of. It is a really fine short story.”

*Dagens bok*

## About Stina Stoor

Stina Stoor (born in 1982) has roots in no less than three of our Nordic minorities, the indigenous Sami, the Swedish speakers on the Finnish coast and the Meänkieli speakers as well as roots from northern settlers. After a rough childhood, Stina decided to leave home at a very young age, without finishing elementary school. She hitchhiked south with truckers and trains, but eventually the north called her back. She now lives with her Sami husband and two small children in her great-great-grandfathers's old house, tending to the inherited forest. Unlike most in her generation she has chosen to live and work in the sparsely populated area of northern Sweden.



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“Actually, if anyone would ever go any further along the dirt-road that passes by my family home they’d find all the other farms left abandoned as a result of today’s urbanization”, she says.

Her storytelling skill was first revealed in an anonymous nationwide competition in 2012. The short story, *För vår del*, was the first Stina actually ever put on paper, and was awarded first prize. Per Olov Enquist was one of the jurors. Following this prize she was contacted by Swedish national radio and wrote them a story, *Gåvan*, for their invites-only competition. By the listeners vote she was given her second major award.

As a little girl Stina wrote letters to her mother in bed at night after bad days, when there had been lots of conflicts and misunderstandings with her father. She wrote to be heard and to explain herself. Stina put the letters on the kitchen table for her mother to read in the morning when she was the only one awake.

“And sometimes”, Stina says, “my mother would come upstairs to my bedroom and she would gently stroke my cheek, wake me up and say:

‘You’re right.’

Her touch, and words, kept me writing.”

In 2015 Norstedts published Stina Stoor’s first collection of short stories *Bli som folk/Beasts and Other Stories* and Norstedts Agency is proud to represent her.