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TROUBLED WATER

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Buried

IF SHE FOUND OUT, would she leave him? Like all the others?

Petra was lying so close to Håkan that they might as well have been joined together. Little puffs of warm breath on his chin. Feet wedged between his, fingers exploring across his stomach. The curves of her body in the dark bedroom, familiar after all these nights they had spent together.

He lay there, pressing her into his memory.

Forgetting was unforgivable; he knew that.

That very first summer after Nilas' death he had forgotten nearly everything; the way Nilas' feet thudded on the floor when he ran to Håkan's bed in the night. The laughter, the shouts, the chatter that never ran dry, about tractors, about Eliasson's red David Brown 880, the reindeer lasso he was practising with.

Forgetting didn't mean he never thought about Nilas; he did. But the thoughts hurried past, thin and fleeting, a feeling, more like.

Like when he heard a tractor in the distance. When he saw a child run past holding a little soft toy, held so tight it had fallen to bits. When he saw seagrass wafting backwards and forwards underwater.

That was what Nilas' hair had looked like. Waves, dancing in the copper-coloured water.

It wasn't as if he hadn't seen anyone die before either. That was probably why the fox's den had sprung to mind at the time, the abandoned one, where he had seen Hebbe breathe his last breath. When Nilas lay dripping at his feet it was Hebbe's place he saw, on a ridge covered with pine needles and soft moss and dappled sunlight.

He had dragged Nilas up out of the water, little Nilas, so thin that he could feel his ribs through his jacket, as heavy as if made of lead.

His white hair, blond hair, like brown seagrass underwater.

"I can't stand it at home any longer," his mother had said to him shortly before she left. "Here, all I see is Nilas. And I see you, Håkan."

He had not realised he was alone until some time after that, the second summer after Nilas' death. He had heard a noise outside and thought it was mother coming back, or Lars, and, no matter, he had wanted to go to meet them. But there was no-one out there and he stood naked and shivering in the yard, the light hurting his eyes.

Everything changed that morning, yet it had looked the same as it always had, the same as it would for the next forty years. The morning shone on the windowpanes and the flies buzzed, shimmering green, around the porch. Whenever Håkan thought about that day, he would remember the way he sank to his knees halfway between the henhouse and the byre, the chilly, dew-wet gravel almost forcing its way into his skin. Stubby potato tops had pushed their way up through the soil. He had cried at the sight of it. Who was going to help him with the potatoes now?

He could imagine the view from the top of Olsberget. From up on the mountain, he would look like a light dot in the middle of everything, surrounded by empty farms and overgrown forest paths and naked stretches where trees had once been. And running through it all, the wet, dark tongue of the Vindelälven river stretched out. Seen from up there, it wasn't far to the place where Nilas lay under his blanket of moss.

Håkan had never felt as alone as he had that morning.

He would always feel alone after that, at least until he met Petra; thank the Lord for Petra. He hadn't thought he deserved her even when she lay beside him the first night, the very first time he had had a woman sleeping beside him in bed.

He lay thinking about it again now. He did not deserve her. Now she would know why. Håkan tried to absorb Petra, all of her, tattoo her deep inside.

He didn't want to forget her.

He hadn't wanted to forget Nilas.

It wasn't that he never tried to remember him, that he avoided thinking about Nilas. But with thoughts of him came the guilt, striking so hard that he couldn't breathe, so he pushed them aside as best he could. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen anyone die before either. But that time it hadn't been his fault.

He didn't know it had all begun long before.

In the beginning

My friend is mine and I am his,
our bond is everlasting.

Hymn no. 476, *The Swedish hymnal* (1937)

Assar

1948

THERE WASN'T MUCH to the village. Assar would hardly even call it a village, more a cluster of separate households clinging onto the sandy slope that ran down to the river. There was nothing there. Just small farms on either side of an arm of forest and neighbours barely on speaking terms for reasons no-one could any longer remember. The only thing that linked them was the summer road that every year turned into a muddy trail under the cart wheels in protest at being roused from its winter hibernation.

Everything had always been scarce in Olsele. The wooden buildings were thinner and the cows' coats duller than in other places. But it had good views, and the soil was good for potatoes. When he was feeling spiteful, Assar thought the potatoes were the only reason his parents stayed. They knew nothing other than potatoes and barley porridge.

Assar had soft hands and a boyish fringe that he usually brushed to one side with the palm of his hand. He had a questioning mind that he couldn't recognise in his parents. There was nothing they wanted, he thought. He wanted everything.

But when he saw her for the first time, Assar was utterly unprepared. She was unfamiliar to him, as new and shining a sight

as the mission house had been a few years earlier when it had only just been built. He caught sight of her going into Sigurd's, her dress fluttering in a breath of wind, her hair gleaming like a newly polished copper kettle in the sunshine. The light hurt his eyes. He did not even notice that the grass in the hayfields was already long enough to need mowing, not until afterwards.

It was gloomy in Sigurd's. The room where he had his shop was right at the back, at the end of a long hallway where the lamps were always unlit. The walls were filled with shelves and goods and he had a large shopkeeper's counter. It looked like a proper country store but in an ordinary home. There was a special smell to it. Sausages and Parma violets.

She was standing in the middle of the room. He could see her clearly though the light was dim. She gave him a quick glance when he came in, but looked past him before turning round to Sigurd again, as Sigurd nodded to him in greeting. He was kind, Sigurd. Used to give him a sweet or two when he came by. It wasn't that long ago that Sigurd had stopped offering him sweets. Assar felt he was too old for such things now and usually said no thank you when Sigurd tried.

She was strikingly tall, almost as tall as Assar, who had shot up in the last two years. Her hair curled on her neck. He looked at the soft line of her jaw, her long neck, the shadow of her collarbone disappearing under the neckline of her dress, the way it curved over her bust. When she laughed with Sigurd, a deep dimple appeared on her left cheek. There was a glow around her, lighting up the room. He could not stop looking. There were small beads of sweat in the

light down on her top lip. He didn't know who she was yet, but he wanted to lick them away with the tip of his tongue.

"Nice to have Hebbe back though," said Sigurd, starting on the next parcel. "He's been missed hereabouts."

She looked at Sigurd expectantly, giving an almost imperceptible nod, as if to make him continue.

"None of us thought the farm would keep going after Anders killed himself. Did you ever meet him yourself?"

The red glow about her moved when she shook her head. She shifted her weight from one leg to the other. Her legs were long and pale. She was not wearing any stockings under the everyday cotton dress.

Assar was all a-flutter, so much it almost hurt. Now he knew who she was. The wife of their neighbour who had just moved back. Father had talked a lot about them before – the brothers who had given up on the family farm and the home village to try their luck elsewhere. Two of them had emigrated, the third had gone south. "A dreamer, that one," father used to say, and the fourth one was the one that had died. The farm had stood there decaying ever since because Anders couldn't manage it on his own. Enough was enough, his father said with a snort, once Anders had gone and hanged himself in the shed. He didn't have much sympathy to spare for them. It cut too close to the bone for his father. They only had Assar left themselves and neither of his parents were in the best of health.

"No, we never met," Her voice was low and clear, but pleasant. A voice you wanted to keep listening to. "We didn't come up at all until after the funeral."

“Well, we’re pleased anyway. That someone took it on,” said Sigurd, tying the parcel in front of him up with string.

Her dimples danced when she smiled. She still had her own teeth, unlike Assar; between her front teeth she had a gap.

“Strömsund, you said?” Sigurd didn’t look up this time.

“Yes, that’s right. But I grew up in Hoting.”

“So how did you come to end up in Strömsund then?”

“Father died.” She chopped off the words short and tightened her lips. The dimples disappeared.

The conversation tailed off and all that could be heard was the rustling of waxed paper as her things were wrapped. Assar took a step backwards and knocked over something that fell to the floor. She glanced in his direction again but this time her attention was caught. She looked at him, exploratory, assessing, and with a hint of something else underneath that he was unable to interpret until much later – a hunger. Sigurd looked swiftly from one to the other and then he bent down again to the receipt he was writing out for her. He wrote slowly with attention to detail.

“Anyway,” said Sigurd, pointing at Assar, “Watch out for him. He’s a Sjögren. They’ve never been friends of the Larssons.”

Assar usually walked with long strides but today it was too hot and she caught him up just outside Saxnäsby. She said nothing, merely kept pace with him. He reached out a hand and she gave him the bag with the shopping and the post. They looked at each other and she smiled at him. It felt as if all would be well, as long as she smiled.

“Thank you for letting me walk with you,” she said. She said it as naturally as if they had been familiar friends.

“I thought you might not want to. What with what Sigurd said,” he answered, taking care over his pronunciation. She spoke proper Swedish, not dialect.

“That’s nothing to do with me,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “As long as it doesn’t matter to you, I mean.”

He shook his head firmly, not daring to open his mouth again. He was afraid his voice would crack. It had settled into its lower register by now but there were still times when it came out high and unsteady. Like when there was something he wanted too much. Like now.

Assar felt the warmth of her body nudging him through the checked material of her dress. Sometimes her hip bumped his, soft against his angles. Once her bare arm brushed against his, giving his skin goose bumps, despite the heat. They were walking slightly too close together, perhaps, but he didn’t say so.

Eight kilometres; that was how far they had to walk together. They walked slowly, silent next to each other, as close as they could without it being unseemly. The air shook with the heat, and dust flew up from the gravel road. The pines grew tall, seeming to lean over them as they walked. There was no birdsong; they must be hiding in the forest amongst the shadows. Instead the crickets sang by the edge of the ditch. The road was winding, it went up and down and curved gently like the loops of an adder; it was impossible to predict what was round the next bend.

So hot, although it was only early June. And there was the dust from the gravel. The smell made Assar thirsty.

“How old are you?” She didn’t even look at him, simply asked the question right out into the air.

Assar cleared his throat.

“I’m seventeen now. Finished school a couple of years ago,” he said, proudly, mostly because he wanted to show her that he was in fact an adult under his skinniness and the fuzz on his chin. He had got good grades at the village school and the teacher had encouraged him to read, passed on books now and then too, for him to borrow and take home. “You could make something of yourself,” she used to say. He missed her. He wished he could have continued studying. There wasn’t the money or the room for that, said father.

“You haven’t moved away?” Her voice roused him from his thoughts.

“No, the idea has always been that I would stay,” he said.

His father wasn’t well, but he didn’t mention that. Father grew shorter of breath with every day that passed. He was fading away; his arms and legs were too weak to hold him. Assar was needed on the farm. He had to help father with the heavy work that mother couldn’t manage. They had some cows, a horse and a couple of pigs and a fine potato patch. But they didn’t have much in the way of land; haymaking was hard work on the marshland and he was the one who had to take care of the cattle up on the fells in the summer.

Their family was the only one in the village to still put their cattle out to summer grazing. He thought they were old-fashioned, but he didn’t tell her that either.

“I was younger than you when I left home. I took up with Hebbe when I was the same age as you are,” she said with a crooked smile.

Assar said nothing. There was not much to say, even if he did feel an unexpected twinge of jealousy. It wasn’t unusual for young maids to go with older men, as several of his aunts had done. Usually the

men who were their masters, he thought cynically. She seemed to see what he was thinking, explained:

“I met Hebbe when he was playing the accordion at a dance. I was there for the dancing. I had never heard anyone play the accordion like he did. I went there to dance with a nice young man, but I came home with a musician!” she said with a belly laugh.

“How was it that you met him so young?” Assar asked. It came out of nowhere, the words bursting out before he managed to stop the question, asked as directly as she had addressed him. He saw her looking at him out of the corner of his eye. The air between them thickened and he regretted asking before she answered.

“My father died. He was a forester and we were turned out with just a month’s notice,” she said. “Mother sent us all off, it was probably easier that way. Hebbe looked after me,” she said gratefully. “It has its advantages and it has its disadvantages. I have a lot of music in my life. But maybe there isn’t much else,” she added after a moment’s silence.

Her directness surprised Assar. He was not used to it, not used to spending time with girls, and certainly not with women like her. The girls he had met felt straightforward. They were as predictable as the farm work. Spring and summer in the fields, autumn harvest, milking and lambing and haymaking, first the meadows, then the marshes. And the forest work in the winter. His mother used to nag him to meet some nice girl. Someone he could settle down with and take over the farm completely with, in time.

“Do you have music at home?” she asked suddenly, as if she had not really intended asking but did it anyway. He shook his head. They had no radio, no gramophone, and no-one played. She

answered with a grimace that could mean anything. Dissatisfaction, apology, perhaps something fierce.

“It’s poverty, being without music,” she said finally.

Assar did not feel particularly poor, at least not for that reason. He walked beside her without answering.

“Do you think I’m odd?” she asked when the silence had lain unmoving between them a while.

“Not odd, no,” he said, “but you’re not like other people.”

“I like doing things people don’t expect,” she said, laughing. It made him wish he could make her laugh.

“But I think you’re like that too,” she went on, without seeming to expect an answer. “Although the idea has always been that you would stay. Forgive me –” she placed her hand on his arm as he slowed down, “– I’m frightening you now. It was not my intention.”

At once he felt small again. And when he was grown-up now too.

They walked on. The Olsele road turned off the Saxnäs road, but there was nothing remarkable about it, it wasn’t gravel like the road from Saxnäsby. Just a couple of wheel ruts and hard tufts of grass between, growing tall in the summer. They walked in a rut each, making small talk. She talked about growing up in Hoting, in few words, but clearly with love, about her father and her sisters. She barely mentioned her mother. He told her about Miss Aslög, who had wanted him to continue studying.

When he looked round, he noticed that they had turned off the road and were halfway to Annersudden, halfway to where she lived. Well, he thought, if she hasn’t noticed, far be it from me to say anything. But he had stopped listening to her and was looking

instead – at the way she described things with her hands, at the way she leaned her head, her hair starting to come loose.

“How many children do you have?” he interrupted suddenly. That twinge of jealousy again.

Her lips tightened just as they had done at Sigurd’s. She frowned. Assar tried to swallow the dust from the road on his tongue, it was still there even though they were into the cool of the forest.

“Sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“No, it isn’t.” Something flared up, something sealed off inside her flickering past.

His heart was beating fast and hard. She was falling out of his hands before she had even been there.

She continued walking quickly although she was now several metres ahead of him. Assar jogged to catch her up again. He wanted that friendly closeness to her, feel skin brushing against his. Too late. He was seventeen and still tears burned in his eyes as the curses rolled around in his mouth. Assar saw the fragile, strange acquaintance between them starting to dissolve and disappear. Not yet, he thought.

“My name is Assar.”

“My name is Margareta,” she said, consideringly, as if he ought not really to be told it. “And I have been with Hebbe almost as long as you have been alive.”

Håkan

1956

HEBBE. NOT FATHER, not daddy, not even da. Just Hebbe, Hebbe who smelt of warm cigarillos, Old Spice and resin and whose legs were so thin that when Håkan bounced on his knee it made his bottom hurt.

“Again daddy!” Håkan shouted when Hebbe stopped.

“Not if you’re going to call me daddy. Say Hebbe,” he said seriously, and didn’t start bouncing again until Håkan had got it right.

“Hebbe, again Hebbe!”

Then he slapped at Hebbe’s braces with their light brown leather ends until Hebbe laughed and started bouncing him again.

No, he was never allowed to start calling Hebbe father.

Sometimes Håkan felt it didn’t matter very much. Still it stung when mother called Hebbe *your father*, like when she showed Håkan the bank book shortly after Hebbe’s funeral. They were sitting side by side on the settle with the thin book in front of them on the kitchen table, filled with marks and stamps that Håkan couldn’t understand.

“Look,” she said, “look what your father did.” She pointed to the incomprehensible squiggles and straight columns. “We have enough to manage on for a while, Håkan.”

Hebbe tended to be frugal, not mean, but careful. That was probably why he was like a mountain birch, thin round the middle but enduring. He smoked one cigarillo a day but didn't touch spirits. The only thing Hebbe was exuberant about was music, that and jiggling Håkan on his knee. He played the accordion and the guitar and the organ, the latter only when they were at prayer meetings, although there was an old harmonium in the parlour gathering dust.

Håkan had tried to play it a few times although he barely had enough power in his legs to get a sound out of it, even standing up. It was old, marbled wood, and a couple of the stops were loose: Cornet and Viola. It squeaked and wheezed in turn when, after battling for a while, he finally got a sound out of it. When Hebbe found him, he slapped Håkan on his bottom with the palm of his hand. It didn't hurt particularly but he put enough effort into it to make it sting.

"You best leave 'un be," he said. When he saw Håkan rubbing his left buttock with the palm of his hand and heard him sniffing back the tears that burned at the back of his nose, he added drawling:

"Do it again an' it'll hurt worse."

Hebbe played the organ at the prayer meetings but he only took the accordion out when they were alone at home. If he was in a good mood, he might push the kitchen table aside, take the accordion out of its box and play cheerful tunes just for them. Then mother would pick Håkan up and dance around with him in her arms. He put his arms round her neck and felt her warm, quick breath in his ear. They twirled round the kitchen while Hebbe tapped his foot in time with the beat and played, and they all laughed. Those were the best times in Håkan's life. He thought Hebbe and mother felt the same but

Hebbe looked sad when he packed the accordion away in its box again.

Hebbe only played for them when mother was in a good mood too, when they had been able to eat themselves full on good food and there were some extra logs in the stove. At times like that, Hebbe might even give her a kiss on the cheek. Otherwise they barely touched each other.

The last winter Hebbe was alive, before Håkan was six, and long after Hebbe had stopped bouncing him on his knee, was the only time Håkan heard the harmonium played properly. It was in early spring, when the reindeer herders passed the village on the way to the fells, and some of the reindeer herding families divided themselves up to spend the night in bakehouses and other places around the village. For Håkan, these occasions were usually festive, the bakehouse heated, with reindeer hides spread on the floor and the fire crackling in the stove. He usually ate blood pancakes with the other children. The pancakes were wonderfully crisp and the grease from the reindeer fat would dribble down his cheeks. But this time they had a different family staying with them than usual, and they knocked on the door just as Håkan was about to go to bed.

“That’ll be Jonsson now,” said Hebbe. Mother, who had been washing up, dried her hands on her apron and took it off before going to open the door. There were two men waiting outside; brothers, they looked like, both with hair like the dried sedge they put in their boots in the winter.

“The both of you, is it now?” said Hebbe. “Come in then,” he said, shaking hands. “You’re early, mind.”

They were there to play. Jonsson – Ante – was the organist; his brother Lars watched. Jonsson played godly music, Håkan understood that much, though it was not any of the hymns he knew like *Prepare ye the way for the Lord* or *Your bright sun doth rise again*. It was vibrating, peculiar notes, long drawn-out, you hardly heard the clicks and wheezes of the old harmonium. Jonsson played with more feeling than he had ever heard Hebbe play with at the mission house.

Håkan sat beside his mother with his hand in hers. Her hold tightened the longer Ante played. Mother's lip trembled. Håkan finally started pulling his hand away to loosen her grip when he saw the way Jonsson's brother was standing leaning against the wall glowering at them. Håkan froze. He made every effort not to move the slightest little bit and focused all his attention on the man playing the organ. He thought he probably was making Lars cross because he was not paying enough attention. Hebbe slapped his leg in time to the music. He was so thin and old compared with these two.

But when Håkan sneaked a look at Lars again, he was standing there glaring although Håkan had not moved so much as a little finger. It was all too much for Håkan. He opened his mouth and cried so plaintively and as loud as he possibly could, oozing rivers of tears and snot. Ante stopped pumping the pedals and the notes of the harmonium died away.

Mother was embarrassed at first.

"But Håkan, what is it?" she scolded. "Please do continue," she said to Jonsson with a nod to the harmonium, "it was lovely. You play well."

"Best we're on our way," said Jonsson's brother standing up. "We've another long day ahead."

“It’s unfortunate for it to end like this,” said mother, holding Håkan firmly by the shoulders. “It really was beautiful,” she continued, turning towards Ante.

“We could come by tomorrow, maybe?” Lars suggested. Mother made no answer at first. Håkan was still sniffing and a deep wrinkle formed between Hebbe’s eyebrows that no-one but Håkan seemed to notice.

“That would be nice,” she responded, her face lighting up, the way Håkan had only seen it light up when Hebbe played for her and they danced together around the kitchen floor.

Hebbe carefully closed the lid of the harmonium. Mother anxiously excused herself while Ante and Lars Jonsson put on their coats and left. Then Hebbe’s silence fell over the house.

That night it was mother who spanked him.

It was the first and only time. She never otherwise laid a hand on him.

And as for the harmonium, Hebbe had it carried out into the shed.

Hebbe showed Håkan his world that last summer, once he had bought himself a carrier moped from Norsjö mekaniska. It was almost like when Håkan bounced around on Hebbe’s knee, except now he was sitting on the flatbed of the moped, which was harder and sharper and not as warm as Hebbe’s lap. Together they travelled all over the place. With the speed, the wind ruffled Håkan’s hair, and he grinned so much that he accidentally swallowed midges and little flies that flew into his mouth. Hebbe laughed every time Håkan started choking and coughing and told him to keep his mouth shut. But he smiled a lot himself too, did Hebbe.

Hebbe had a big rucksack with leather straps left over from when he was called up, and they packed it full of sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. Hebbe gave Håkan a little knife to wear on his belt, just like his own. It swung when he moved and banged against his hip. Håkan tripped because he was looking at the knife more than the ground in front of him. That made Hebbe laugh. He laughed kindly, mostly, but sometimes it was a laugh that made the back of Håkan's nose burn.

They could drive on some of the freshly surfaced roads but otherwise they had to keep to old cart tracks and well-trampled forest paths. They drove the moped until they could get no further and then they walked, hand in hand. Once when they were sitting by a campfire together, Hebbe grew sad. Not the kind of sadness that made him cry. He just got subdued and silent.

"My da never taught me aught," he said. "My brother got to learn a lot. Everything I know, I've had to teach meself," he said, putting his arm round Håkan's thin shoulders. "I want to teach you," he said. "D'you understand?" Håkan nodded.

"You sure? That you understand?"

"Mm, I understand," Håkan's voice was thin. It would be horrid to say no when Hebbe was solemn.

Hebbe knew a lot about the forest and everything that lived in it. He pointed out places where there was good wood for fires for the coming winters. He showed Håkan the anthills, pointed out the tar kilns and the ditches he had dug. In a dry glade in the middle of the forest, he scratched some bits of charcoal out from the slope. He said the charcoal came from the two finest houses in the village. His father had had them dismantled, only to turn them into charcoal in

the Second World War. He'd thought he'd make money, said Hebbe, but he got nothing for it. And that kind of money-grubbing just got him disliked.

Once they met at a barn deep in the forest that Hebbe said was theirs. He pointed out a birch tree that had been split by lightning; one of the big branches had fallen on top of the barn roof.

The roof looked sunken and there was a hole where the sawdust had fallen in. When they went inside, because Hebbe wanted to see how bad it was, they were overwhelmed by a pungent smell of tar. Håkan liked the smell, although it made his nose itch. The light inside was dim. The only daylight squeezed its way in through the cracks between the thin logs, revealing that the air was full of dust that swirled up when they moved. Håkan saw nothing at first, then he made out the outlines of some barrels standing in a corner of the barn.

Hebbe tapped one of them. It gave off a solid sound, as if it was full. Hebbe examined the timber under the hole in the roof with a knife, sticking the blade into it. He said with satisfaction that it wasn't as bad as he'd feared. Inserting a new piece of wood would do the trick.

"This needs fixing. But not today," said Hebbe, pulling at Håkan's shirtsleeve to get him out of there.

That was the summer Håkan learned to fish. Hebbe usually brought the smaller rod and the flies, for Håkan to use, with him. Hebbe's own rod was long and impressive. "This is no rubbish rod, this one" said Hebbe, "I sent off for it from Leidesdorff." Håkan was entrusted with making sure no harm came to it on their trips. Hebbe did seem to enjoy showing Håkan the forest but he seemed to enjoy

even more showing him how to cast, where the best water was found, how to tie a fly and how to recognise good spots for pike, grayling and the beautiful spotted trout, Hebbes own favourite. It wasn't until a long time later that Håkan came to understand that perhaps what he had taught him was not fishing but what it was like to have something in common.

Unlike Hebbe, mother was not musical, but she had her own way of making music that expressed her mood. When the weather was fine and the cows were doing well, she usually hummed to herself and she played the instruments she had available. The coffee cups and saucers clinked cosily, the cream separator sang and whirred, and even washing up bowl made music of its own. When she was happy, it was as if the whole house reverberated with cheerful harmonies. Hebbe did not swear or threaten or use his fists when he was angry, but he grew silent and it was a silence that sank over the whole house, that made Håkan hide in the dark, warm space beside the log box in the kitchen. When both of them were angry, Hebbe was silent while mother carelessly clattered and rattled the washing up and the rings on top of the stove.

They almost never argued.

But they argued the evening that Håkan caught his first trout, a river trout that gleamed and then took off with the fly in the clear water before Håkan pulled it up. Håkan was proud enough, but Hebbe was even prouder, took his cap off and threw it up in the air and sang until it echoed round about them. It sounded like on the radio, and it made Håkan happy and surprised. Imagine when he told mother! But he never got to do the telling. Mother sent him outside

when they got home, and he wandered about in the yard for a while with a stick he had found outside the woodshed. He went and poked in the flower beds and among the fresh hen droppings and heard them all the way outside, mother shouting at Hebbe. He dropped the stick and went towards the house, one step at a time. There was still shouting. He wanted to help Hebbe, get mother to stop yelling at him, and he walked faster. He sneaked in. Silently, so they wouldn't hear and get angry with him instead.

They were standing in the kitchen and had calmed down when Håkan came in. They did not notice him.

"I don't like you spending so much time alone with him," said mother. She was calmer now, but her voice sounded like a rusty nail, brittle and dry. Håkan couldn't understand what she could have against it.

It smelled of the cooked trout they were going to have for dinner. Hebbe mumbled something in response. Håkan crept closer and peered in through the half-open door. Hebbe was standing with his back to him, it was a back that was protesting. It had its hackles up, like their cat, if it had been fur instead of Hebbe's blue-checked cotton shirt. The cuffs were bloody at the edges from gutting the fish.

"I've always looked after you, Margareta, all these years. D'you think I'd let any harm come to him?"

"No, no, I don't think that. Of course not. It's just. He isn't yours," answered mother and Håkan couldn't understand what she meant. He was Hebbe's, of course he was, he was Hebbe's and no-one else's.

It was then Hebbe grabbed her chin, with his thumb on one side and the other fingers on the other, as if he was going to squeeze her mouth together until her lips were pursed like a fish.

Håkan heard him loud and clear.

“I’ll tell you one thing ‘bout that boy. He’ll be as much mine as he can be.”

Mother said nothing. She just stood there, her eyes stormy. Hebbe let go and walked out, so riled that he missed Håkan sitting where he was sat. Håkan ran after him, calling his name. But Hebbe had started the moped and rattled away at such a speed that he left skid marks behind him in the gravel. Håkan wished inside that he could have gone too.

They used to spend a lot of their time at Måckavan. The *ava*, the inlet, was a shallow river bed where the current flowed the wrong way, an offshoot of the mighty Vindelälven river that snaked its way deep into the forest and worked its way back in the opposite direction to the river. What made Måckavan unusual was all the stones, as if some giants had had a shot put competition with rounded grey rocks the size of small boulders. Stone after stone stood lined up, the same distance apart, above the water and in the *ava*. It was impassable by boat.

Hebbe sometimes said that no-one would be able to find their way around there as well as Håkan would be able to when he was finished with him. To Håkan it was an adventure to dart around among the moss and the ferns, deep into the forest where the rays of the sun barely reached, with a pack on his back and birch twigs in his hands to waft away the midges. The trees they passed were big and weighty and thwacked them in the face with clumps of dark dangling lichen.

Hebbe showed him all the places he used to go when he was a child. He pointed out where the beaver lived, the one that gnawed

down small trees and dammed up the river. He showed Håkan lairs and dens. Some were old and abandoned, others gave them the chance to sit and watch young, venturing out in the summer warmth.

Those days. They carved a map inside Håkan, with all the trees and hidey holes that Hebbe told him about, with the hassocks of grass and the stones that he jumped on.

The jumping made Hebbe nervous. Håkan skipped from one big stone to the next, moving like a young goat, deeper and deeper into the *ava*.

“You’ve a talent for jumping, boy,” said Hebbe once when Håkan had come back to him. “I’ve never been able to leap like that, not even when I were your age. But it’s our secret,” he said, nudging Håkan conspiratorially with his elbow. “Don’t tell your ma I let you go springing about like that.”

Håkan shook his head. He wouldn’t ever tell.

When, as an adult, Håkan thought back to those days that turned into weeks and months, he thought it was about passing on knowledge. That Hebbe wanted to show him the world as he saw it.

It wasn’t that Hebbe was old – not really. He was long in the tooth, true, for his family had come to him late in life, especially Håkan. But as thin as he was, he was sinewy with it. Strong as a maple. He had a spring in his step that men both younger and heavier than him lacked, and what he did not possess in raw strength, he made up for in thinking power.

No, Hebbe was not old really. But still, that summer it was as if he was *in a hurry*, he worked with a never waning energy. He stockpiled. Fixed things and pottered about at home. He mended the field fence

and made sure the woodshed and the peat store were well filled. Hebbe was like a frenetically working squirrel that senses the smell of snow in the air. And he was out with Håkan, a little boy who was learning what he could teach him. A whole lifetime of lessons in barely a couple of months. How best to fell a tree, and how to read tree trunks to know in which direction to go. Where to find wild birds and how to track elk.

Hebbe talked to him in a constantly flowing stream of words about the past and the present and the future.

One morning in late summer, Hebbe took Håkan with him to the wood yard at Gidnicken to see the men and show him how it all worked. Hebbe assumed nothing other than that Håkan would work in the forest just like he had; he was clear about his expectations. He saw no future in farming. It was money down the drain, he said, no matter how much Margareta loved her cows.

From his vantage point, Håkan could see the big cages filled with stones poking up out of the water like rectangular islands, and between them lay booms, logs chained together to make a channel for the timber. The sun bore down on Håkan's head and his shirt stuck unpleasantly to his body in the heat. Some of the log drivers had taken off their shirts and their bodies glistened. While Hebbe and his friends laughed and talked, Håkan's attention was on the splashing and laughter he could hear a little further off. It was some boys, not much older than he was himself, playing and diving in the gaps between the timber. Sometimes they balanced on the logs. The water looked cold. Even from where he was standing, Håkan could see the children's lips were blue.

“That’s strictly forbidden, d’you hear?” he heard Hebbe behind him and he felt found out.

“Mm.”

“If they fall under the logs, they can drown. The timber can close over their heads.” Håkan squinted up at Hebbe and nodded.

“I can let you jump. That I can. But I can’t let you swim here,” said Hebbe. He looked serious and Håkan did not know what to say. He did want to. His hair was stuck to his forehead under his cap and the water glittered. A dip would be wonderful.

“I know where we can swim instead,” said Hebbe. Håkan smiled until his cheeks hurt.

Hebbe took him to a tarn a short distance away and they cheerfully undressed, both of them.

Håkan could swim a few strokes – he eagerly demonstrated – but Hebbe just shook his head. He couldn’t swim. It felt strange; Hebbe had worked on the log drive a long time, even lived on the river.

That swim was the first and last time that Håkan saw Hebbe completely naked. His lower arms were sunburned but otherwise his body was so pale that it seemed never to have been exposed to the sun. On his back there was a network of thin, silver lines. Håkan thought it was beautiful, but the sight scared him too, and he did not ask about it. There was a little tuft of hair, a mix of grey and brown, above his sharp breastbone.

It was that tuft that Håkan saw before his eyes afterwards when Hebbe was in his coffin, though he was wearing a white shirt buttoned all the way up, and his best suit. His hands rested respectably on the cover. Hebbe had rubbed them together to get the warmth into them after their swim but nevertheless, his laugh had

lit up his whole face. He said he hadn't done anything like that in at least fifty years. His nails were as blue as the tarn, just blacker underneath.

When they bathed, Hebbe's hair was wet and wind-ruffled. In the coffin it was tidily combed and his mouth was open. Håkan cried. Hebbe was all fancy. He went up and hugged Hebbe, as well as he could. He didn't smell of Old Spice and resin any more. Håkan thought Hebbe would feel frail, even frailer than he looked, but he felt solid. Heavy, resting under the palms of his hands. He was not used to hugging him. And Håkan had been going to teach him to swim.

Mother had never liked Hebbe being out alone, whether he was fishing in the rapids or tying on his skis to work in the forest.

"But *what if*, Hebbe. Think about that." That *what if*.

Hebbe used to argue back at her.

"Can't go thinking *what if* all the time!" he said with a splash of spittle. But that *what if* came anyway in the end. When Håkan had jumped from stone to stone while Hebbe patiently carried his rod around so it didn't get wrecked. When they traipsed hither and yon, and ate berries from the bilberry bushes until Håkan's fingers and trousers were completely stained. When Håkan walked around in a cloud of silence and grumpiness because nothing, nothing whatsoever, had bitten for him while Hebbe had managed to haul up a grayling. When Hebbe dragged Håkan to a lair nearby to look at fox cubs. That was when *what if* caught up with him.

"Got to go home," was all Hebbe said. There were dark shadows under his eyes and he was gripping his shoulder.

"But we only just came!"

Even Håkan could hear himself whinging. Hebbe didn't like whinging. Sometimes he couldn't help it.

“Can't catch me breath. Got to go now.”

“Noooo! What about the foxes? I want to see the foxes!”

Hebbe grabbed Håkan's wrist and no more was needed. He helped to scramble their things together, snivelling quietly. He stared down at the ground, it was covered in pine needles. Neither said anything. Hebbe was rubbing the top of his arm. Håkan could hear him groaning, off and on. Hebbe was sweating and his face was grey. When Håkan looked at him, he wanted to walk faster or not walk at all. Hebbe urged him on. It sounded an effort. Håkan gritted his teeth and kept going as best he could.

A moment later, Håkan realised that there was no-one walking beside him any more. He slowed down and turned round.

“Hebbe ...?”

Hebbe had lain down next to the path. He still held one hand on his upper arm.

He didn't answer. Håkan cleared his throat and tried again. Out came not much more than a whisper.

“Hebbe.”

One step forward. The next. He raised his voice. “Hebbe!”

A third step. The tears started to flow, stinging his cheeks.

“Hebbe, please, Hebbe. Dadda?”

His voice cracked. The forest usually made so many sounds. Whispering in the treetops and branches cracking. The dry earth squeaking under their feet. Birdsong and the buzz of insects and midges. Håkan heard none of it; he only saw Hebbe lying there with

his hand on the top of his arm though Håkan had started shouting at him to wake up.

Hebbe lay where he lay and Håkan turned and ran. Like a little baby rabbit. Not like the wolverine Hebbe had said he was.

Assar

1948

HE SAW HER from time to time. She whisked past him at Sigurd's, sometimes he saw her with Hebbe. He was old. He was a skinny, thin-haired old man who held her round the waist, his hand in the middle of that appealing, soft curve between chest and hip. He held her round the waist and Assar wished that hand was his.

She never saw him. It was like that first time they met – she looked past him, unseeing and unconcerned as if he wasn't there.

Assar cycled over to hers once when the longing grew too much. He saw her at a distance, hanging up freshly washed sheets. They drooped, clean and wet, and at intervals she stretched her back with the weight of them.

The farm was well looked-after. Behind the bakehouse he could see the potato field; the sandy soil was light and the rows straight and neat, but it looked as though they had got their potatoes in slightly too late. Only a few plants were poking up out of the ground.

He dreamed about her in the evenings. She smelled like Lux soap and warm sex lying beside him, responsive, trembling. He bit her cheek although it was his own, rubbed himself to release and imagined her falling apart above him. Mother said nothing although

it meant more laundry. Sometimes he heard her telling father she was worried about him.

Mother's anxious face and the tension in her body meant he tried to make an effort to find someone and something else to think about. Sometimes he went to barn dances in the neighbouring villages, mostly because mother had told him he ought to find some nice girl to marry and because he wanted to wipe away the worry lines between her eyes. He was good at the polka and they queued up to dance with him, red cheeked and starry-eyed. He kissed their mouths behind the barn and they let him in between warm, parted legs on cool summer evenings. But these were girls to practise with; it was not the ones he lay with who filled his thoughts.

Assar started to go to the mission house every Sunday. He joined in the meetings, sang the hymns and he prayed but he never witnessed. Mostly he prayed that his mother would stop fearing for his soul. She was not particularly god-fearing herself, not like his father, but she was worried about whether he was saved. He did not feel at home there. Deep inside he felt a belief in an Almighty was beneath him. A little too rational, like the well-read philosophers he had heard speak of. But he loved his mother and could not bear to see her worried. It was father she needed to be worrying about, not him.

Once he arrived there for the meeting. It was packed and Margareta was there, she had put her hair up in a bun that was a little too careless, a lock of hair had escaped and was hanging down on her neck. Hebbe was there too. He was at the very front, next to the preacher, with a friendly smile on his face that made Assar clench his fists in his pockets. Assar navigated his way through the people

in the aisle to make his way through the room quickly enough, crossed over to her bench and slipped in next to her. He put his coat down beside him, did not want anyone next to him. Margareta briefly noted his presence, then turned to look ahead again. She did not greet him. She was wearing stockings this time and she sat with her legs crossed, with her arms closed over her chest as if trying to make herself small. He looked at her sideways on. The straight nose, the full lips, the lines. The down above her lip. He squeezed his shirt as if to tell the blood inside it to calm down.

There was a storm outside. It had not started raining yet, but the air was charged, dense and dark. Hebbe rubbed his temples and outbreaks of jitters could be heard here and there in the mission house during the prayer meeting. The villagers did not care for storms; it could mean fire and people were still frightened. The bad weather was coming closer and closer, they could tell as they counted the seconds between lightning and thunder. Soon the sky outside turned black and the rain beat hard on the glass and the thin Masonite walls. It was right overhead now. The preacher tried to calm the congregation. He spoke calmly and convincingly to them with the palms of his hands facing downwards to get them to sit down again. Several members of the congregation had lifted their rears a few centimetres above the benches and were half standing, their bodies poised, ready to run if necessary.

And then. The storm hit.

There was a crash. A couple of women screamed falsetto screams and the mission house was plunged into darkness.

The music fell silent and the murmuring, the low murmur that competed with the hammering rain, grew to an agitated buzz. He had stood up, like everyone around him.

That was when he felt her touch.

He did not see her, he could not even have seen his hand in front of his face, but he felt her. Feather-light. The way she cautiously stroked him, from the palm of his hand over the calluses of the summer, caressed the thin skin on his wrist. Slowly, she traced the veins on his lower arm up to the fold of his elbow, and then no more. He stood there breathing breathlessly beside her, and everything else around him disappeared while the buzz grew even more agitated and a couple of parties started to put their coats on to make their way home. They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, and no-one could see them, but God the feeling of it. He sang with joy when the power came back on. His soul burst out in songs of praise.

Håkan

1957

HÅKAN SCREAMED, LONG after Hebbe had gone and died. He screamed and howled and hit his way through their Hebbe-less lives. He could sit on the wood box and kick it with his heels, a rhythmic, hollow thud-thud-thud, while mother stood cooking at the stove. Silently and stubbornly he sat in fury, watching his mother whose movements grew more and more jumpy.

“Doesn’t it hurt your heels, love?” she finally asked. She sounded calm but Håkan saw how tense she really was. He saw the eyebrows drawn together and the mouth that was no more than a hard line. Her eyes looked like bruises, but the blue circles under them were marks of tiredness and nothing else. He answered her by kicking faster and harder. *Thudthudthudthud*. Mother fumbled with the ladle and the cast iron sizzled and smoked from the food she spilled.

“That’s enough!” she shouted. “I can’t stand it. Get out!”

Thudthudthud. He looked at mother, her tousled hair and red cheeks and shining eyes, her chest falling and rising like that of a stressed animal. He saw the sadness in her, let his heels come to rest against the wood box. He raised the palm of his hand, upwards and backwards, saw his Mother recoil from him as if she was afraid. Then he smashed his hand down where the stove was still smoking and

hissing. He burned himself. As an adult, he would sometimes look at the burn scar he still bore on his hand. Mother said it was an accident when the doctor asked. That he had tripped and used his hand to break his fall. He himself was silent, until he started screaming again.

If his anger had been visible, it would have been steam, forcing its way out through every available opening, his eyes and ears and mouth, surrounding his hands and feet like a cloud. It was as if all that steam made him stronger and faster. Sometimes it felt as though it might make him explode, crack into a thousand pieces and never be whole again.

If there was one thing that irritated him, it was the animals on the farm. The slightest little clank from inside the cowshed and he jumped as if someone had hit him. And the farm was not short of noises. It was not like in the forest with its comforting noises, noises that were muffled among trees and branches, the ground soft and covered with a carpet of bilberry bushes and moss. On the farm, the ground was hard, and sound carried as if it were rifle shots. Not even the sound of the lambs was consoling; they were no longer newborn, but still had a high bleat.

The cockerel was the thing Håkan found it hardest to stand. He was handsome, a proud bird with gleaming, magnificent tail feathers and a harem of hens and descendants to look after like a gentleman. Mother used to comment on the way he always gave the best bits of feed to his womenfolk. It had started to get dark at night now, which meant the cockerel no longer kept crowing at all hours. But he still woke Håkan far too early in the morning and defended his hens bravely and loudly for much of the day, with a voice that carried and

would have made any other cockerel jealous. Håkan found it ear-splitting, even though he lay holding the pillow in a cramp-like grip over his head. One morning he went out, in long-johns and boots, and walked over to the henhouse that lay furthest away, right in front of the farm buildings. He went up to the cockerel, chivvying away chickens and hens that got in the way of his feet with unnecessary vigour.

And he screamed.

He put his face right up close to the cockerel, unafraid of attack from its sharp beak or claws, and he roared for all he was worth.

He screamed and screamed.

Finally mother came out, just as oddly dressed too, scared at the noise.

Håkan screamed until she grabbed his small shoulders and shook him until his teeth chattered. He scrunched his eyes shut and started to hit out around him, just hitting and kicking. Perhaps he did want to punch something. Perhaps he just wanted to get free. But he only got free when he kicked so hard one of his boots flew off and hit the cockerel, which gave out a broken, wailing screech. He ran in when he felt mother let go, limping with one boot on.

The cockerel never recovered. He croaked out his morning cock-a-doodle-doo and it was as if the cuckoos round about were mocking him for his miserable, broken cry. In the end, mother boiled him up for stew, saying that there was no use for a cockerel with no self-confidence. And he had looked after his hens so well.

“This isn’t you,” mother whispered to Håkan later. She sounded tired and sad. “You’re a nice little boy.”

The circles under her eyes were darker than usual. Or she was more transparent than usual, and they stood out more. Håkan sniffled but he did not cry. And he opened his mouth, not to say anything, not to give her an answer, but to scream.

The cold sank over them, causing creaking and knocking noises in the wood of the walls. The darkness of winter took over outside. It was like a creature in its own right. Håkan had never been afraid of the dark, but now it was like a giant mouth that swallowed everything that came in its path, and it crept into the house and spread into every corner. He hid under the cover when trying to get to sleep, crept under there so as not to see the darkness gaping at him and making his head shouty and muddled before he slept, sweating and exhausted.

More and more often he could hear mother crying through the walls. Sometimes she cried bent over Hebbe's little books with their scribbles. He thought she was crying most about him. That winter her face grew paler and paler and Håkan thought one day he would wake up and see her looking like one of the portraits she had on the walls, all in shades of grey, except old and no longer young.

When he started school, Håkan stopped speaking. Dumb and still, he sat on a school bench practising reading and writing. Inside him the letters and the words tumbled around, unmastered and as loud as he felt inside without coming out of his mouth. When he did speak, it was as if his voice was vibrating with how much he was holding in. He answered the teacher's questions in a whisper although he was howling inside.

His classmates learned to read in the end, all of them. Even the ones who were younger than him and the ones who were slower than the others. More and more, Håkan was asked to read out loud in front of the rest, a task he stammered and staggered his way through, while the teacher stared at him through her thick, round glasses. He did not get any strokes across his fingers with a ruler. But he would have preferred that to the humiliation he suffered day after day, and which made him all the more silent. Frustrated, he banged his fists against his forehead and his stupid brain that refused to behave.

It was hard to say whether Håkan kept out of the way of the others, or if they kept out of his. He preferred to sit hidden by a bench, with his back to the wall of the classroom, reciting the alphabet to himself to imprint it in his noisy skull, as if the doggerel would put everything up there in order and set it all out in neat rows. He made no friends in that first year of school.

As spring drew nearer, mother started to gain colour in her face again. It was as if her kitchen music grew happier. In the winter, the coffee pot had whistled in pain. Now it bubbled cheerfully again. He did not hear her sniffing through the wall as often; it was as if someone had taken a grip and blown life into her. Not very much. Not enough for her to cope with everything. But enough for the screams inside Håkan to quieten, and they quietened enough for Håkan to be able to learn to put the letters together to make sounds, words and sentences into a flowing, proper context.

Then, after they had eaten themselves full on potato dumplings that mother had managed mainly to get rid of some slightly old potatoes in the earth cellar, then Håkan read from the ABC book,

prouder than the cockerel they had got rid of. Then, after Mother put him on her knee, although he was far too big to sit there, after she had rubbed her nose in his hair and given him a kiss on the head, she said:

“My dear heart. My little prince. Perhaps we’ll manage anyhow.”

There was a surge inside him, but not the sort he was used to, happy and nice; he felt a rushing inside and the screams fell silent and he sat with mother a moment and looked forward to tomorrow with her. The feeling lasted until he saw how deep the lines in her face had dug themselves in. The headiness lasted until he saw, and understood, that their happiness was as fragile as night-old ice, the sort that would break if you so much as touched it.

Assar

1948

THE SUMMER WAS starting to draw to a close. August had crept up on them; she had offered warm, caressing days and dark, pleasantly cool evenings. She had also given them some unexpected nights of biting frost and potato tops that had turned soft and dark and impossible to pull up.

It was at haymaking on the riverside that he heard Margareta. He heard her soft, dark laughter, fluttering out of the thick morning fog at the water's edge. On such mornings they got up to work in the grey light and the dew, while the hunger gnawed at their stomachs until it was time to eat waffles with jam after a few hours' labour.

Assar balanced on the tussocks on the ground. Her laughter reached him between encouraging shouts and the sound of whetstones running against the scythe blades. He jumped with joy when he heard it. He tried to catch sight of her, but it was too dark, too dense, he could not make out the shape of her. All that could be seen was grass, the hateful, short-growing, tufty matgrass that they were up at the crack of dawn to cut. He was freezing despite being warm and sweaty. The grass was wet and coarse and prickled as he walked. A black-throated diver mourned somewhere on the other

side of the river. Her laughter, bubbling and tumbling, was the last thing he heard or saw of her in a long time.

The memory of Margareta faded, like a photograph left out in the sun. The strong feeling he had had, that she was the person who would make him something other than what was expected of him, died away. And her fingers that had touched him. He thought it had not really happened, he had just imagined it. He was nothing other than a lad to her, although he was not a lad any longer, although he had become a man.

He had filled out over the summer, he could see it in the mirror. The farm work had made him strong. His shoulders and arms were bigger than father's. Mother had sewn him new linen shirts. He had grown out of the old ones width wise, while his stomach was still flat and smooth. The girls looked at him differently, he noticed. They giggled and preened. There were a couple he lay with more than once; they started to get hopes that he swiftly had to put a stop to. He was careful not to get them pregnant. His father had taught him that, a few years ago, before he was ill. Assar knew to pull out and finish off with his hand.

"I'm never going to marry," he told them.

Sometimes he heard Mother talking about Margareta with her friends.

"That woman! Her's that high-faluting. Thinks she's better'n other folk." There was a contempt to it that Assar could not understand. The only thing he had seen in Margareta was that she was always friendly to everyone she came across. But nor had he ever seen his mother as being small-minded and gossipy. It went against

the grain to see her like that. One thing was clear, though, and that was that Mother would not invite her in, even though there was in fact no more than a few years between them. And the children. No children. It got her back up.

“If her’d a-been a cow, her’d a-been slaughtered,” said Mother, snorting as she set out the coffee. Mother was pleased with herself; she had bartered herself some ration coupons and still she had eked out the coffee with rosebay willowherb roots.

“What d’you expect if you take a barren mare to wed,” she continued, and the women from the parish umm-ed and ah-ed while Assar set down his coffee cup – the thin, fine, English china with roses on – on the kitchen table with a crash. The handle came off in his hand. Mother looked up, surprised and frightened.

“You mean-mouthed lot. Backbiting gossips!” said Assar and did not speak to his mother for two days.

Assar concentrated on the harvest. He took in the hay dried on the hayracks, saw to the calves, which were growing bigger all the time. He saw the trees flaming on the other side of the river and raked in the birch leaves on the ground with his toecaps. Soon they would be wet and stuck together. The dances were over, spinning and blurry bodies and warm laughing lips against his behind the barn. At home they lit the kitchen lamp in the evenings. They sat together in the circle of light to eat porridge and herring. For a while, father seemed to have regained some of his health.

Assar left. Many of them worked in the forest in the winter, fathers and young men. Some of them would keep doing so all the days of their life, for others it was just a parenthesis in their lives,

albeit quite an exciting one. Assar knew nothing of what lay ahead. For him it was a necessity, a life he saw as being his life for a long time to come, the necessity of earning a living.

He shared a hut with a strict cook, who had a bed in the kitchen, and fifteen other lumberjacks from thereabouts. Four teams all in all. Three of them sawed, one drove the horses. Their driver was an older man who always snored but who cared about the horse more than anything else. The cold pierced its way in like an angry spear and woke them in the mornings when he got up to feed the horse. It made Assar pull the cover extra tight around him although he knew he would soon have to get up, put on his felted twill trousers and warm felt boots and rub methylated spirits into his cheeks to stop them freezing.

Asper from Gargnäs was the one in the team he got on with particularly well and the old guys used to joke that the two of them were like brothers, even their names were alike. They slept mostly once they had gone to bed, exhausted by the work, but they talked quite a bit where they lay head to head in two of the rough-hewn top bunks. The hut was small, with an iron stove against the long wall, and he rarely thought about Margareta. Nor did he talk about her, though the others might talk, in low voices, about women, keeping it down so as not to wake the cook. Instinctively, Assar felt it would be to do wrong to her and the little spark they had together that he had, perhaps, imagined, or perhaps not.

Assar and Asper worked side by side in the forest with a saw and axe each, cutting notches to fell trees. It was hard and sweaty work, and they took short breaks for food that tended to mostly consist of some sandwiches and a piece of ham. If they sat too long, they got

cold and their joints went stiff, but they usually exchanged a few words with each other anyway. Assar talked about his father with cancer in his stomach, so big it showed on the outside. Asper liked to talk about the spring and summer, when he usually worked on the log drive, floating the logs downriver.

Sometimes Assar stared into space, and then Asper jogged him with his elbow. He thought about other things while Asper asked questions that he could no longer hear.

“It’s like as if you disappear even though you’re there,” said Asper and Assar promised himself that he would pay attention when Asper was talking to him.

Sometimes it was only Asper that kept him going. They did not talk much when they were standing out in the deep snow – they were paid piece rates. But they had their brief cries from one to the other. Joking, warning shouts that meant you didn’t feel alone.

Together they laughed at the reindeer, thin and scrawny, attracted by the sound of the saws, that gathered around them to eat the lichen on the felled trees. Time after time, they had to trudge through the snow to shoo the reindeer off. Time after time, the hungry reindeer came back. Many of them died when the trees fell on them. If they did not die immediately, they would later from the injuries. Some survived but got stuck in the branches. Asper and Assar helped several of them loose. It was a pity, they said, they were just skin and bone.

Assar could also feel like that, pitiable, thin-skinned, frozen blue, although he was properly dressed and could keep warm from working. It was as if they had membranes of ice on their cheeks and

the tips of their noses from the wind, their noses were stiff with the cold and their eyelashes stuck together.

Asper was just a few years older than Assar, but already had long experience of forest work and log floating. It all joins up like a chain, said Asper. The timber was hauled and laid on thick ice, and then it was taken over by bubbling rapids and floated past calm water. Asper usually worked on the log drive on the Gargån river. He described his nights on watch waiting for the ice to break, the stolen hours of sleep while he lay on the ground under the dense cover of a spruce tree, the sound of the logs hitting each other and the log jams they worked to break up. He talked lovingly of the old men's *håbej!* and the old women who manned communications on the phones.

"Have you never wanted aught else, Asper?" Assar asked once when they were having their minutes of rest for a sausage sandwich. Asper was packing together a portion of wet tobacco, his fingers caked in crumbs.

The harsh smell of tobacco made Assar rub his nose.

"How d'you mean?"

"I mean, d'you think this is all you'll ever do? Working in the forest and log driving?"

"Never thought of aught else." Asper pushed the tobacco under his top lip and brushed his hands off against each other.

"I like the log drive. With the guys. And the money's good. You though?"

Assar took a bite of his sausage sandwich and chewed it thoroughly.

"Dunno. I've always felt I'm meant for other things though."

"Hark at him with the big plans! This too dull for you?"

“Not really. Bits are fun,” said Assar. He smiled at Asper, who laughed back.

“Now you’re being silly!”

“But don’t you ever think there’s more out there? To learn? To do?”

“You’re daft, Assar. I like you. But you’re daft.”

“Still there, are you?” asked Asper sometimes when they were sitting each with their gritty cup of coffee and bit of sausage in the hut after a day’s work when Assar was so tired his head hung and his muscles ached.

“Not any more,” Assar answered and they laughed while the others looked at them questioningly, a young man with rye-blond, longish hair that he shoved backwards over his head, tall and gangly, the other with a serious face and a soft brown fringe that sometimes hung in his eyes.

Håkan

1959

IF YOU ASKED, Håkan couldn't say how it came about that Lars Jonsson moved in with them. One day he was just there, and he stayed.

To begin with, mother said that Lars had started as their farmhand. He slept out in the bakehouse, ate with them and helped with the farm work where he could. Not usually the everyday jobs but the heavy labour that mother couldn't manage, like putting a new shingle roof on the barn down by the river, mending the fence and ploughing up the potato field.

Håkan reacted to him, like everyone else in his world, without a sound. Lars was not provoked by it like the other adults who asked thousands of questions or tried to trick him into talking. Lars did not talk either, he let Håkan sit beside him and just watch. When Håkan was not at school, he followed Lars wherever he went, and helped him in the tasks he took on to keep the farm going.

It all just kind of happened. Lars spent more and more time in the house with him and mother instead of in the bakehouse. He helped out more and more there, not just outside. Mother started to hug him in thanks for the help. First, short and awkward embraces that Lars did not know how to take, but soon he was hugging her back,

and the hugs grew longer and longer. Håkan was silent but when too long time passed, he separated them by reaching out for something behind them.

He had nightmares, woke with the sense of having run fast for a long way, with a big, wet patch under his bottom, in the middle of the bed. It happened lots of times, always the same dream, always Hebbe gliding away and falling apart when Håkan grabbed some part of him. The wet patch was always warm to begin with but became cold and unpleasant after a while.

This time, like many other times, Håkan ran to Mother's bedroom to crawl in beside her. She usually lay in the dent where Hebbe had once lain and Håkan had his place beside her, curled up against her chest. In her room, things were not as usual. When he was about to crawl up into the bed, Lars was lying there in the way. In his place. Håkan stood, dithering a moment, but no-one woke up and he padded back to his own room. There was a louder roaring inside him. He turned the foam mattress over to lie on it dry, turned the damp cover upside down and lay down and thought his heart would break.

No-one said anything in the morning. Håkan sat silently over his breakfast porridge and herring. He sat silently over lunch, afternoon coffee and supper. And finally, when Lars went out to the bakehouse at last, he asked:

“Does Lars live here now?”

Mother carried on putting the supper things away. The plates clattered when she piled them on top of each other. So did the knives and forks. She put the milk and butter away in the fridge, and the bread basket in the pantry and poured heated water into the sink, all

while avoiding looking at Håkan. But finally her hands were still. She turned round and answered:

“Yes, I think he does now.”

It stopped, eventually, when Lars took him with him to mend the roof of the barn with the tar barrels, the barn that Håkan had explored with Hebbe the same summer he died. Lars inspected the damage, stuck the knife into the wood just like Hebbe had done, he hummed and said ah-ha and talked – mostly to himself because he still got no answer from Håkan – uninterruptedly about what he was going to do to repair the barn

Håkan listened, growing sleepier and sleepier. His eyes grew heavier and heavier and he looked at Lars through thin gaps between his eyelids. Lars measured and planned. In the end, Håkan crawled up on the big stone outside the barn. The stone was shadow-cold, but soft, and he rested his head on the rough, dry lichen. The blue sky forced its way in through his eyelids. He had shut out Lars' chatter and he did not notice it had stopped. He slept while the tears ran and the hair at his temples curled with the damp.

Perhaps he understood that Håkan was screaming inside. Perhaps he had seen the screaming in his eyes. Because a few days later Lars took him with him up on Olsberget. They picked juicy, red raspberries below the gorge, the rocky gash in the mountain that could be seen all the way from home. Håkan chewed the sweet berries to bits and the seeds got stuck between his teeth.

Then they climbed up between the walls of rock, not the whole way, but far enough, and above them Lars pointed out where the

birds of prey usually built their nests. He had never been there with Hebbe.

“*Vyöddalejiennuo*,” said Lars calmly and slowly when they sat side by side, pointing at the river. They sat in silence for a moment looking out over the landscape – the glittering water and the hayfields like blurry patches of bright green the other side of the river.

“Now it’s time, Håkan. Scream!”

Håkan looked doubtful, looked from Lars to the gorge, and from the gorge to Lars. Lars nodded encouragingly at him and said it again.

“Scream, Håkan!”

So Håkan screamed. Uncertainly to begin with. Not as angrily as he had screamed at his mother, and not as loudly as he had screamed in his head, but he screamed. And finally he screamed until it thundered and deafened and echoed between the steep walls of rock the long depth of the chasm, he screamed and he screamed until the mountain answered him.

Finally, he had screamed enough. Lars let the sound die away between the walls of rock and he said:

“Come. Now it is time to go down.”

Assar

1949

HIS FATHER DIED in a winter storm, a weekend that Assar spent at home. It was a relief for him, he had not needed to interrupt his time in the forest. And he wanted to be there whatever it took. Perhaps not really to be able to say goodbye. Mostly for mother and father's sake.

That storm – it was as if nature was raging with fury. The snow lashed the windows and the wind rushed in between the cracks in the house. It felt as if it could lift it from its foundations, as if it wanted to seize it by the gables and shake the house away from the hill on which it stood.

Of father, who Assar had left in good humour, looking in better health at the time, not a trace could be seen. He lay on a flat pillow and wheezed. His arms were thin and the veins shone bright blue beneath the thin, paper-like skin. His face had gained liver spots and become scraggy, old and yellowish.

His hair was dull, the few strands that were left were sparse and straggly. Father was no more than fifty-two years old.

Though Assar had been aware of it a long time, though he had had to shoulder a lot of responsibility already, a weight settled in his chest. As if the cancer in his father's stomach had detached itself and

made its home there instead. He felt the seriousness of his promise not to abandon mother and the farm. The buildings and the fields, the work, the responsibility. He was only just eighteen.

Mother sat beside father, hiding her face in her skirt. The fabric was stained dark blue from the tears that had drenched it.

Father died in the night, while the wind raged and the house was packed in snowdrifts. They washed him, dressed him in a clean shirt and soft trousers, and put him to bed in the bedroom upstairs that they had left cold for the winter instead of taking him outside to the outbuilding where corpses were kept in winter awaiting the thaw. It was a kind of care that Assar wished he had shown his father before.

After that, mother breathed in the smell of father's shirt every night before she went to bed and in the morning before she cooked porridge. She left all father's papers to Assar, did not want to go through them although Assar insisted. It was as if she wanted everything to carry on as before, except without father and with Assar in his place. And still she was battered by ill-winds when nothing worked and nothing functioned. As if the solid ground under her feet had turned into a bog.

"What'll us do now, Assar?" Mother sat on the settle, crumpled, listless. Empty bags hung under her eyes, her skin looked a size too big.

"What's the difference? Father hasn't been able to work the farm in a long while."

"What'll us live on?"

"We can live the same way we did when father was alive," said Assar.

“Us won’t manage,” she said and started bawling like a child. The swelling in his chest strangled his vocal chords. He tried to say something but couldn’t.

She repeated it over and over again while he still was at home, that they wouldn’t manage. She kept clinging to him, drove her fingers into his shoulders and wailed. He pushed her away, sometimes hissed at her. Eventually, he tired of it and shouted at her. His father would not have approved.

That was when she went and lay down.

She lay in bed and cried until her eyes were swollen and red round the edges.

Assar tended to the farm and thought she just needed a few days. But the days passed and she grew no better.

She did not even come with him to Sorsele to see the priest and talk about the funeral.

When he came home, he found mother in an untidy, wrinkled heap on the floor, with a broken bottle beside her. The smell of spirits hit him when he picked up the pieces. It was Father’s spirits ration, what was left over, the stuff that Father hadn’t managed to sell. Father himself didn’t drink. Assar thought about it sometimes while Father was still alive. The morality of it. Or the lack of it.

Mother lay in a pool of blood and urine, snoring loudly, and she did not wake although her head lolled backwards and forwards when Assar shook her.

That was when he phoned Margareta. The call went via the telephone exchange in Saxnäsby, and perhaps there would be gossip but he was careful and hoped that Margareta would understand how serious it was.

“Help,” he said. She was silent on the other end. All he heard was the line scraping and buzzing.

“What do you want help with?”

“Mother. She has fallen ill. I don’t know this kind of thing. I need help. Can you come?”

“She doesn’t need a doctor?”

“Not this time.”

“I’m coming,” she said and hung up.

No more than that was needed. After twenty minutes there was a knock at the door. She did not react when she saw his mother, and nor was it as if he needed to explain anything. She pushed him aside, rolled up the sleeves of her dress and gave him brief orders. Heat water. Decent-sized bowl. Soap. Towels. They knelt, bent over mother, and when she moved there came a breath of lavender in the midst of the foul smells. They washed her together. Margareta found the cut on the back of her head and she washed and washed to get all the dried blood out of her hair. Finally she told him to put his mother to bed. His light, little mother. She fitted in his arms.

“Thank you for helping.”

He had offered her coffee and brought out some almond rusks that mother had baked.

“No matter,”

“I mean it. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m happy to help you. I like being near you.”

She said it completely neutrally, as if she had said that it was a nice day, but he was utterly undone. She sat looking down, blowing on the hot coffee. He had not looked at her properly since she arrived. Her skin was creamy white and looked soft. He stretched

out his hand and stroked his index finger along her cheekbone. She caught his hand, pressed it against her cheek, and then brought the palm of his hand in front of her mouth and nose, smelled it, licked it carefully with the tip of her tongue on his wrist as if she wanted to know what he tasted like. Then she let it go, quickly, as if she had burned herself on it. He took his hand back, put it clumsily on his knee, as if he didn't know what to do with it. It was hot.

“I trust you. If this got out, that mother...” he said.

“I won't say anything,” she said and looked him straight in the eye. “And I trust you too.”

Asper took things as they came. He was a confidante, but not completely. Life in the lumberjack hut was an intimate experience. Underwear and shirts, wool-linen weave, were hung to dry over the stove; the crowded space left no room for shyness. They ate together, sweated together, slept together and knew each others' smells. They slept to the sound of each other's muffled prayers and steady snores.

It was Asper he lay and whispered to in the evenings, and it was Asper who convinced him to start working on the log drive when spring came. Assar told his mother he was doing it purely for the day rate he'd be paid. The log driving doesn't last long and the spring farm work won't have got going by then, he smoothed things over when she started to cry.

There was a dark space left after father that he had not expected. Father had been too old, too old-fashioned and too unwilling to change. He had refused to have running water or mains sewage put on to the house for ages. The only one who suffered for this was mother, who had to carry water to and from the well every day, to

the cattle and the men. And then there was the electricity. The strange, magical electricity that the rest of the village had already dragged into their houses. That he wouldn't stand for. Assar had convinced him the year he finished school. Can't you do aught other than say nay, he had asked his father in frustration, and father had laughed at him and said "nay" with deep crow's feet in the corners of his eyes but Assar had got his own way in the end. Stubborn old devil. He ached with missing him.

Assar shaved in the mirror and saw father's nut-brown eyes staring back. But at least he could talk to Asper. And talk they did, from the logging hut to the nights on watch beside the Gargån river, before the ice broke and they worked, cold and dung-grumpy for a few hard weeks, while the Gargån was still spring-high and able to carry the timber.

It was Asper he told of his missing his father and about mother's listlessness. And finally he told him about Margareta.

"I long for her. I haven't wanted anyone else," said Assar after having told everything from start to finish. Assar was sitting on a debarked log that rubbed his rump uncomfortably. There wasn't that much to tell either. One walk. One touch. Asper thought for a moment.

"It were you that went away this time though?" Assar poked the fire with a stick, he stirred the embers and sparks flew up into the air. They shone like red fireflies, or what he thought fireflies would look like, high up in the air above the flames, they glowed in the half-light of dawn.

"Nay," said Asper, "I've not went away."

"Not yet, anyhow," said Assar with a wry smile.

“It’s no’ right. Him and her don’t fit. We do.”

“You’re jealous,” said Asper.

“’s not about being jealous.”

Asper sat with the knife in one hand, carving a piece of wood, as if to keep his hands busy. He was phenomenal at making knife handles. Assar had seen his pride and joy – a beautiful decorated reindeer horn one that he always carried.

“Maybe she’s man mad,” said Asper and the wood shavings landed at his feet, one by one, turning into a light covering on the ground. Assar shook his head firmly.

“Nay. She keeps at home on the farm mostly.”

“D’you think he’s cruel to her?”

Assar thought a moment.

“Maybe. Don’t know. But I don’t think so.”

“Her might just be playing with you, you know.”

It was as if Asper had dug a deep hole in his guts. That was what he was afraid of. That what was special to him was nothing other than her playing games, playing with him like the farm cat did with its prey.

“Yes, maybe. But still.”

Asper looked at him, questioning and sympathetic. “You really want her.”

Assar nodded silently. Asper continued carving his piece of wood. A thin sliver of wood landed on Assar’s shoe.

“I’m no churchgoer,” said Asper. “But I reckon it’s s’posed to be worth summat. Being wed.”

“But love though? Don’t that mean something?”

Asper looked at him, for a long time.

“True enough,” he admitted. “But I don’t know if I think it sounds like love really.”

“Maybe not.”

Asper blew shavings and loose stuff from his carvings. A person was starting to take shape in the wood; it was rough as yet with no details to it.

“D’you think it’s just you her flirts with?”

Assar shrugged his shoulders. She smiled a lot of course, no matter who she was talking to. “I haven’t seen her going with anyone.”

“That’s not answering the question.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know, Asper. I haven’t seen her very much, really.”

“Bloody hell, Assar!” said Asper, and rubbed his forehead so hard it turned angry red. Assar sat there, saying nothing.

“It’s not good,” said Asper finally.

“Maybe not.”

“What if her’s at it with half the village?”

Asper raised his hand when Assar opened his mouth to protest. “I’m not saying her is. But be careful.”

“I always am.”

“Well, people are different,” said Asper with a shrug. And on that topic they were.

It was a beautiful day. Air that smelled of both snow and clarty spring ground, of heart pine and sap. They sat silently waiting for the adventure to begin.

Håkan

1959

AFTERWARDS, HE WOULD think it was thanks to Lars that he was able to make some friends. That and starting a new school. One by one, the village schools were closed down, including the school in Saxnäs before his second year. Instead of walking the long five kilometres early in the morning in all weathers, he had to walk out to the Saxnäs road to be picked up by a bus that went past Kvarnbränna to Blattnicksele. The door of the bus opened with a squeal; a sound that to Håkan was like the opening of a doorway to the kingdom of heaven.

The first time, he sat in an empty double seat at the back and leaned his head against the window. The others, his old classmates, were all talking at once. Their chatter floated like an expectant buzz over the whole bus but Håkan had placed himself on the edges of it and there he stayed until someone sat down next to him with a hard thud and nonchalantly put their feet on the back of the seat in front.

“You’re sitting in my seat,” said the strange boy.

Håkan lifted his head from the cold bus window and looked. A boy. He looked angry. His socks came halfway up his calves, his shorts to just below his knees. One leg was narrower than the other and marked with bruises and scars. His hair was cropped short and

he had freckles on his cheeks and nose. The boy looked as cocky as he behaved but he was as much an outsider as Håkan was, Håkan could tell. He did not answer, instead stared just as unblinkingly back.

The boy seemed to want to move him from the place next to the window with pure strength of will, but then he relaxed and scratched his neck.

“I’m Gunnar. And you’re still sitting in my seat.”

The bus children, as the children from the villages were sometimes called, were a type apart. They were a little odd, although there really was nothing odd about them other than the fact that they travelled to and from school by bus. It was for precisely this reason that Håkan was adopted into the community that had excluded him the year before. It would have gone less smoothly had he not stopped screaming inside, had he not got a little flesh on his cheeks and had he not become good friends with Gunnar even before the first bus journey to Blattnicksele was over.

The bus driver sang religious songs at the top of his voice every morning. His chest notes were impressive. When he drove them home he was meeker, but if there weren’t many of them in the bus, he might give them a sweet each. Day out and day in, Gunnar and Håkan sat next to each other in the bus that shook and juddered and was, as Gunnar put it, draughty as Satan. The first time Håkan heard it, a phrase that was unfamiliar to him and that he had certainly not heard from any other child, he laughed so much that his stomach hurt. Gunnar joined in. “Satan, Satan, Satan!” he said, louder and louder and giggling and sniggering, until the brakes screeched and

they were flung forwards by the driver coming to an abrupt halt. Brick red in the face and with his moustache dancing under his nose he came up to them and threatened Gunnar that if he didn't behave, he would have to walk home. That was the last time Gunnar swore on the school bus.

The first year in Blattnicksele, Håkan found himself sat next to Rune. *Forsliiin*, he said, drawing his surname out when he introduced himself. His curiosity and his inability to control his tongue meant he often got into trouble – the teacher called him *blabbermouth*, which Håkan did not think was kind, although he could see why – and it was as if he wanted to be noticed, to make an impression on his surroundings.

Rune had a television set at home. “My brother bought a Luxor. It doesn't work and still everyone comes to watch it. They sit there staring though it looks like a snowstorm in January,” he said laughing loudly. Håkan never asked if he could come and look at Rune's television set.

Rune could sometimes be cruel, behind people's backs. He pointed out the mistakes and faults of his classmates to anyone who wanted to listen. Still he was uncertain, with eyes that flickered from one to the other to pick up on reactions to what he had just said. Håkan and Gunnar agreed that Rune was funny, and therefore he was welcome to play with them. Above all he made Håkan laugh, and if there was anything he needed, it was laughter.

They played football because there was nothing else to do. That was what they said, although several of them, like Håkan, did their share of work on the farm. Mostly his job was the logs, that he managed

all by himself, but he turned the cream separator too, turned the handle until both his arms were tired and he wanted to give up. Mother said the cows were her job. She looked after the animals, she always got up in the early hours to see to the cowshed. Besides the work, there was nothing, not once you were too old for childish games, as they thought they were now they had completed a year of school.

They met in Blattnicksele, where the Österåsen recreation ground was, and most of their friends. Håkan had to make do with Hebbe's old bicycle that was really too big for him. Many a time he slipped on the pedals and wrecked his heels or bashed his cock on the crossbar and then jumped up and down at the side of the road in agony hoping no-one driving past would see him. Especially not Gunnar, who had had polio and was lame in one leg – “look,” he said, showing his foot that hung and dangled that he seemed to have no control over, “being ill all that long time was tough but this was the worst,” – who got lifts from his father.

Håkan would always associate the smell of warm gravel and yarrow with an ache in his cock.

Blattnicksele was not like home. There were old wooden houses and barns and potato fields here too. But there were also detached houses that were not particularly old at all, made from brick and render, with lawns cut short and smart little flower beds and stone paths. On Rune's lawn Håkan sat running his fingers over rough, stubby blades of grass that pricked his hands, not like the lumpy yard at his house. He liked that it was different. He liked going for a walk in the village, looking in the shop windows at Viola's, drinking in the petrol fumes through his nostrils at the Shell garage next door,

past the mission house and the light green, plastered guesthouse called Panget. The difference mostly did not bother him, but sometimes he felt that he smelled of the farmyard. He knew the hay and the cow shit and the ammonia were embedded in his skin and hair and he sniffed his arms and hands and shivered. It did not smell like that in the red brick houses, he was sure of that.

Blattnicksele IF had a good men's football team. Better than ever. "With the potential to make it to the fourth league, dad says," Rune informed the others, with an air of superiority, and Håkan nodded as if he understood what he was talking about. Vilgot Partapuoli was the best of them and a player they all looked up to. He was fearless. Vilgot was not one of the youngest in the team but he was not one of the oldest either. He had combed his hair in a Brylcreem-stiff rockabilly wave on top of his head that did not even move when he ran his fastest. He looked like Johnny Cash. Håkan thought of that sometimes, and started humming "I walk the line" while he watched Vilgot playing.

In any case, it was Vilgot Partapuoli who made Håkan start training properly. Not Pelé, and not the gymnastics teacher and not the football coach, but Vilgot, one time he saw them playing. Håkan saw him sit down to watch. Vilgot had a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and his shirt sleeves were rolled halfway up his arms. That knowledge alone, that Vilgot Partapuoli, the fearless player of Blattnicksele IF, was watching him, made him up his game. Perhaps it was not much of a match. It was Gunnar he was playing against, with his dodgy leg, and in goal was Rune who was as chubby as a pig and had difficulty moving. But he gave it all he'd got, a real stinker

into the goal. Rune did not have a chance. Nor Gunnar for that matter.

“Hey,” said Vilgot Partapuoli when they came to the side of the pitch for a breather. He took Håkan by the shoulder and squeezed it, took a last puff of his cigarette and blew out the smoke at Håkan who started to cough. “You should play. You’re good.”

“Thank you.” Håkan managed to get out, half suffocated by the cigarette smoke but shining with pride, gleaming like Hebbe’s best copper fishing lure.

“And you too,” said Vilgot turned to the others but still with his hand on Håkan’s shoulder. “You should play too.”

Vilgot threw his cigarette on the ground and put it out with his heel before he walked away. They stood and watched him leave the pitch with that cocky, loose stride that he sometimes dropped into during a match, just as if he could see some admiring little boys standing behind him, watching him open-mouthed.

They were as proud as peacocks, all of them, once he had disappeared down the main road, interrupting each other, voices heatedly and eagerly jostling.

“Did you hear what he said?”

“Yes, but did *you* hear what he said?”

“Yes, but did *you*?”

Håkan thought it didn’t matter what Vilgot had said to the others. Vilgot thought he was good. Him.

Assar

1950

It was almost two years before Margareta and Assar walked the same walk that they had done the first time they met, from Sigurd's to the village. He with her shopping in his hands and her with the same rare glow about her that rendered him speechless. Her face was open. He could see every thought slide by as shifts in her expression. But still it was so closed. At times her eyebrows crept together, like her lips, and her chin became sharper. She was still as beautiful.

"How is your mother?" she asked once they were out of the village.

"Not too bad," he said, "she's still sad, of course. She misses father."

"But it's going better?"

"Yes. She can look after herself now, and the farm."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

"I don't know if I thanked you enough for your help."

"You don't need to thank me any more than you have."

This time, the birds were singing, it was sunny, but the air was cool. The summer was biding its time. There were still patches of snow in places when he looked into the forest.

"Ow!" Assar stopped and put the bag down on the road to take off one of his shoes. Something in it was rubbing. A bit of gravel, he

thought first but nothing came out when he tipped the shoe upside-down. He looked inside and saw nothing. But when he pulled it on again it still hurt.

Margareta had stopped too. She was not distracted or restless, but looking at him with interest.

“I can look,” she said. He passed the shoe over. She shook her head; that was not what she had meant.

“Give me your foot.” He leaned on her shoulder for support and lifted his foot up towards her. She gripped his calf firmly, the skin burned, he was pulled in towards her like moths to the kitchen window and she took off his sock. He wondered suddenly what he smelled like; he could not remember if he had washed his feet that morning, she seemed not to be bothered anyway.

“You’ve got a splinter,” she said. “It’s quite big and it’s gone in under the skin.” She bent down, looked as closely as possible, then gripped it with her nails and pulled. It hurt.

She held him still, manoeuvred his sock over his toes and carefully covered his naked foot with her free hand. He tried to keep still although he was almost shaking with the effort of standing on one leg. Finally, he was able to tie his shoelaces again and they continued walking.

“You’re limping,” she said, looking down at his feet. The leather shoes were broken and dull and his socks were wrinkled at the ankle. The limp was barely noticeable, apart from when he put weight on it.

“Did the splinter hurt that much?”

“No.”

“I can carry the bag if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. It doesn’t hurt.”

“So why are you limping?”

“I slipped, when I was in Gargnäs. We were clearing a log jam. One of my feet slipped down between two logs that were about to crash into each other. At least I kept my foot, it could have been crushed. But I won’t be able to work on the log drive this summer,” he said.

She did not reply for a long time. That face. He saw what she was thinking.

“What will you do then?”

“I shall be a goatherd,” he said with a hollow laugh.

“How do you mean?”

“Up at the summer grazing with the cows. Mother can stay at home and rest. I’ll look after the animals in the summer. I can’t do very much anyway with this foot. Limp about calling the cows in.” His eyes grew dark.

“There’s no shame in that for an occupation,” she said, and then stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Before that, you can come by and drink a cup of coffee, can’t you? Hebbe is out setting booms in the river, soon he’ll be away for the log driving season. You can keep me company instead of him. It’s nice to have someone to talk to. And you should have something to make up for missing out.”

Hopes and doubts rushed through him at one and the same time. But she did at least want to spend time with him.

He took the bicycle when he went. His instep hurt on the pedals but cycling was joyous, the pine roots buckled under the tyres and the

forest towered high above him. He was surrounded by bilberry bushes, birdsong and an early summer of whispered promises. His fringe blew in the breeze, it would be a mess by the time he arrived.

He lay down his bike beside the chopping block, behind the byre. It could not be seen until you were on top of it. He walked the last bit. The house was red, just like theirs, with white corners and a double door with rectangular panels. He caught sight of her through the uneven glass of the window. He was out of breath after cycling, did not hesitate but took the steps in an eager bound and banged on the door. She opened it as quickly.

“Hello!”

“Hello.”

They stood there and looked and grinned, neither speaking nor moving.

Finally, she turned sideways so he could sidle past her into the house. He stopped for a moment as he passed her. He could almost feel her pulse through his shirt. She was wreathed in a cloud of flour; she had been beating batter for waffles. The joy between them! It trilled and fluttered like the chirpiest barn swallow.

She took out a Windsor chair beside the little drop-leaf table, made for two it looked like, that stood in the middle of the kitchen. They had replaced the big one with benches that Anders had had. It had been a decent piece of furniture that, and Assar wondered what had happened to it. Perhaps they had burned it.

“Sit down,” she said, and he sat down. Her kitchen was bathed in light. He had not expected anything else. It would have been surprising if her kitchen had been gloomy like theirs.

The worn table top was patchily warm from the sun and on the thin cotton tablecloth lay crumbs of flatbread next to a glass in which she had placed a small bouquet of yellow globeflowers, blowsily creamy in their humbleness. She had a towel slung over one shoulder and her arms were bare. They looked sunburned. She must have been out in the heat. The same pink skin tone crept up from the bodice of her dress between her breasts, he saw when she turned towards him. It made him blush. Instinctively, he placed his hands over his groin although nothing should be visible under the table. It felt as if she could see exactly what he was thinking.

Next to the old iron stove on which Margareta was cooking the waffles, a kitchen boiler was installed. Central heating! Assar stroked his hand over the radiator, let his hands slide in between its slopes. What an easier life felt like was warmth and bright enamel.

The waffles were served with blueberry jam and whipped cream. She ate hers standing by the stove, warm, and the cream dripping blue-purple down her elbow.

She laughed, showed the gap between her teeth, and wiped it on her apron. He watched her and he could see that she was watching him. She fell silent.

Then she came over to him, held his chin, licked her thumb and wiped away something that had got stuck in the corner of his mouth as if he was a child. And then it was as if she realised what she was doing. Instead of wiping, she stroked her thumb along his bottom lip and let it slip into his mouth. When he met it with the tip of his tongue she took her thumb away and wiped it on her apron without looking at him. Assar cursed himself, silently, in his head.

Her face clouded over when he asked her about Hebbe.

“Must you ask?”

“I think so,” he said. Truthfully. He would still probably not understand her, but he still wanted to know if he should give it all up.

“Hebbe is good enough,” she said. “He needed someone who could help him with the house. He found me,” she said, still out of sorts.

“Why do you have no children?”

“He isn’t like that.”

“What do you mean – like that?”

“I mean what I say. He just isn’t like that.”

“But what is he like then? Isn’t he kind to you?”

“Oh yes. He’s kind. He looks after me. I don’t lack for much. Except some things,” she said.

“What do you lack?”

Between her eyebrows a horizontal wrinkle deepened making her look angry. The silence forced its way in between them.

“Hebbe gives me music. That was why I chose him.”

“Is it worth it? The music.”

“It was. Would you like another waffle?”

“Yes. If you’re still offering.”

“There’s a lot I’d offer you. But I can’t offer you everything.”

She spooned the batter into the hot waffle iron on the stove, it steamed and smoked. A lock of hair had come loose from its hairpin and was stuck to the damp on her red cheeks. She was warm, he was warm.

The next time he met Margareta behind the byre, where he had left his bike before. He came without an invitation and heard clattering

and scraping from inside. She should already have seen to the animals, but he knew that she liked being in there. Her white mountain cows liked her, they were faithful. She described them as being like cats in need of a cuddle. They pressed their warm bodies against her and wanted their polls scratched.

He sat down on the ground with his back against the grey barn wall. It was silvery grey, lighter than the wall that faced the river and was more open to wind and weather. It was rough and sun-warmed, and the flies buzzed in the air around him. He closed his eyes and listened to the lazy flies, the cattle blaring, the chains jangling from inside, Margareta's humming that reached him through an open window. A horsefly landed on his bare leg and nipped at his skin. He squashed it as Margareta opened the barn door and came out. He opened his eyes a little just to let in the sight of her. She did not look surprised, only breathless and sweating from the work. She smiled.

“So, you're here?”

“Uh-huh. I just wanted to tell you I'm moving out to the fells tomorrow.”

“I understand.”

“Will you come and see me?”

She nodded, looked almost shy, let the zinc bucket fall to the ground with a clunk. He stood up and came towards her. She smelled of the byre, a cosy barn smell and she smiled. A couple of beads of sweat shone on her top lip, just like the first time he had seen her.

In an unthought moment he bent forward and took her top lip between both of his, cupped his hands around her cheeks and ran his tongue carefully along the edge of her lip. She was not like the others. They could play hard to get, mostly because that was how it was

supposed to be, for the sake of propriety. Her tongue was soft and wet and responsive, as if in a dance, and her fingers dug into his hips.

Then he let go. And she stood there looking as if he had slapped her, she could not control the muscles of her face and bright red spots shone on her cheeks.

“Forgive me,” he said, hanging his head.

“Assar...”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Assar. You don’t need to apologise.”

He looked up at her. It was then that she tugged at his belt and unbuttoned his trousers. First, he did nothing. He merely stood there and let her pull down his trousers and grip his hardness that edged up through his underpants. He could barely breathe, barely move, as if he had never done this before. But when she tried to lift up her skirt without breaking her gaze or her grip, he woke into life. He felt for her with his fingers. She was wet far down her thighs and he lifted up one of her legs for ease of entry. But it was she who guided him in, with the hold she still had on him. She moaned in his ear and clung to him with one arm round his neck.

It was over quickly. Too quickly. Her eyelashes tickled his neck where she stood, and it ran out of her when he pulled out.

They made love every time they saw one another, and he could never have enough of the light fuzz on her stomach. She took the cow ferry over, it was the quickest way, and she stayed all day.

It made it easier that he was alone at the high grazing. They could lie there together on the narrow settle that creaked and rocked in time with them. But they could also go for walks together, hand in

hand, and stop whenever the urge took them. They were alone in the cabins in the fells once filled with herdswomen and dairymaids and for once Assar was grateful for his backward-looking parents.

It hadn't been very many times. Their encounters were tentative and uncertain. Mainly it was her who was shy in front of him. He had thought it would be the other way around. Once, as if to console her, he said there wasn't any difference between her and the other girls he had been with, although they were younger. But then she put her hands over her ears and did not want to hear. She made him confused. It was her who had. Not him.

Now she was sitting with her back to him, between his legs, head bent forward. He picked pine needles and bits of twig out of her hair and felt his way over her shoulders. Sunlight filtered through the branches above them and landed in bright pools on the ground. There were little goose bumps on her upper arms and she shivered with a gust of wind that made the trees whisper.

"Are you shivering?" he asked, putting his arms around her.

He breathed warmly into her neck.

"Mm," she answered.

"I want to make sure you're never cold again."

"That will be tricky," she said and pinched his big toe. "I'm fairly well frozen if you haven't noticed."

"But I mean it. I want to be the one who keeps you warm."

She laughed, it was a short and empty laugh, a *ha!* that he had never heard before. "I mean it, Margareta," he said seriously while she continued to snort and pinch his big toe.

"I already have someone. He keeps the house I live in warm."

“But I want to keep *you* warm, not just your house. Yes, I want you to live with me. We can move here. Up on the fells.”

“It’s a nice dream, Assar –“

“Except I’m not dreaming.”

“– but it can’t be done.”

“Well, perhaps a cabin in the fells was a stupid idea.”

“Not just the cabin.”

“Me keeping you warm?”

“Mm. But you can warm me up now,” she said shifting her bottom closer to him, he placed his hands over her breasts and pinched her nipples with his fingers.

“Margareta,” he said, taking his hands away, she was still turned away from him, “I mean it. I want to be a good man. I want to make you mine and look after you. I want you to be mine.”

She sighed.

“You know full well – ”

“Don’t’ sigh at me. I know what I want.”

“– that it won’t work.”

“I know nothing.”

“No, you know nothing,” she said, and her back was at once stiff and tense. He tried to caress her soft again.

“You are wonderful,” he said, his mouth against her soft hair.

“So are you,” she whispered, almost inaudibly. It sounded wet and strained. She leaned backwards and they kissed. “I wish we could too, I do, don’t think anything else.”

“I’ll make it more than just a wish.”