



One winter evening when I was six years old, I was walking alone from out by Storflo marsh toward the village. The chill was deep, and the stars seemed high and bright. I was scared of the forest along the road. The snow weighed down the branches of the spruces, and under them it was very dark. I became increasingly frightened when a shadow appeared on the bridge, looming larger and larger as it advanced. The customs house was the only human habitation along the way, and it was unlit. The border guard was long dead. There was nowhere to hide, and the stream was roaring. No matter what, I had to face whoever was approaching, even if it was the water phantom. By the time he was standing in front of me, I was rigid with fear. He said something I couldn't understand, and yet I thought I'd heard it before. Then he reached out and took me by the chin as if to raise my face toward the starlight. I'd forgotten my own language, but now I realized he was asking my name and whose child I was. So I said I was the shopkeeper's foster daughter, called Kristin.

Risten, he said. Risten, *onne maana*. *Onne maana!*

When he said that, our language came to life in me again. His way of talking sounded like singing. He asked if I remembered him, but I couldn't say I did. Even though it was cold and dark, I could tell that made him sad. Then he started singing to me: *nanana . . . onne maana . . .*

na na nananaaa
little baby, little Risten
little cheek

Then I remembered that he had sung to me long ago. I wasn't afraid any more. He told me he was my uncle, the one I'd called Laula Anut. He went on singing, and I remembered those exact words, the very same ones.

*voia voia little baby
There's a wood grouse in the tree
na na nanaaa white-cheeked baby
frost bites hard in all this chill
voia voia little downy
Oh don't let the mountain wind
blow you when the black dog's barking
nana nanaa naaa*

When he'd finished singing, he put his hands to my cheeks and felt how cold they were, so he told me to hurry on home to the shopkeeper's. When I got home, I didn't tell them I'd met Laula Anut on the bridge or that he'd sung to me. I didn't want them to think my uncle had been drunk. Hillevi said that when they were drinking, the Lapps went around chanting their *yoiiks* and even the other Lapps, the ones she called respectable, found it shameful.

I speak four languages now, and for my story I've chosen the one I learned at the Vocational Seminary in Katrineholm. Laula Anut knew three of those four languages.



Hillevi arrived in Östersund by train on March fifth, 1916. Even in those days the streets were paved, and there was electric arc lighting. There were turrets and towers on the building known as the Central Palace, which housed the bank, post office, and bathhouse. On a huge mural painted right on the plaster in Erik Johansson's house a little farther down the street, strange beasts wandered in a forest. The Staverfelt mansion had wrought-iron balconies, ornamented gables, and vaulted arches. The market hall next door had a stately stepped gable; the Mårtensson home on High Street had several. So it wasn't exactly the last outpost of civilization.

On March seventh though, when she reached Lomsjö, she began to wonder.

There were only two people in the taproom at the inn that afternoon. One was an old Lapp, who was sitting on the floor. The other was Hillevi, who was sitting on a bench attached to the wall with her fur hat sliding off and head tipped forward. She was asleep.

Outside, there was silence. The snow sifted down over sledge tracks and horse droppings. The old Lapp was cutting himself a plug of tobacco from a plait. The innkeeper's wife came in and scolded him for sitting on the floor until the old man explained that the seat of his pants was dirty. Their conversation didn't awaken Hillevi. She only woke up with a start when the innkeeper's wife shook her by the arm, calling Miss!

You'd best not be sitting in here.

She rose and followed obediently. At the door of the dining room she stopped and looked back into the taproom as if she'd never seen it before or had forgotten it in her sleep. There was a lantern on the long, bare wooden table. Next to it was a pair of felt mittens, brownish-yellow at the thumb

seam. Sitting on the bench, she'd noticed the smell of stable. The man on the floor was wearing an old blue knitted cap. His boots had upturned toes and were dark with wear, greased hundreds of times.

The dining room was not as warm as the taproom, but a fire gleamed behind mica panes in the iron stove. The table was covered with a heavy white linen cloth. In this room there was a kerosene lamp with a white glass shade that modulated the light. Hanging on the wall over the sideboard were enormous portraits of a man and a woman. The woman was wearing a turban like a negress. But these were country people. His hair was cut short around the ears, and he had a thin fringe of beard under his chin. Pinned to the front of her dress was an enamel brooch. Their expressions were wooden, corpselike.

Hillevi had seen corpses. When the loud Miss! of the innkeeper's wife brought her out of a deep sleep, she had been reminded. As if she were there again. Boots soaked. The edge of her hem hanging in the puddle. Her fear of a different voice, coarse, unrestrained, from the darkness. Miss!

Now she was truly exhausted. Her gaze wandered the walls, with their brown and gold patterned paper. She saw paintings, wall hangings, reindeer antlers, and stuffed birds. There were crystal vases and photographers' portraits on the sideboard with its framed oval mirror. The tray under the salt and pepper set was silver-plated. A stale food smell hung in the air.

She thought: As soon as I'm at my own place, I'll be myself again. I'll stop remembering that harsh voice. This is the last outpost of everything revolting and crude. That old Lapp on the floor. Sitting there cutting tobacco. Singing under his breath in his own language. Yes indeed, he was intoxicated. Outside when I arrived, the skinned body of a reindeer in the lantern light. Blood underneath. He's waiting to be paid, the woman had told her. So he must have flayed that reindeer hanging out there. Well, it had to be a reindeer.

The innkeeper's wife brought her some soup. The tureen steamed as she ladled it out. Big doughy balls floated in the cloudy gray liquid. It tasted odd.

It's moose broth, she told her. 'Twill fortify you, Miss.

Had it been reindeer stock she would have pushed it aside. She remembered the blood dripping from the animal's mouth. There was a yellow patch in

the snow too. And black droppings. Well, that's what happens. Involuntary elimination.

I'm an educated woman, I know all about these things. It helps keep you from gagging. Knowledge helps.

Whatever Aunt Eugénie might say. It does help.

Oh, Miss, you wouldn't be weeping now?

Just tired, she mumbled into her handkerchief. She hadn't been given a napkin.

Sure y'are. Poor little thing. So young. And so thin. Dear me, what'll become of you? Well, Miss, you'll be having some pancakes now, with cloudberries. Some milk with it? Nothing the matter with the milk, you know. It's fresh and strained.

She declined politely without saying it made her queasy.

When will the driver be here?

Who can say? In this weather. Never imagined it would get this bad. Drifts on the lake. I s'pose it'll take Halvorsen a day or two. You'll just have to wait it out, poor thing. I'll be giving you my very best room. We've lit the fire. And there are hides to keep you warm too.

She'd brought out a bowl of something a strange shade of yellow and a pitcher of milk.

Do have some berries, at least. And I've brought the ledger.

The pen nib kept splitting as she wrote her name. Hillevi Klarin.

Put down midwife, the innkeeper's wife said after she'd already written Miss. For us to remember you by.

That made her realize her arrival was a major event.

Poor little thing, said the innkeeper's wife to the Lapp a little later. They were on friendly terms now and were talking about her. She could hear their voices through the door to the taproom. The old man rambled on and on. The outside door slammed and booted feet tramped across the floor three times while Hillevi sat waiting for her room to be readied upstairs. Three times faces peered in to look at her.

That night the wind began to whistle in the pipes of the tile stove. Soon it was a high-pitched whine, and the whole house shook. When the morning light came, she watched the snow sweep down like gray curtains. The storm

howled. Now and then the gusts would die down. There would be a lull for a couple of hours before it picked up again. All day and all night. The cold seeped in through the cracks and drafty windows.

She spent most of the time in bed, wrapped in two heavy gray woolen blankets. She had folded the brightly striped bedspread and set it aside. She was afraid there might be bugs in the wooly side of the sheepskin, but when the chill from the floor crept up toward the bed, she pulled it over herself anyway. That first day she felt frozen to the bone and achy. The tile stove slowly grew cold. She thought it probably hadn't been used for a long time.

Before Hillevi was properly awake, an old woman came up with the wood basket to rekindle the fire. It was a good stove. Gradually it overcame the rawness and the cold. The stove seemed more human than the old serving woman who never responded, no matter what Hillevi said.

Once the room had become more habitable, Hillevi grew bored. The smells of fried herring and salt pork wafted up. In the end she went down to the dining room and had some pancakes after all. Only pancakes. She asked about Halvorsen and the wagon again.

It's likely to be some time, the innkeeper's wife told her.

And it did take time. She opened the suitcases she'd had them carry up. Her chest was still downstairs. She removed all her things and repacked them even more neatly, paying particular attention to the instruments that were wrapped in clean linen towels in her midwife's bag.

In the middle of the night she woke up and started thinking about the instruments. She had a feeling someone had come to get her in spite of the snowstorm. There was a woman in labor who needed help. But it had been her own screams she had heard. She'd been dreaming.

She groped groggily for the lamp. The wick flared and spat reams of black smoke before she managed to get it turned down. Her shadow loomed on the wall, and the wind was howling outside. Aunt Eugénie came to mind:

My dear, are you sure this is a wise decision?

When it was light outside and the silent old woman had been in, first with the wood basket and then with the coffee and finally with the hot water for washing, her aunt came to mind again, but this time Hillevi was amused. She was such an expert at playing the martyr. Actually she must have been relieved.

On her twenty-fifth birthday her uncle and aunt had given Hillevi a diary. It was a thick book with a burgundy velvet cover. There was a subtle fleur-de-lis pattern in the velvet like a damask tablecloth. The diary locked with a tiny key, but her aunt had insisted she was not to think of it as a youthful diary. She might not even want to write in it every day. It was so she could inscribe the main events of her life.

So far, though, she hadn't written anything in it. She had taken it out when repacking. Now she was sitting in bed with it in her lap. On the bedside table there was an inkhorn, a steel nib, and a piece of ragged blotting paper. The innkeeper's wife had warned her they might have to borrow it back if anybody came to register.

She hesitated. Was her arrival at the Lomsjö inn one of the main events of her life?

What settled it was that the nib was so badly used it might leave blotches, so she didn't write anything. Instead, she took the writing set back down and ended up sitting in the warm kitchen. The hands of the taciturn old woman were sticky with something she was rolling into balls.

We're doing some dumplin's. She suddenly spoke. She was dicing pork and lard. The gray balls of barley flour mixed with grated potatoes and water were dropped into a boiling pot. The kitchen filled with steam.

The second day was overcast and the wind had died down. The dark wall of trees on the far side of the fields was mottled. The boughs of the spruces were heavy with snow and hung almost to the ground. She saw a fox that morning. Otherwise nothing. The dogs were silent, though earlier they'd seemed to bark night and day. They were shaggy gray Pomeranians, their eyes peering out from behind the black-and-white masks of their faces.

Are you sure this is a wise decision?

It wasn't really her aunt any more. The insistent voice inside her sounded more like her own.

Long days and nights. She hated idleness as much as she hated indecision. She had applied for the position and made up her mind to go without consulting anyone. Now here she sat not knowing what to do with her hands. Her embroidery was in the trunk, and she didn't want to unpack it.

One of the innkeeper's sons was outside driving a small black horse who

pulled the snowplow. He was plowing in circles, making a ring with a stripe across the middle.

On the third day people began to appear. Some on skis, one or two with sledges. But none of them was Halvorsen. She was in bed by eight in the evening, her mind a haze of worry and boredom that gradually faded into heavy sleep.

A loud shout awakened her. She heard barking and men's voices. At first she thought there must have been an accident or a fight. She couldn't see what was going on since her window looked out over a smooth snowy surface that the innkeeper's wife called the near field. She called the area behind the stable the enclosure.

Hillevi put on her socks and drew her shawl tight as she went out into the hall. The gable window gave her a view of the stable. Looking down, she saw a group of men crowding around the body of an animal lit by lantern light.

It appeared to be a big dog. The men had suspended it by its back legs right where the reindeer carcass had been hanging when she arrived. They were laughing and shouting. She could see the Lapp and a man in a black fur cap who she now knew was the innkeeper. His sons, who had been out plowing snow all day, were there too. And a small agile man seemed to be dancing around the dead animal.

She should have gone into her room and shut the door. But she stayed there watching him slit the body from sternum to genitals. The light fell sharply on the gray fur and on the man's hands. It was probably a carbide lantern, although she couldn't hear it hissing through the nailed-down window. Down below everyone was quiet. A gray bundle of entrails spilled out, and the man put his hands into the cavity and dug out other bits and pieces. Clotted blood stuck to his hands and soaked the cuffs of his sweater. The Lapp brayed into the quiet: a long droning hoooo. That was the moment when she realized the dead animal was a wolf.

The men were shouting and laughing again. All the insides of the wolf were on the ground. The man with the knife knelt down and lifted something up from the stained snow. It was big and glistened in the lantern light, bright blue membranes and dripping blood. He slit it, then extracted a little lump and tossed it to the ground. Another. And another. Five times. Each time, the Lapp howled again.

Then she realized the animal was a she-wolf who had been with young. The man had dropped five unborn cubs to the ground. His knife gleamed in the lantern light.

Stumbling in her thick socks, she went back to her room, locking the door from the inside. She sat on the bed too frightened to lie down under the covers, although she was chilled to the bone. She retched, and her mouth filled up with bitter saliva. She swallowed and swallowed, trying to ease the retching, but suddenly she had to lean down and quickly extract the chamber pot from under the bed as everything came up. Some dripped onto her socks.

How she puked. That was what she called it in her mind. Usually she said throw up. At the hospital they used to say vomit. Her aunt said be sick.

But this was puking. It cascaded out. She couldn't stop retching even after she was sure her stomach was empty. The last part was yellow bile, gall. Tears in her eyes and her face burning, she curled up on the bed and waited for the dry heaves to recede.

Then she made the mistake of using the rest of her water. First she cleaned her socks, wetting her towel and rubbing. But they still smelled of vomit, so she held them over her chamber pot and rinsed them. She applied the last few drops to her swollen face.

There was noise in the house, but she wasn't the least bit interested in what was going on down there. She drew the hide over herself, trying to get warm. Her entire body was still shaking. Her stomach was completely empty, and she eventually grew thirsty. She couldn't believe she had been so foolish as to waste the water on her socks. Not a single drop left in the jug. Although she'd covered it with her towel, the vomit in the chamber pot smelled horrible too. In the end all she could think about was how badly she wanted to drink some water and empty the pot.

She went out into the hall and listened. Boots were tramping down there. An accordion whined, and voices shouted. Peals of laughter rang out. The noise seemed to be coming from the taproom. Just to be on the safe side, she pulled her dress over her nightgown, though she thought she could probably make her way to the front steps and empty the pot in the snow without being seen. But when she got downstairs she could hear someone out there stamping the snow off his boots. She retreated quickly into the dining room so as not to be discovered with the chamber pot.

There was no heat in there now. No lamp was lit, only a soft light coming from outside, the shine of the taproom lamps on the snow. She could discern the table and the tall sideboard. There was something shiny on the tabletop. She felt along the tablecloth but found only a vinegar set. Nothing to drink. She pulled out a chair and sat down by the brown curtains.

Boot heels and toe irons clacked against the taproom floor. Men's voices were singing though she couldn't make out the words. The accordion bleated under fumbling fingers. She was frozen stiff, almost as cold as that first night, an aching chill between her shoulder blades. But the front door kept opening and shutting; men went in and out, possibly to relieve themselves. She would just have to wait.

The image of the unborn wolf cubs came back to her. But it no longer made her retch. She felt cold inside, just as she had that time she stood outside the nursing school, the smell of carbide stinging in her nose.

She figured the innkeeper's wife would eventually materialize and help her, but when the woman finally bustled into the room and grabbed a breadbasket, Hillevi failed to attract her attention. Now the door to the taproom was open. She withdrew into the curtains, would have liked to wind herself up in them and hide if they hadn't been so dusty and hadn't smelled of grease.

She watched two men stamp past, their arms around each other's waists. Two more. A bobbing head. Toothy grins, mouths brown with snuff juice. The accordion wailed. They were basically dancing to the rhythm of their own stamping and the singer's voice. Now a man whirled out onto the floor all alone. He was lighter on his feet than the others. His belt was cinched so tight around his narrow waist that his homespun trousers puffed out like a gathered sack at the back. A curved knife hung from his belt. He tossed his head and his dark curls shook. She considered his hair a little too long to be presentable. When he turned his face toward the dining room door, she recognized those gleaming teeth and could see what kind of knife it was.

Fiddledi da fiddledide . . . fiddledi, fiddledita, fiddletay, fiddledi . . .

Not much of a song. More like a drunken racket. The warmth rolled in with the tobacco smoke, and then the innkeeper's wife came back and pulled the door shut. Hillevi made herself known. She hid the chamber pot in the folds of the curtain, still thinking she'd be able to go out into the snow

and empty it. The inescapable gossip when a young woman was sick to her stomach was the last thing she needed.

She asked for some water to drink and a jug to take back up. And whether Halvorsen had come. He damn well had, said the innkeeper's wife. Whatever she meant by that.

I thought I might find out when we'll be leaving, Hillevi said.

She was given a glass of water and sat waiting on her chair for a carafe to take upstairs. But the next time the door opened it wasn't the innkeeper's wife at all. It was the man with the knife and the untrimmed hair. A beam of light fell on Hillevi. He stared. And yet he must have known she was in there. Otherwise he wouldn't have come in. Still, he just stood there gaping, openmouthed, teeth gleaming and brown with saliva. Then he took a step back and closed the door without turning around. Again the room was dark.

She was frightened of course. But she said nothing. She felt herself tensing up as he crossed the floor. She could no longer see his face. He stopped by the table; a match scratched a rough surface, possibly a shoe sole, since he was leaning down. Awkwardly he lifted off the white lamp globe with one hand. It wobbled and sang out as it struck the brass lamp foot. He raised the globe again as he touched the match flame to the wick. It hadn't been adjusted properly so it flared up and puffed out a cloud of black smoke. He cursed under his breath and turned it down. When he tried to set the globe back in place, he almost dropped it, and in the end he just set it on the table. He took a deep breath.

Fancy meetin' you, he said, staggering slightly.

He reeked of drink. His eyes gleamed, and his face was ruddy under his dark whiskers.

We'll be leavin' on the morrow, he said.

She realized this was Halvorsen. She had to travel through the forest all alone with a drunkard.

Do y' have a lap fur, Miss, for the sledge? She shook her head. The only thing she had that vaguely resembled a fur was her faux fur collar.

That made him laugh. With pleasure, it seemed. She couldn't figure him out. How could he dance around so gracefully in those huge boots? Almost pirouetting. And with perfect balance, not the least sign of inebriation.

He left, shutting the door behind him. She sighed with relief. However,

he hadn't gone back into the taproom but out toward the front steps. She heard the door bang. Lots of noise. Then that wild laugh again. His chortle of pleasure.

She got up and blew out the lamp. Better to sit here in the dark for a while. That way if anyone else came in they probably wouldn't notice her. The minute she could hear Halvorsen carrying on in the taproom again, she would sneak back up to her room. Never mind the chamber pot. Lord knows she wanted to be well behaved, but this was too much.

He came back in. Thumped into the dark room, stood there unsteadily. A soft reflection of light gleamed off his teeth. He had something in his arms.

Here you are m'am. For your lap fur. Someday, he said. Lovely Miss.

And he gave her a wobbly bow, setting it at her feet. Then he headed toward the door of the taproom, stumbling over the bundle he'd just set down. He pulled himself together enough to make it look like a little leap, and shouting Hey ho! he rushed back into the thick haze of tobacco smoke and the harsh fumes from the taproom, and she heard his voice sounding jubilant.

She ran to the door, stumbling over the bundle as he had. It was quite soft. She didn't dare touch it. Her hand trembled slightly as she groped for the box of matches on the sideboard and lit one. She didn't bother to light the lamp; she could see enough by the light of the match. Even the eye sockets, the gray matted fur and damp streaks of blood on back.

In the morning Halvorsen was no longer drunk. He strapped her baggage onto the sledge, to which a little black horse was harnessed. The innkeeper's wife told Hillevi there was no room for her trunk. Someone named Pålssa would bring it when he came from town.

When will that be? Hillevi asked.

That wasn't easy to say because there would soon be the Saint Gregory market in Östersund, and Pålssa might stay for it.

They started off, tucked in side by side. Halvorsen had lent Hillevi his fur coat. The weather was gray, but behind the haze of snow the March day was dawning. She left her trunk behind with the feeling that her whole mission would come to nothing. She imagined having to give up and go home.

She was scarcely twenty-five when she set off for Röbbäck, and secretly betrothed to a man named Edvard Nolin. She never moved back.

The faux fur collar and hat were a farewell present from her aunt when she left Uppsala. Both of them imagined she would need something furry up there. She was wearing the hat, but she'd folded the little collar down into her rucksack when Halvorsen lent her his fur coat for the ride.

Lovely wasn't how she thought of herself. But apparently he did.

Sharp little flurries of snow blew into their faces. They were sitting close to each other, but he no longer paid any attention to her. His hat of bushy fox fur was pulled all the way down to his black eyebrows. He was more interested in his horse than in her. The two of them were going to be sitting there rubbing up against each other for many a mile. The woods were striped with snow; the bristly evergreen forest rose straight up like the frozen coat of an animal.

The snow blew harder and harder, and Halvorsen muttered to "maresy," as he called the horse. She wouldn't have been surprised to hear the horse answer. She felt left out in spite of her legs rubbing against his in the foot sack. But he's wearing homespun trousers and no doubt thick socks and woolen underwear too, she thought. And then there are all my skirts. There's a lot in between.

They were driving straight into the haze of snow, a gray whirlwind. Snow-laden spruces flanked the road; the roadside ditch was marked with felled birches.

She would never come to call him anything but Halvorsen when anyone else was listening. He and his father eventually changed it to Halvarsson, the Swedish spelling. The story was that his father, Morten, had come over the mountains on foot, his sack of goods to peddle in a hand cart. Hillevi couldn't possibly know just how well things had gone for him, the Norwegian who hadn't owned so much as a horse when he arrived, and for his son and his daughters Jonetta and Aagot. She couldn't possibly know anything.

Halvorsen clucked to the horse and pulled at the reins to bring the mare to a halt. He wormed his way out of the sack and walked to the front of the cart, inserting several fingers under one side of the harness. It was too tight; he loosened the girth a notch and tried again. When he was satisfied, he returned and stuffed his legs back down next to Hillevi's. Then he gave

the horse a slap, and she recommenced her slow, systematic gait. He gazed intently at her swaying behind. The tip of his tongue protruded. He had no whiskers today, and a dark scab was starting to form on the cheek facing her. He'd shaved in a hurry.

She didn't like the thoughts she was having. Shaving and underwear and whatnot. They were sitting too close together. That brought up the kind of thoughts she would never otherwise have had.

Her Aunt Eugénie came to mind, and she wondered what she would have made of all this, sitting for hours, mile after mile, right up next to a man. I'm not going to converse with him, she thought. Not much anyway. He's the driver, nothing else. Her aunt would never have allowed her to ride this way. So close. Alone with a man who, just the night before, had been more than a little tipsy.

But her aunt had no idea.

Halvorsen was pleased with the mare now and slapped her gently with the reins so she fell into a trot, after which he turned to Hillevi and broke into a cheerful stream of chatter she couldn't follow. He didn't seem to mind, just kept on talking, and after a bit she was able to pick out some words. She was mighty alone on a very long journey, and the same kind of comments she'd already heard plenty of at the inn, that she was young and that she was slight. What was she supposed to say? That she would be twenty-six on her next birthday? It was none of his business.

Miss, you're sittin' deep in a thiiink, he said softly, and at first she thought thiiink was the name of the little sledge. But a thiiink was her thoughts.

Thoughts of Uppsala: the black river whirling just above the falls, the scent of carbide, and her own shrill voice with Berta Fors lying on the stretcher, her face ashen.

What a strange language Halvorsen spoke. It was full of diphthongs he enunciated clearly, saying the words as if they were spelled that way. His chatter was now circling around the subject of Hillevi's journey, her destiny, and her life. It was embarrassing.

He was probably trying to figure out her degree of cultivation. He seemed to sense that she had both a cultivated side and a coarser one. Her cultivation was on the surface, as Aunt Eugénie said, fearing that some of the coarseness would shine through. In her opinion Hillevi was being drawn down toward

her origins, and she said as much. But only very softly and when she thought no one but her husband, Hillevi's uncle, was listening.

They had brought her up lovingly. But when Hillevi told them she wanted to use her small inheritance from her father to train in midwifery, her aunt pronounced those somber, mysterious words: she's being drawn down.

Shipmaster Claes Hegger had been a heavy drinker, and drink had made him coarse. He only resembled his brother Carl in appearance. Bowed legs, a heavy torso, and a cranelike neck. No one ever told her what Lissen had looked like, but Hillevi must resemble her; where else would her looks have come from? A dainty thing, her aunt called her.

Photographs showed Hillevi's small, straight nose and the chin she tended to tilt upward. Her eyes were neither wide nor deep set. The look in them was matter of fact. But her hair was not at all the mousy color it looked in studio portraits or big group pictures from parties. Many years later, when she cut her hair and stored the plait away in a Freja chocolate box, it was still strawberry blonde.

There was no photograph of Elisabeth Klarin who was known as Lissen and who had done the cleaning and cooking for Claes Hegger, a bachelor. Housekeeper, her aunt had called her euphemistically. But the proper housekeeper had removed all her things from the chest of drawers, packed her bags, and left in a huff when the maid's condition became evident.

Hillevi's mother died in childbirth. Surprisingly, the old, alcoholic former sea captain had refused to give up his daughter. He acknowledged paternity, though of course the girl bore her mother's family name. A new housekeeper was hired. Hillevi had vague memories of her. But she couldn't recall her father in spite of his fondness for her. She's the light of my firmament he had told his brother and sister-in-law, who considered his words irreverent. He, of course, had no idea where the words came from. His life had taken on meaning, and he intended to quit drinking. He really tried, kept himself semisober and became extremely sentimental according to Carl. The whole matter was more than a little grotesque. With his appearance: gorilla and tapir. Not to mention that he was sixty-nine when Hillevi was born. She was three when he died.

They had to spend the night in Kloven. Me mare she needs some rest, said Halvorsen. A farming family put them up: there was one bed in an unheated

room and the kitchen trundle bed to share with the grown-up daughter. Hillevi fell asleep in her chair. Thus the trip ended up taking two days. But for how many days and weeks would she dwell on it in her thoughts? Deep in a thiiink.

Not its beauty. Not the big white lakes, where he carefully guided the horse down the banks so that they'd have a long straight ride on the ice with the bristly forest rising and stretching up to the crests above. When the banks of clouds broke up, she glimpsed the brilliant white mountains. At those moments the sky flashed bright blue.

Not her worries either, the thought that she might have to turn back. But the fact that Halvorsen got her to admit she knew Edvard.

However he had managed to do that.

She'd been strictly forbidden to let on. Edvard had stressed that it would be disastrous for his future if anyone found out they knew each other. He had to be impeccable to have any chance at all of promotion from temporary to permanent minister of the parish.

An impeccable clergyman would not send his secret intended on ahead of him. Nor had Edvard done so. On the contrary, his nostrils had flared when she told him that she had applied for the opening as midwife in Röbbäck.

Halvorsen had caught her out with questions about whether she had any relations up this way, whether she knew anyone at all. In Röbbäck? What about in Lomsjö? Or in Östersund? He kept asking questions. She realized he must think she'd have to be insane to be riding straight out into the unknown. Unfamiliar with the language. And without even the right clothes for traveling by sledge.

That was when she mumbled that she knew Edvard Nolin, the new clergyman who was coming. Instantly, three cocks could have crowed. She tried to gloss it over. It couldn't be retracted. She was acquainted with him, she said. Knew of him.

Halvorsen didn't comment at all. He just looked at her sidelong. For ages.

The second lake they descended to was an even wider expanse. She couldn't see a house anywhere along its shores, nothing but the edge of the forest. Points of land extended sparkling white, shifting in blue, tongues shooting

into the whiteness where there was nothing to fix one's eyes on. When they were down on the ice, Halvorsen stopped again to adjust the mare's harness. But that wasn't his real purpose. He removed a rifle that was strapped down on top of the cart and loaded it. With a scowl he wedged it in across their laps.

She thought about that disgusting animal skin. She hoped he wouldn't remember his drunken gift to her. They rode in silence for over an hour. Then he pointed to one of the fingers of land.

That's where they were, he said. Four in the pack. I shot the bitch. She was with young. There were five cubs in 'er.

Luckily there was no way of his knowing that Hillevi had seen the dead wolf cubs. She was busy trying to reassure herself. He's not from the village. What he knows or doesn't know is of no consequence. The innkeeper's wife had said he came from Fagerli. God only knew where that was. Far away, she hoped. Preferably in Norway.

The restfulness of white. She would become familiar with that. When snowflakes sift down and shake through the leafless boughs of the aspens. When the air thickens, when the white goes gray and coalesces into blue twilight. Then you sit deep in a thiiink. Uppsala thoughts.