

# **The Colours of The Northern lights**



**Karen Anne Buljo**

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A long, long time ago, in a Saami siida, the people were getting ready to go up to Sleepy-mountain<sup>1</sup>. The elements of the heavens had come alive. The stars shone bright, beckoning the children up Sleepy-mountain.

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<sup>1</sup> The equivalent of English “up the wooden hills” i.e “to the land of Nod”.





Joret, Risten and their little brother, Guovssu, had just had their supper.

– Has Guovssu drunk up his milk? asked his mother. Guovssu didn't answer, just held on to his wooden cup.

– It looks like little brother is certainly going to be the first one up Sleepy-mountain, said his father with a smile.

– Little brother isn't going up Sleepy-mountain just yet, said his mother as she lifted Guovssu onto her lap.

– Let's get these outdoor garments off.

Guovssu wouldn't allow anybody to take off his silk scarf as it had so many bright colours and glittered in the sunlight.

His grandmother had said that Guovssu's silk-scarf had the most beautiful green colour she had ever seen. Guovssu's mother took off his scarf. Well, Guovssu didn't like that at all. He wriggled and shouted.

– You can't take off my scarf! I shall be going up Sleepy-mountain, shouted Guovssu and started to cry. I'll get cold up there without my scarf!

So his mother had to give little brother back his scarf.

Father put more wood on the fire. – Your mother and me will have to drive out to the herd in a short while.

Joret and Risten put their wooden cups away in the chest.

– We'll manage, father, while you're gone, said Joret.

– Yes, quite easily, Risten assured her father.

Saami siida's clever children, said their father smiling.



The children were now lying down and Náste, the dog, was lying down beside them. Their father was getting ready to go out.

– Now children, father's going out to hitch up the reindeer, said their father. Your mother'll be back as soon as she's finished.

– Yes, I'll be back soon, their mother reassured them. – Don't forget your lasso! mother reminded him.

Guovssu and Náste had started to snore.

– Well, those two are already up on Sleepy-mountain, said mother with a smile.

Joret and Risten had a giggle at their little brother and Náste's expense.

– I'm looking forward to asking him for news from Sleepy-mountain tomorrow, said Joret.

Mother was getting ready to leave. She had to get out both her woollen scarves as it was very cold outside.

– Mother, can you tell us a story before you go? asked Risten politely.

– Yes, tell us a story about the light. About that dangerous light. Joret was also excited by the suggestion and jumped to his feet.

Their mother looked at the two children. – You know that you're not supposed to tease that light, it's dangerous for children to tease it you know.

– Why is it dangerous? I'm not afraid of it. We just run off as fast as we can.

–The northern lights are always looking for colours for themselves, said mother.

– Colours? Well we certainly haven't got any colours for them.



Their mother explained that when the heavenly elements were dividing colours and light up among themselves, the northern lights had only gone along with it because they believed they were stronger than the light of the summer skies, the midnight sun and the rainbow. It ended up as a competition. The northern lights were showing off so much, flapping and flickering, that they didn't even notice that the rainbow had pinched all the colours for itself.

– Risten and little brother sometimes tease the northern lights, said Joret wide-eyed.

– You must never do that, not under any circumstances, do you hear?

Their mother didn't like what she was hearing. Whatever next! She was afraid the children would be taken by the northern lights, and then she and father would be left on their own, to pitch their lávvu and keep house in the Saami siida, just the two of them.

– Well, at least you'd have Náste, said Risten. – It's Joret who taught us to tease the northern lights.

– Hush now children, it's time you two were also on your way up Sleepy-mountain. It's a moonlit night outside, so it should be easy to find your way.

Joret and Risten promised to lie down and be quiet. Risten though still couldn't resist giggling as she recited a short rhyme.



*Northern lights, Northern lights,  
A piece of fat in your mouth,  
A hammer in your forehead,  
A scraping-board<sup>2</sup> in your backside,  
Flapping and flickering,  
Lip lii lip lii lip lii*

– Risten! Now you'll see what you've done, said her mother.  
In no time at all, the light started flashing and flickering and  
swept around the lávvu.

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<sup>2</sup> A wooden board or plank used in the preparation of skins.





– Does Náste have to go with you and father, asked Risten from beneath her reindeerskin covers. She was frightened. Father popped his head in at the entrance to the lávvu, letting in billows of frost mist.

– Who’s been teasing the lights? It’s dangerous for children. They can catch you very easily and take the colours from you.

– We won’t do it again father.

– Does Náste have to go with you and mother?

– Yes, Náste has to come as well to help us.

Náste, hearing his own name, leapt to his feet and slipped out under father’s arm.

– Right then mother, come on! The reindeer’s are hitched up and ready to go.

Their mother gave a few final instructions from the doorway. – You’ve got an amulet, haven’t you children? Don’t let anybody in and don’t go out whatever you do while your father and I are away with the herd.

– A-a, no we won’t mother.

– We’ve all got an amulet, said Risten, showing her mother the silver button that hung round her neck.

– What about you Joret?

– Yes, here it is.

– Good, you must show that if the kind of visitors you don’t know somehow get in.

Risten and Joret responded with one voice:

– Underworldlings, giants, ghosts of children!