

The Stone Bird

R I S T E N S O K K I

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Short Stories

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The Wolf Skin

I sit in the in the cabin in the evening, before it gets dark. I always sit with a cup of coffee here by the cabin window around this time. Here I have counted the days in the autumn, the dark winter and in the spring when the brightness lights up the world. When I look north, I can see the vastness of the sea. I feel the wind blowing and the waves have begun to splash. When I look west I can see our church shining white. The wind has blown snowbanks and decorated the churchyard. In some places the black uncovered ground was showing.

My daughter visited me this weekend. She lives with her group inland. She always begs me to come visit her.

–Mother, why can't you live with us during the winters. You are so alone here, if something should happen. Of course you

could live here during the summers, when there also are more people around.

That's what my daughter used to say and I always answered:

–I can manage here just fine. I can't even stand to live in a village.

And that was the truth. I look out and my thoughts follow the wind and the snowflakes' movements.

– When the Russian forests are getting filled with snow, the wolf begins to wander northwest, to the mountains. If you put your ear to the earths' chest, you can hear how it pounds the ground when it runs, if it has started its journey. Then you can here the wolf signalling from far away in a few days. It howls in complaint, tells early on, its coming now. If it's a lone wolf, it howls with hate and that sound sticks to your body. It's a sound, that follows you for the rest of your life. It can disappear and you can live with the notion that the sound has disappeared completely. But sometimes the sound comes alive again, because the lone wolf never stops tormenting. That's how my grandmother used to talk.

We stood in the doorway and watched when our grandfather skinned a wolf. There were wolf skins hanging on the storehouse wall. I had heard a wolf howl and it seemed true what my grandmother said, that the sound seemed to get stuck on your body.

I went to boarding school in the village. The school was on the edge of a hill and we used to ride sleds down the hill. Now we were all standing outside and looking at the sky. We could here a sound from an engine far away coming closer and closer. Like a big bird that was about to land the plane came closer to us.

The skis on the plane were spread like a birds legs, that were ready to meet the ground when the bird landed. The swirling snow made the plane disappear for a second, the sound from the engine was drowning and the goading from the village dogs faded away. This was no ordinary village event, and this time we schoolchildren got to see the whole thing close by.

Apart from the pilot there were two other Norwegians. They were gunmen. The Norwegians wore big sheepskin coats. Early in the morning the plane had lifted and flown towards the mountains. They were wolf hunters. Now they were going to clean up our mountains, the predator was going to be eradicated. You could fly low with the plane and shoot the wolves through the window when you got close by. Sometimes they had to land and follow the wolves with skis, if some wolf got wounded. The Norwegians waved at us.

I was very bold and stood at the front. I was not afraid of wolves, nor Norwegians. Ingå stood behind the bold ones, she used to be very shy, everyone knew that. The biggest Norwegian stepped out of the plane. He turned his back against us and pulled something out of the plane. It was a huge wolf. Then he tried to push the body towards us. The wolf was heavy and stomped to the ground, and it was quite scary to us. We scattered in all directions, screaming. Ingå disappeared behind a corner, and was seen peeking from there. The Norwegians laughed and said: dead, dead. The biggest Norwegian even showed with his fingers how he shot it in the head.

Now other villagers had gathered and even my grandfather had arrived. The men dragged the wolf to grandfathers sled. He was going to skin the wolf. The skins were apparently expensive, but the body was thrown in the bin. When he drove away, the snow was coloured with small red blood drops.

We were fascinated by wolves for some time. Ántte-Niillas, who was the oldest boy in boarding school, could tell scary wolf stories all evening. He had eavesdropped when the kitchen maids talked about lone wolves. This wolf, who wandered alone and came close to the huts, had attacked dogs and killed some. That had happened recently in a camp in the east.

Ingá was scared and sat in complete silence. We used to scare her a bit. Ingá was an orphan, because her parents had died when she was a baby. She had been raised by her grandparents. Now Ingá was in my care. I was supposed to help her with the shoe hay in the morning. For that I got a crown from Ingás grandmother and there was already a crown tied to a lace at my chest.

The wolves had us all wild and one day I stole a wolf skin from my grandfather which I brought to boarding school. I showed it to Ántte-Niillas and he took it.

I had forgot about the wolf skin when I heard a scream from Ingás bed in the morning. She had woken up beside a wolf skin and started to cry. Ántte-Niillas had sneaked it beside her. I tried to comfort Ingá, but she didn't want to speak to me. She blamed me, because she had her clues where the skin came from. Ingá didn't get up that morning and the maids said she was getting ill. Ingá had told about the wolf skin and the same day I sneaked it back to grandfathers storehouse.

The next morning Ingá was gone. Her bed was left empty. I ran to the kitchen and asked the maids where Ingá was. They had no idea and started to search in the boarding school. We put our clothes on in a hurry that morning and went outside to shout. We didn't see nor hear anything.

A while later Bier-Ánte came driving. He could tell us that they had found a little girl floating in the rift, her right hand stuck in the ice edge. She had tried to cross the creek there. We guessed right away what had happened.

I don't remember much of those days. Something has cut off my memory. I do remember though that no one asked why Injá had fallen ill right that day, no one ever talked about it and no one asked me when was the last time I had seen Injá.

I don't visit the village that often since I left it after I finished school. I started to work as a maid and that is how I met my husband and moved to the coast.

When the Russian forests are filled with snow, the wolf starts to wander northwest, to the mountains. If you put your ear to the ground, you can hear if it has begun its journey. It pounds the ground when it runs.

I listen in the evening, when the autumn winds come and it starts to snow. I listen and I hear, when my heart beats, like a wolf pounds the earth's chest.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It had been a good fishing season that winter. My husband had caught many fish and sold them. We had paid our debts and it felt like a relief for both of us. Our only daughter was studying and lived inland during winter. When there was banging on the door that evening, I started to feel a familiar sound in my body, that I hadn't heard in a long time. They had caught a lot of fish and the boat was filled.

It howls in complaint. If it is a lone wolf, it howls with hate and that sound gets to your body. It's a sound, that follows you

for the rest of your life. It can disappear and you can live with the notion that the sound has disappeared completely.

The north wind slams and the snowstorm covers the churchyard while I drink my coffee. A real storm seems to be coming.