



translated from the Swedish by Steven Hartman, preface by Alice McDermott

Stig DAGERMAN

Sleet

SLEET

SELECTED STORIES

*Translated from the Swedish
by Steven Hartman*



A Verba Mundi Book

David R. Godine · Publisher · Boston

This is a Verba Mundi Book
published in 2013 by
DAVID R. GODINE, *Publisher*
Post Office Box 450
Jaffrey, New Hampshire 03452
www.godine.com

Originally published in Swedish in 1947 in *Noveller I Urval* by Norstedts, Sweden. Published in English translation by agreement with Norstedts Agency.

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This publication was made possible with a translation subsidy from The Swedish Arts Council.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Dagerman, Stig, 1923–1954.
[Short stories. Selections]
Sleet : selected stories / Stig Dagerman ; translated from the Swedish by Steven Hartman. — First edition.
pages cm. — (Verba Mundi ; 23)
“These stories originally appeared in Swedish in 1947 in *Noveller I Urval* by Norstedts, Sweden.”
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-56792-446-6
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-56792-513-5
I. Hartman, Steven P., 1965– II. Title.
PT9875.D12S54 2013
839.73'74—DC23
2012043446

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Acknowledgments

Preface

I was introduced to the work of Stig Dagerman by his daughter, Lo, nearly twenty-five years ago. At the time we were both mothers of preschool sons, and in the way of mothers overseeing playdates, we had begun to exchange brief biographies as we sat together on Lo's back deck while our boys played their imaginary games in her yard. I learned that Lo's father had been a Swedish writer of much renown, a novelist, a short story writer, a poet, and a playwright. He was also a journalist. In 1946, he had been sent on assignment to postwar Germany to record the devastation there, one of the first independent journalists to do so. His second wife, Lo's mother, Anita Björk, was an actress. He committed suicide in 1954, at thirty-one, when Lo was younger than our sons were when we met.

Of course, I asked if her father's work was available in English. Lo had a British edition of *German Autumn*, her father's collected articles about the German people after the fall of the Third Reich; a book of short stories called *The Games of Night*; and a novel, *A Burnt Child*. She hoped, eventually, she said, to find some time (as working mothers of preschool children, we were well familiar with that *how to find the time* refrain) to seek out an American translator for her father's work.

Our four-year-olds were running and calling in the yard. A suburban autumn, as I recall. It so happened, I told her, that among my graduate students that semester there was a very bright and talented young fiction writer named Steven Hartman, who was also fluent in Swedish.

It's inevitable, perhaps, that while reading Steven Hartman's translations of Stig Dagerman's stories collected here in *Sleet*, I find myself recalling something of the substance of those days when Lo and I were young mothers standing watchful on the periphery of our small sons' games. Young boys, after all, imaginative young boys, appear often enough in these stories: large-eyed, as one thinks of them, tentative, observant, loving, lonely. And I suppose it could be argued that the various autobiographical settings of the stories, from the small farms and villages – Dagerman himself spent his first six years living on his grandparents' farm in Älvkarleby – to the working class flats of Stockholm – where he later lived with his father and stepmother – have a kind of parallel in the urban/rural convergence that is a secluded backyard in a busy American suburb. But personal experience and its attendant associations seem insufficient to explain the depth of feeling that these stories achieve. For me, there is something at work here that calls to mind much more than the circumstances of my own introduction to Stig Dagerman's writing. It is, I think, a tremendous generosity of heart, an overwhelming empathy expressed in tandem with a keen awareness of the inevitable suffering, the loneliness and pain, the pettiness and cruelty, that make up the human experience. There is compassion to Stig Dagerman's clear-eyed vision of the world that causes me to recall as I read these stories not merely the circumstances that brought me to his work, but the less tangible experience of being a young mother watching over a young child's play: that heady mix of caution, joy, pride, fear, helplessness, and love.

I confess that this was not what I expected to find from this tragic Swedish writer when I opened *German Autumn*, the first of his works that I borrowed from his daughter. I expected darkness. Anger. The void. Hopelessness. But what I found instead was an account of human suffering unbiased by politics or nationalism, hatred or revenge. An account of human suffering given with both a novelist's

eye (“A big bare room with a cement floor and a window that has been almost entirely bricked up. A solitary bulb hangs from the ceiling and shines unmercifully on three air-raid-shelter beds, a stove reeking with sour wood, a small woman with a chalk-white face stirring a pot on the stove, a small boy lying on the bed and staring up apathetically at the light,”) and a moral vision that managed to maintain, “respect for the individual even when the individual has forfeited our sympathy and our compassion ... the capacity to react in the face of suffering whether that suffering may be deserved or undeserved.” Dagerman writes:

People hear voices saying that things were better before [Hitler’s defeat], but they isolate these voices from the circumstances in which their owners find themselves and they listen to them in the same way as we listen to voices on the radio. They call this objectivity because they lack the imagination to visualize these circumstances and indeed, on the grounds of moral decency, they would reject such an imagination because it would appeal to an unreasonable degree of sympathy. People analyze: in fact it is a kind of blackmail to analyze the political leanings of the hungry without at the same time analyzing hunger.

An imagination that appeals to an unreasonable degree of sympathy is precisely what makes Dagerman’s fiction so evocative. Evocative not, as one might expect, of despair, or bleakness, or existential angst, but of compassion, fellow-feeling, even love. The brief story “To Kill a Child,” as unsparing as it is – “Because life is constructed in such a merciless fashion, even one minute before a cheerful man kills a child he can still feel entirely at ease” – ends up being a lament, not a shrug; a lament for all of us at the mercy of merciless time, unwitting victims of life’s circumstances. Dagerman rivals Joyce in his ability to depict the intractable loneliness of childhood, but time and again, in stories like “The Surprise,” “The Games of Night,” and the marvelous “Sleet,” he tempers this loneliness with brief gestures of hope, connectedness: the poem on the phonograph record, the bright coins from his father’s drinking companions, the warm hand of the aunt from America. There are tears in these stories, for sure, cruelties, eruptions of violence, but none of this is offered without pity and even in his stories in which irony reigns – “Men of Character,” “Bon Soir” – Dagerman never turns a cold eye on his creations.

Greta in “Bon Soir,” a ship’s dishwasher with teeth that “look like they’re covered in cement and sweating cement,” has propositioned Sune, the story’s fifteen-year-old protagonist. He is repulsed by her but also charmed by the thought of a woman waiting for him in one of the ship’s cabins. And then while the boat is docked, he sees her being led away by two detectives; he later learns she has been spreading venereal disease in the port.

As he approaches the gangplank Sune notices something peculiar and disquieting. Paul and the drunken first mate and several others are just standing around on the foredeck, idly waiting for something. And now the door swings open and out steps the small, slender man in the trench coat. He turns and holds the door for Greta, as the large, heavy-set man with the cigar clenched between his teeth walks directly behind her with a small, shabby suitcase in his right hand. In single file they walk up the foredeck gangplank and suddenly Greta spots him there. She looks up at him hastily, and later he will think back on that look many times – something impossible to forget.

“Bon soir,” she says and almost drops her handbag. “Bon soir.” And that’s when he notices she is crying.

Life may be merciless, but the creator of this scene – who notes Greta’s shabby suitcase, her hunched look, her pitiful “Bon soir,” her fumbled handbag, her tears – is not.

The long last story collected here, “Where’s My Icelandic Sweater?” is both a comic masterpiece and a heartbreaking depiction of degradation and loneliness. Knut is a bore, a drunk, a braggart, and yet even as the reader is absorbed into his careening and very funny interior monologue of self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-delusion, we are given the opportunity to recognize, too, the very human longing at the heart of his nature. Like the cheerful man in “To Kill A Child,” what Knut wants is a simple impossibility: to gain back a single minute of his life.

Here on the old man's couch, stripped pretty much naked, blubbering ... And this is where we sat, me and him, the last time we ever saw each other ... this is right where the old man put his arm around me and gave me a big squeeze. And then he got up and went over to that dresser there and rummaged around in the drawer for something. After a while he got his hands on what he was after and he laid it out right here on the table. A little sweater.

"Member this, Knut?" he said to me. "Member this Icelandic sweater? I picked it up for you one Christmas in the city. And you, well, I ain't never seen a kid so goddamned pleased with anything in my life ..."

I could do with that Icelandic sweater right about now. The old man, he had it in his hands the last time I was here. I sure could do with it, alright, to hold under the blanket whiles I think about the old man.

There is much tenderness in this moment, as there is in every Stig Dagerman story, a tenderness that does not seek to distract the reader from what is terrible about human experience, but manages instead to confirm it. Were it not for such tenderness, after all, cruelty would be of no matter. Were it not for those fleeting moments of connection, loneliness would not sting. Without an imagination that appeals to an unreasonable degree of sympathy, human suffering – the suffering of the likes of Knut and Greta, or of the people of Germany after the Second World War – would be met with no more than the skimpy indifference we afford the inevitable, or dismissed as no less than what such characters deserve.

Stig Dagerman possessed just such an imagination. No doubt it caused him much pain. But as the stories collected here prove, there is redemption in such an unreasonable degree of sympathy: by its grace, by the grace of the artist who wields it, tenderness survives, fellow-feeling, the mercy that the merciless life itself does not provide, but that we might still offer to one another, in joy and fear and helplessness and love.

ALICE MCDERMOTT

While covering postwar Germany as a foreign correspondent for the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* in the fall of 1946, Stig Dagerman was advised by a fellow correspondent in the Allied Press Corps “with the best of intentions and for the sake of objectivity to read German newspapers instead of looking at German dwellings or sniffing in German cooking-pots.” The implicit criticism stemmed from Dagerman’s ambition to chronicle the supposedly “indescribable” realities of life for ordinary Germans in a land left in ruins at a time when world sympathies for the German people were at an all-time low and the need to judge and punish the guilty was at an all-time high, when the Press Corps and all the world were focused on the drama and expiation of the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

Dagerman sought instead to chronicle as nakedly as possible the suffering of all the remaining victims of the war and its ravages with an eye unaffected by the collective need to assign guilt for the atrocities of a horrendous Nazi Regime. What followed were a series of articles, later collected in the book *German Autumn*, that examined the very nature of human suffering and the moral complexities of justice.

As he came to understand just how much his own motivations were at odds with those of the international press corps, Dagerman wrote in frustration to fellow Swedish writer Karl Werners Aspenström in the midst of his assignment in Germany:

A journalist I have not yet become, and it doesn't look as if I'll ever be one. I have no wish to acquire all the deplorable attributes that go to make up a perfect journalist. I find it hard to meet the people I meet at the Allied Press hotel – they think that a small hunger-strike is more interesting than the hunger of multitudes. While hunger-riots are sensational, hunger itself is not sensational, and what poverty-stricken and bitter people here think becomes interesting only when poverty and bitterness break out in a catastrophe. Journalism is the art of coming too late as early as possible. I'll never master that.

If journalism was the art of coming too late as early as possible, then in short fiction Dagerman sought its antithesis, *the art of coming in time*. In his focus on fragile human subjects, particularly young people swept up in or swept aside by circumstances and forces much greater than themselves, Dagerman sought to trigger links of identification and empathy that could give his readers a deeper understanding of the tragedies of human suffering before they became *faits accomplis*.

His classic short story “To Kill a Child” is a fine example. For a meager fee of seventy-five kronor, Dagerman was commissioned by the National Society for Road Safety to write a cautionary tale as part of a campaign designed to get Swedish motorists to slow down on highways when speeding was becoming an increasingly difficult social issue with serious consequences for public safety.

What could have been an ephemeral and gimmicky work of public service fiction became perhaps the greatest short short story in the history of Swedish letters, for in this tale Dagerman took the simple redressing of a particular social problem as the starting point rather than as an end in itself and out of these mundane materials created a poignant tale of choice, chance, and human loss that rises to the highest levels of art, literary balance, and philosophical concision.

What makes this particular story gripping, like so many of Dagerman’s tales, is his earnest investment in short fiction as a vehicle of moral agency and insight, with a capacity to generate human empathy, identification, and understanding – a commitment, in short, to the art of coming in time.

STEVEN HARTMAN
Stockholm, Sweden
September 4, 2011

To Kill a Child

It's a peaceful day as sunlight settles onto the fields of the plain. Soon bells will be ringing, because today is Sunday. Between fields of rye, two children have just come upon a footpath that they have never taken before, and in the three villages along the plain, window panes glisten in the sun. Mothers shave before mirrors propped on kitchen tables, women hum as they slice up cinnamon bread for the morning meal, and children sit on kitchen floors, buttoning the fronts of their shirts. This is the pleasant morning of an evil day, because on this day a child will be killed in the third village by a cheerful man. Yet the child still sits on the kitchen floor, buttoning his shirt. And the man who is still shaving talks of the day ahead, of their rowing trip down the creek. And still humming, the woman places the freshly cut bread on a blue plate.

No shadows pass over the kitchen, and yet even now the man who will kill the child stands near a red gas pump in the first village. He's a cheerful man, looking through the viewfinder of his camera, framing a shot of a small blue car and a young woman who stands beside it, laughing. As the woman laughs and the man snaps the charming picture, the attendant screws their gas cap on tightly. He tells them it looks like a good day for a drive. The woman gets into the car, and the man who will kill the child pulls out his wallet. He tells the attendant they're driving to the sea. He says when they reach the sea they'll rent a boat and row far, far out. Through her open window, the woman in the front seat hears his words. She settles back and closes her eyes. And with her eyes closed she sees the sea and the man sitting beside her in a boat. He's not an evil man. He's carefree and cheerful. Before he climbs into the car, he stands for a moment in front of the grille, which gleams in the sun, and he enjoys the mixed aroma of gasoline and lilacs. No shadows fall over the car, and its shiny bumper has no dents, nor is it red with blood.

But as the man in the first village climbs into his car and slams the door shut, just as he is reaching down to pull out the choke, the woman in the third village opens her kitchen cupboard and finds that she has no sugar. The child, who has finished buttoning his shirt and has tied his shoes, kneels on the couch and sees the stream winding between the alders, pictures the black rowboat pulled up into the tall grass of the bank. The man who will lose his child has finished shaving and is just now closing his portable mirror. Coffee cups, cinnamon bread, cream, and flies each have a place on the table. Only the sugar is missing. And so the mother tells her child to run over to the Larssons' to borrow a little. As the child opens the door, the man calls after him, urging him to hurry, because the boat lies waiting for them on the bank of the creek, and today they will row much, much further than they ever have before. Running through the yard, the child can think of nothing else but the stream and the boat and the fish that jump from the water. And no one whispers to the child that he has only eight minutes to live and that the boat will lie where it is today and for many days to come.

It isn't far to the Larssons'. It's only across the road. And just as the child is crossing that road, the small blue car is speeding through the second village. It's a tiny village, with humble red houses and newly awakened people who sit in their kitchens with raised coffee cups. They look out over the hedges and see the car rush past, a large cloud of dust rising behind it. The car moves fast, and from behind the steering wheel the man catches glimpses of apple trees and newly tarred telephone poles slipping past like gray shadows. Summer breathes through their open windows, and as they rush out of the second village their car hugs the road, riding safely, surely, in the middle. They are alone on the road – so far. It's a peaceful thing, to drive completely alone on a broad road. And as they move on

onto the open plain, that feeling of peace settles deeper. The man is strong and contented, and with his right elbow he can feel the woman's body. He's not a bad man. He's in a hurry to get to the sea. He wouldn't hurt even the simplest creature, and yet, still, he will soon kill a child. As they rush on towards the third village, the woman again shuts her eyes, pretending those eyes will not open again until they can look on the sea. In time with the car's gentle swaying, she dreams about the calm, lapping tide, the peaceful, mirrored surface of the water.

Because life is constructed in such a merciless fashion, even one minute before a cheerful man kills a child he can still feel entirely at ease, and only one minute before a woman screams out in horror she can close her eyes and dream of the sea, and during the last minute of that child's life his parents can sit in a kitchen waiting for sugar, talking casually about the child's white teeth and the rowing trip they have planned, and that child himself can close a gate and begin to cross a road, holding in his right hand a few cubes of sugar wrapped up in white paper, and for the whole of that minute he can see nothing but a clear stream with big fish and a wide-bottomed boat with silent oars.

Afterward everything is too late. Afterward there is a blue car stopped sideways in the road, and a screaming woman takes her hand from her mouth, and it's red with blood. Afterward a man opens the car door and tries to stand on his legs, even though he has a pit of horror within him. Afterward a few sugar cubes are strewn meaninglessly about in the blood and gravel, and a child lies motionless on its stomach, its face pressed heavily against the road. Afterward two pale people, who have not yet had their coffee, come running through a gate to see a sight in the road they will never forget. Because it is not true that time heals all wounds. Time does not heal the wounds of a dead child, and it heals very poorly the pain of a mother who forgot to buy sugar and who sent her child across the road to borrow some. And it heals just as poorly the anguish of a once cheerful man who has killed a child.

Because the man who has killed a child does not go to the sea. The man who has killed a child drives home slowly, in silence. And beside him sits a mute woman with a bandaged hand. And as they drive back through the villages, they do not see even one friendly face – all shadows, everywhere, and very dark. And when they part, it is in the deepest silence. And the man who has killed a child knows that this silence is his enemy, and that he will need years of his life to conquer it by crying out that it wasn't his fault. But he also knows that this is a lie. And in the fitful dreams of his nights he will try instead to gain back just a single minute of his life, to somehow make that single minute different.

But life is so merciless to the man who has killed a child that everything afterward is too late.

In Grandmother's House

It was quiet in Grandmother's house. The little boy slipped from room to room. He was searching for the quiet. It had to be somewhere. Perhaps it sat rocking in a chair somewhere, reading from a book. The boy pushed open door after door, and he listened. They were heavy doors. Their thresholds were high and shod with gold. The boy himself was small and very anxious. His heart ticked in his breast like a clock going much too fast. Now he found himself standing on the very last threshold where he had to shut his eyes. For who could say what quietness looked like? He turned his eyes towards the room to see if this was where it lived.

And then he heard so much. He heard a big boat rolling over the sea as a storm howled and raged. And he heard a little girl who could not be seen, because she was buried under flowers. And she was crying because she was dead. He could even hear grandfather's boots wandering back and forth over the wide creaking floorboards. But the quiet itself he did not hear. So he opened his eyes and entered the last room.

The room was small. Just a tiny bedroom really. But in the middle, on the bright floor, was a bright square patch of sunlight. The boy stepped into the square and stood there for a long time, listening. It was so quiet in Grandmother's house. Nothing stirred but his own restless heart. The boat in the picture was still again and the dead girl on the bureau had finished crying. On the stool in the corner between the tiled stove and the high window, stood Grandfather's black boots. And they remained silent. Grandfather himself was on the sun now. And when the sun shined, Grandfather was glad and looked down on him with happy eyes. But whenever the clouds came Grandfather was sorrowful, and he would shut himself up in his house. "When it rains," thought the boy, "it must be hard to be dead."

It was now late in the afternoon, and the sun-square was shrinking and shrinking. But the boy did not notice this. Instead, he closed his eyes again, whereupon an odd thing happened. The brightness grew stronger and stronger, until he himself was filled with light. Suddenly he heard a voice whisper "Now you should do it. Now. Now!" A clock struck. Backwards he crept out of the small radiant strip. When he opened his eyes he was standing there with one of Grandfather's heavy boots in his arms. He put it down carefully on the floor. And the whole world remained silent.

For a thousand years the boots had stood together side by side. They were as old as the earth and the sun and a path in the forest. But now, when they were suddenly separated, an inaudible sound arose, a lament, which seemed to shake the whole room. Trembling in every limb, the boy stepped up onto the stool and quickly fulfilled his longest-held dream. With both legs he stepped down into the boot, sinking and sinking into the leg, until he finally touched bottom.

And so the boy stood in the boot. What more?

Nothing more.

He just stood there, and the sun died out. Twilight crept into the chamber as softly as a cat. The boy closed his eyes, and as always when he closed his eyes something peculiar happened. Now the boot began to walk around with the boy crouching down in its leg. It went right through the wall and out to the garden. It went through the garden and across the road. It stepped into the barren fields, over rocks and moss and marshland until at last it came to the forest. And wherever it stepped all sounds died out. The birds in the trees fell silent. In the meadows moose stood frozen with balls of leaves in their mouths. In the heather snakes stiffened to black sticks.

"Where are we going?" whispered the boy to the boot.

And it whispered back, "We're going to the quiet."

~~Suddenly the black wall of a mountain reared up before them, and the boot whispered to the boy~~
"This is where we go in."

But they never went in, because now the sound of a cry tore the boy's eyes open. It was Grandmother. In a kind of daze, he looked around the tiny bedroom. He was back, and Grandmother was calling out to him. It was already dusk, and the boot clung to its silence. Grandmother called out again and the boy struggled to get out of the boot. But to his horror, he found he couldn't. He was stuck. His feet rubbed against each other in the narrow boot leg as it closed itself around his hips like skin of stone. He wanted to scream. But it was only his feet that screamed from somewhere deep below as they fought like animals against something in the dark. And then, at that moment, a very terrible and unexpected thing happened. The boot leg split and the boy tumbled out on the floor. And while he lay there, sprawling and terror-stricken, Grandmother called out to him for the third time.

With quiet, frozen movements he freed himself. And then he simply stood there for a while with the torn boot in his arms. He shut his eyes as tight as he could, but nothing happened. On the inside of his eyelids there was only a big quiet darkness. But on the other side the boot was shrieking without sound. It was quiet in Grandmother's house, but it was an evil and dangerous quiet. A quiet like a wild and savage animal lurking in the dark. He had to get away. But to do that he would have to commit the final degrading act. And so he bent over and shoved Grandfather's boot deep into the evil darkness beneath Grandmother's bed. Then he cautiously opened the door and crept into the other room on feet that moved like paws.

Grandmother sat reclining in a chair with a high, high back. It was dim and the flowers had no luster. Grandmother hadn't lit even the tiniest little lamp. The boy stepped lightly over the carpet until he stood by her side. She had not yet noticed that he was even standing there. With curious cruelty he scrutinized her white face. Her eyes were closed and he wondered where she was. Perhaps on her way – on her way into the bedroom! He grabbed hold of her arm. He had to get her away from there. Grandmother cried out, her eyes sprang open, and at once the boy could tell that she had been somewhere else altogether. She shook herself like a dog and smiled at him.

"What are you doing, my boy?"

"Grandmother," said the boy. "Where is quietness?"

On the little table in front of them lay a white seashell. He had listened to it many, many times. Now Grandmother picked it up. She pressed it against his ear. It was cold and hard and he wanted to run away.

"What do you hear?" asked Grandmother.

"The sea," answered the boy.

Strange enough, he was lying. In fact, he heard nothing. He didn't hear even the slightest surge and he knew that the shell was dead. He himself had killed it. Devastated and defiant, he put the shell back on the table.

"No," said Grandmother. "There's no such thing as quietness. Everything can be heard. That thing that we call silence – it's not really silence. It's only our own deafness. If we weren't so deaf the world wouldn't be such a wicked place. But lucky for us there are some people who can still hear. They're the ones who can stand on the plains – do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Grandmother came from a place that had plains.

"Yes," answered the boy. "Plains – they're like fields."

"There are those," Grandmother continued. "... those who can stand on the plains and hear how the hills sing. But not only that. They can hear what's happening on the other side of those hills. They can

hear the people who live in the valleys, and even more. They can hear how people struggle and fight the cities. They can hear all the way to the sea. They hear boats sailing in the night, and buoy-bells sounding their warnings. And even that's not all. They can even hear people screaming on the other side of the ocean, when war comes. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"War," answered the boy. "That's soldiers."

Grandmother remained silent. But her words hovered around the boy like a thick smoke. He bent over the table. On top, beside the seashell, was a big, yellow apple.

"Grandmother," he asked. "Can you hear apples, too?"

"You can hear whatever you want," said Grandmother.

The apple was cold and bitter. He pressed it to his ear.

"What do you hear?" asked Grandmother.

"I hear when the wind blows," said the boy.

But it was a bottomless lie. In reality, he heard nothing, and would probably never hear anything again.

"Do you hear everything?" he asked her.

She didn't sense his hatred. Nor did she answer him. Instead, she rose up youthfully, lightly, and took him by the hand. He thought she wanted to go into the bedroom, and he struggled against her. But instead they went outside. They stood together on the porch and looked out on the garden with its frozen dahlias, its apple trees beaming with fruit. There was no breeze, and no one was coming down the road. No birds were crying out and no dog was barking in the village. It was quiet, and the sky above spread itself out, steep and dark blue. Stars bloomed in the clear quietness. And further below, a red wall rose up from the earth – the town's quiet lights reflecting on the sky.

The boy listened with all his might. He sent his hearing out all over the world, but each time he came back with nothing to show for the effort. And yet, as they stood on the porch amidst the sparkling quiet, an apple loosened from a nearby tree. It fell to the hard ground with a small, clear thud.

"Did you hear that?" asked Grandmother as she put her arm around his shoulder, preparing herself for a speech.

"Yes," answered the boy. "It must have been a dog."

He hadn't heard a thing. Grandmother's arm suddenly began to tremble, and at first he didn't know why.

"Yes," the boy went on. "First a dog walks on the road. And then – then come the soldiers."

"Soldiers," he had said triumphantly. Because in that moment he knew why she was shaking. She was afraid. She was afraid because she couldn't hear what he heard. She didn't hear the dog. Perhaps she was even more frightened than him. Somehow he sensed his only chance for escape might come from this one advantage, and so he went on with his betrayal.

Grandmother whispered to him, "And what comes after the soldiers?"

The boy listened out into the darkness. But still he heard nothing, not even the hot, staggering breath of his own fright.

"After the soldiers," he whispered back. "After the soldiers is a heavy wagon."

"How do you know it's heavy?"

"Because its wheels are squeaking."

Grandmother was finding it difficult to breathe. The wind drew reluctantly through the trees, but neither of them heard it.

"And what comes after the wagon?"

“After the wagon there’s a man beating a drum.”

“Why can’t I hear the drum?” panted Grandmother.

“He’s beating it softly,” answered the boy. “Because it’s dark out.”

Now a long moment passed. Frightened and cold, the boy thought: “Maybe ... maybe she’ll never go back inside. And if she never goes back inside then she’ll never notice the boot is missing.” Grandmother shivered. If there was anyone in the world who wasn’t deaf, then they would have heard Grandmother’s bones rattling in her body like a rickety old cart. But in this world there were only the deaf. And out on the road, the endless procession dragged past in the thickening darkness.

Grandmother whispered, “And what comes after the drum?”

“After the drum,” said the boy, “... there are two horses.”

“Why don’t I hear them?” complained Grandmother.

“Their hooves are padded,” replied the boy. “Because it’s dark out.”

He could feel the evil growing within him like a tree of stone.

“And after the horses?”

“After the horses there is someone crying.”

And in that instant a bird cried out from the hedge. The boy heard nothing, but Grandmother heard it. She said, “I hear, I hear. I’m freezing. Let’s go in.”

And she hurried in to lock the door against the evil. But when she looked for the boy he wasn’t there. He realized now that everything was lost, and so he shouted back as he rushed down into the garden:

“I just want to get my ball!”

There was no ball there. There was nothing there. But he quickly threw himself down below a tree and he began to pray out loud.

“Dear God, please fix the boot. Dear, dear God, please let me hear again.”

But God did not hear his prayers. Instead God allowed the quiet to spread itself out over the boy like a giant black wing.

And yet the creek was there. It flowed steadily on the other side of the road, throwing itself from stone to stone with an anxious whisper. He had to go there and listen. So he shot up and rushed to the gate. But he never made it through the gate, because a man was coming down the road.

The man came forward in the darkness. And clearly, things were not altogether right with him. First of all, he walked so strangely, staggering from ditch to ditch. And even though he walked forward most of the time, sometimes he would step back, too. And then, of course, he sounded funny. One moment he’d quarrel with someone who wasn’t even there, and then the next second he’d sing a snatch from a tune. Then, once he’d finished singing, he’d begin to quarrel all over again. With a pounding heart the boy followed the man’s peculiar wandering from behind the hedge. He followed him as far as he could, until the man disappeared into the night and could no longer be heard.

Be heard? Yes, the boy had heard him. But he was only a person, and people can always be heard because they’re there. The boy needed to hear something that wasn’t there. But he couldn’t. So because of this, and because he was cold, he sneaked back inside.

As he slipped into the kitchen Grandmother was standing just outside the bedroom door. And the moment he saw her face, he knew. It was sunken in, as if someone had dug into it with a spade. And her eyes clung to him, rigid and huge. He knew now that she had learned everything. Suddenly, before he could stop himself, he yelled out to her.

“Grandmother! There’s a man lying in the road!”

Fascinated by his own lie, he watched her come towards him, trembling and weak. Her mouth

moved a few times, but no words came out. As if in a dream, he watched her poor shivering arm reach out for her sweater on the hook. A moment later they were outside again in the dark. They made their way through the mute garden each trembling. Hand in hand, they stepped out onto the black road. It was cold and quiet and above them a haze of stars was wavering in the sky. All at once Grandmother stopped by the hedge and whispered:

“Where?”

“Not here,” said the boy in a low voice. “Farther down.”

They walked along in the shadow of the hedge, and it protected them. But then the hedge ended and Grandmother stopped. She would not go any further. Nor did the boy dare to – but he had to. Step by step he forced himself out into the black unknown. Just a little ways off, he stopped on the side of the road and bent over.

“Here!” he cried softly to Grandmother.

She would not come closer, but he heard her call out:

“How does he look?”

The boy looked down into the gravel. He grasped a couple of small stones in his hand and answered:

“He’s tall. He’s awfully big. And there’s a hat over his face.”

“Take away the hat,” said Grandmother.

The boy lifted his hand from the road.

“Is he breathing?” asked Grandmother.

The boy turned his head and lowered his ear to the gravel. With tearless eyes he stared out into the depths of night, desperate and lost. It was quiet all over the world. Some black trees stood out on the meadow, like darkness over darkness. It seemed as though they were walking towards him. He closed his eyes and lowered his ear even more. And then, just then, a very remarkable thing happened. A warm stream of air rushed into the boy’s ear. From the gravel below rose the calm, steady breath of a sleeper.

“Grandmother!” he shouted, excitedly. “He’s sleeping! He’s just sleeping!”

From the end of the hedge came a deep sigh.

“Wake him up,” said Grandmother. “He can’t lay out in the cold like this.”

The boy shook his empty hand in the air. Then he closed his eyes and lowered his ear. From the gravel came a grunt and a hoarse whisper.

“What’s he saying?” asked Grandmother.

“He says to go inside. He says he’s not sleeping, just resting. He’ll move on in a minute.”

With a quick leap the boy was back beside the hedge. He found Grandmother’s hand tucked inside the sweater, and taking it, he led her back along the safe black shadow. Suddenly the wind picked up from out of the darkness, and all of the branches began to sway, their leaves rustling. On the other side of the road was the creek, holding the stones awake with its whispers. And in reply, the forest clouds above them let out a strong, calm murmur.

“Grandmother,” said the boy. “You don’t have to be scared anymore. He wasn’t dead.”

And with his hand he could feel how she stopped shaking altogether. They walked through the garden. The grass rustled. An apple fell. And each of them heard it.

“Grandmother,” whispered the boy. “One of Grandfather’s boots is broken.”

And Grandmother said, “Oh, honey, that doesn’t matter. We can fix it.”

So in silence they continued on to the bright, quiet house, and to a new and good night.

The Surprise

There are some people who never do anything to be loved and yet still are. And then there are those who do everything to be loved, but never are. The very poor, it could be said, often find it hard to be loved. When Håkan's mother had been a widow for five years, her father-in-law turned seventy. They were invited to his birthday celebration in the form of a short, curt letter some eight lines long; it read:

Of course you're free to come if you want to, Elsa, but you got to bring your own bedding 'cause it's cold in the back room. Besides, some people's probably gonna have to sleep in the hallway. You ain't the only ones coming. There's the bank clerk and the store manager Mr. Jonsson. Both of them's been invited and they'll probably sleep in the living room. If you can come up a day ahead of time, then that would be nice. We'll need some help with the cleaning and the tables and the cooking.

*Best,
Irma*

p.s. I'm sure there's a few other things, like the dishes and such, that'll have to be taken care of afterwards, and maybe Håkan can chop some firewood.

Håkan's mother read the letter out loud one night under the lamp. She was tired and she gripped the edge of the writing table with both hands as she read. For the whole day she had been cleaning the ceiling of a large, lush apartment in Östermalm, and she had a terrible headache from all the hours spent with her head crooked upwards. After she finished reading, both she and Håkan sat quietly for a while without looking at one another. Håkan began flipping through his geography book: *the waterfalls at Trollhättan have a natural beauty ... the Dutch are a cleanly folk who scrub the pavements daily ... under Mussolini's harsh but effective rule, these unsanitary swamps were nonetheless drained ... from Chile comes a fertilizer we call guano ...*

Håkan's mother stared out into the room. Her hands were completely alone as they crumpled the letter into a rough ball. As he looked at those hands, Håkan could see that they were ashamed. The hands of the poor are always ashamed. They worked to smooth out the letter again, but it kept its wrinkles, like the face of an old woman.

That night the light burned long over the small desk, and Håkan went to sleep quite late. For a while he thought his mother had fallen asleep with the light on. But when he raised himself up carefully on his elbows, he could see that her eyes were still open. And he could see her hands on top of the blanket, at first crumpling up and then smoothing back out a small invisible letter.

The next night the light burned even longer. Fully dressed, his mother sat at his father's old desk writing. It was a letter that never seemed to be finished. By the time Håkan went to sleep, the desk top was littered with wadded balls of inkstained paper. When he awoke in the middle of the night, it was cold, and his mother was sitting on the edge of his bed. She was holding her hand on his forehead, as if he were running a fever. She waited until he was fully awake and then looked him in the eyes.

"It's only twelve o'clock," she said. "How do you spell 'century'? With a 'c' or an 's'?"

The alarm clock said quarter past one. "C," he whispered. He heard her tiptoe quietly back to the

small desk and begin scratching with her pen. Then he fell back to sleep and slept the deep sleep of a child until morning.

The next day she was standing outside the school gate, waiting for him. Like all children with poor mothers he was ashamed at first and pretended that he didn't know her. He crossed the street with his friends, parted company, and then timidly made his way back. His mother sensed his anxiety, and she did not take his hand until they were completely alone on the street. They rode the trolley down towards the city, sitting opposite one another, looking at each other's hands. When they got off the car, she took him again by the hand and led him through the rush-hour crowd along the bustling row of shops on Drottninggatan. They stopped in front of a big, fancy store with a window full of flashing lights. Håkan's mother stood there for a minute, pretending to read the signs in the window. There were several English phonograph records on display, and she read their titles without understanding them. When at last they went inside, she pushed Håkan out in front of her like a shield.

In fancy stores the salesgirls are always your enemies. When you talk to them you suddenly feel embarrassed and stammer. "What can I do for you?" they say, so arrogant, as if they're speaking to you in some foreign language. And immediately you translate – "Can you really afford it?"

"We want to talk into a record," said Håkan's mother. "You see, his grandfather's turning seventy and he wrote this poem that he wants to say into the record."

They had to sit and wait a while until the recording booth was free. The bench was made of metal and they sat vulnerably out on its edge, whispering. Håkan's mother gave him a note. It was the poem she had written the night before. He read it, but understood nothing. While he was reading he could not keep his mind off the salesgirls in their pure white work blouses. It seemed to Håkan that they were staring at him from behind the counter, and his face flushed red from shame and dismay. His mother looked around.

"Don't forget the rhymes," she whispered. "And make sure you talk loud."

Håkan's eyes struggled with the words on the page to the point of tearing, and he stared at the rhymes until they echoed inside him: seventy years old – young and bold; your loving wife – the stream of life; hard at work – no duties shirked; sewed your seeds – dropped their leaves; horses and plows – feeding the cows; to make things nice – your sacrifice; on this glad day – happy birthday.

When they entered the hot, cramped booth, the air was still thick from the heavy perfume of a woman who had just finished singing in there, and Håkan's throat suddenly seized up, locking his voice within. He opened his mouth, but couldn't get a single sound to come out. His mother stood behind him, holding him by the shoulders. To Håkan, it felt as though she was about to strangle him. The sweat ran down his back in large, hot drops. But when everything was set and the recorder began to hiss and rasp, he found that he still did have a voice after all. The words came loose and filled his voice – big words, solemn impressive words – and he read the first line like a priest. When he was finished, there was still some room left on the record, so his mother bent forward and sang into the microphone in her mild Christmas Eve voice: "*Happy Birthday to you ... Happy Birthday to you ...*"

That whole evening she could not stop talking about what a good job he'd done, about what a surprise it was going to be for Grampa and the other farmers in the village, for the relatives from Uppsala and Gävle, and for the bank clerk and the store manager. What a surprise they'd all get when she wound up the phonograph and put the record on. Many times that night she simply sat and looked at Håkan, her eyes alive with pride. Sometimes she would fold her hands beneath the light and sit there quietly for

while. But then, sooner or later, she'd begin it all over again.

The next night she disappeared from the apartment with a mysterious smile on her lips. She came back shortly afterward with a portable phonograph she had borrowed from the neighbors. She set it down in the middle of the table and put the record on, handling it as if it were a relic, something that shouldn't be touched. She wound the crank and lowered the needle tenderly onto the spinning disk.

They sat beneath the lamp and listened.

It began with a harsh scratching noise, and at first Håkan's mother stiffened, her eyes tense and watchful. But then a soft panting arose from the speaker, and immediately Håkan was embarrassed because he knew it was his. However, he didn't recognize the voice that followed. He thought about saying that the store must've cheated them. But when he turned towards his mother, she looked back at him with such delight in her face that he understood at once – the voice was his after all. At the end when her song came on, Håkan's mother tried to look away. But he smiled at her over the phonograph until at last she smiled back.

A moment later, when the record was over, she turned to Håkan.

"I'm sure it wouldn't hurt if we played it one more time. I'm sure it could stand that much."

They listened to it another time. And later on, when they took off their clothes for the evening, she put it on yet another time, somewhat unknowingly, as if it had happened on accident. In the middle of the night Håkan awoke from a rainbow dream. The room was empty, but from the kitchen he could hear his own unfamiliar voice. He fell back to sleep with her song in his ears. The next night they heard the record four more times, and each time somewhat unintentionally.

One Friday in March they stepped off a train in the village. It smelled of smoke and melting snow. No one met them at the station, but Håkan's mother told him that was only natural, considering all the preparations they had to make for the party. It was slippery on the road, and they had to walk a very long way. Håkan wanted to carry the suitcase, but she wouldn't let him. However, along the way she began to feel palpitations and was no longer able to manage it on her own. From there on he would have to carry it – but only if he was very, very careful. Inside was the record, wrapped up in thick layers of newspaper, like a poor man's only eggs.

No one was standing on the porch when they got there. They had always done that when his father was alive. Håkan and his mother stepped right into the kitchen. At the table sat his grandfather with newspaper spread out in front of him. His aunt was standing by the stove, stirring a big pot. His grandfather looked up from the paper and his aunt let the ladle slip from her hand.

"If it ain't the widow," said Håkan's grandfather. "What you got in the bag? Not a present, I bet."

He went back to his reading, as if he had already forgotten they were there. Håkan's aunt nodded to them and then took up the ladle again. They stood abandoned in the middle of the room. Håkan watched his mother's eyes wander nervously about the kitchen, from the potted plants to the copper pots and pans. It was the fifth year she looked like a widow, dressed in black, thin and alone. Suddenly she looked down at Håkan with a conspiratory pleasure in her eyes.

"It's a surprise," she said.

But only Håkan heard her.

"You can start with the floor in the living room," said his aunt. "And Håkan, he can go out to the woodshed."

Late in the evening Håkan's mother came out to him in the woodshed. She put her hand on the axe, set it down on the chopping block, and ran her fingers through his hair. She said nothing. She was dressed like a scrubwoman. She brushed the wood chips off his shirt.

That night they slept on the same couch in the tiny back room. When they were finally alone, late in the evening, she unpacked the suitcase and stood for a while under the lamp, holding the record tenderly in her hands.

They were up early the next morning, stringing garlands from the living room ceiling. A little while later the church organist stopped by with a few of the local farmers, and they presented Håkan's grandfather with a silver-handled cane. They sat in the living room, drinking coffee and brandy. As they were getting ready to leave at ten o'clock, a few of the men helped Håkan's grandfather over to the couch. Just then Håkan's aunt turned to his mother.

"And what about your surprise?" she asked bluntly.

"We'll wait till tonight," his mother replied. She gave Håkan a quick wink.

That night the relatives arrived in cars from Uppsala and Gävle. The farmers who lived a long way off came in yellow horse-drawn wagons. The bank clerk came and the store manager came, and in a short time the house was filled with laughter, talk, and the smell of food. Håkan stayed out in the kitchen, peeling potatoes and drying glasses. His mother ran between the living room and the kitchen with warm food and china. At one point, the store manager made a speech which tempted them out of the kitchen. They stood in the doorway, listening and watching. The store manager was already a little drunk and his voice seemed to lose itself in his throat. With a little trouble he pulled out a gold pocket watch from his vest pocket and presented it to the septuagenarian. Håkan's grandfather wept in silence, a few small tears dropping stealthily into his brandy snifter. Next one of the tenant farmers talked, and then the bank clerk and the relatives from Uppsala and Gävle. Håkan's mother nudged him in the side suggestively; soon it would be their turn.

The store manager had brought along a phonograph. It was sitting on the dresser next to the radio. Without drawing any attention to himself, Håkan smuggled the record over there. When they met in the dark, empty hallway, his mother whispered to him.

"Wait till after the coffee," she said. "I'll give you a nod."

They drank their coffee with brandy, and spirits were high. Håkan's mother cleared the table while he walked around the living room, passing out cigars and cigarettes. When he saw his mother step into the doorway a couple minutes later, Håkan caught the look in her eyes and made his way carefully over to the dresser. Meanwhile, his aunt was busy setting up the card table. The bank clerk, the store manager, and the organist dragged their chairs to the green card table and sat down. Håkan began to wind up the phonograph. The bank clerk dealt. Håkan's mother nodded to him from the doorway. The four players picked up their cards, their faces glowing from liquor and laughter. Håkan's grandfather was dealt a possible straight flush in spades, and he had the first bid. He was so beside himself with excitement that he dropped his cigar on the floor. Then he heard the radio come on, loud and irritating from the corner of the room. It sounded like a lecture. He whirled around on Håkan.

"Will you turn that goddamn thing off!" he screamed. "...Two spades."

Håkan turned it off. It no doubt put a big scratch in the record, but that made no difference. The

pain ran through him, cold as an eel. A fine mist settled over his eyes and the red drunken faces in the room took on a dull metallic cast. Someone from Uppsala or Gävle laughed. And it was that laugh which drove him from the room, out through the hallway and into the darkness of the small bathroom. He came to a stop in the middle of the room with the record still in his hands. And it seemed to grow and grow, until at last it was as heavy as his own life. The door creaked open, and from the stream of light his mother stepped quietly towards him. He slipped into her arms with his pain, and her warm wet whispers caressed his cheek.

“Don’t cry, my boy,” she whispered. “Don’t you cry.”

But she herself was shaking and in tears.

Sleet

No, there will never be another afternoon like this. It simply couldn't happen. Because it's only once in the world that you're nine years old, chopping the heads off carrots with your new Mora knife, having sleet in the middle of October, and with an aunt – or should I say your mother's aunt – coming from America at seven-thirty. So here we are, sitting in the barn, cutting the tops off big muddy carrots. If you want to, it's easy to pretend other things, like how it's not really carrots that are losing their heads, but something totally different, like kids at school that you don't like, or even vicious animals. Most of the time we don't talk. We just cut, the green tops tumbling down between our feet, the headless carrots tossed out in long looping arcs to disappear in the bushel basket.

It smells good from all the freshly dug carrots. The tops are wet and when you get really dirty you can even wash yourself with them. Just like what Alvar does to Sigrid when she's not watching out how he jumps up from the upside-down pail, grabs her around the neck and rubs her face with the wet carrot tops till she screams and laughs. But this just makes Grampa lose his temper and start pointing his finger at Mama, who's sitting next to me on the stool that Alvar uses when he shoes the horses.

"You keep an eye on little brother there ...," he says. "And make sure he don't try no funny stuff with the girl."

This makes Sigrid's face flush red. But Mama, she doesn't answer Grampa. Nobody answers him most of the time. Maybe because he's so old. I'm just about the only one that ever does. And then all he does is holler at me. But Mama, she always sticks up for me.

Alvar's sitting back down on the pail again.

"You just set there on the cutter and mind your own business," he says to Grampa. "You mind yours and I'll mind mine."

Nobody dares to look right now, because sometimes Grampa gets so mad that his face turns beet red. And that's when he knocks over his chair and all the other chairs in the kitchen. That's when he yanks his work shirt down from the hook, throws it to the floor, and starts stomping up and down on it. You only dare to look a little bit. But this time there isn't much to see, except of course that Grampa is sitting there on the chaff-cutter. "Why can't you just sit on a pail like the rest of us," Alvar said to him when we were getting ready to chop. But Grampa said if he couldn't sit on the chaff-cutter, then we could go ahead and do it without him. So Mama and Alvar helped him up onto the machine. Sigrid was laughing so hard she had to run into one of the stalls and shut the door behind her. And Mama got mad, because she doesn't like it when Sigrid laughs at Grampa, and she started scolding him about walking around and making a damn fool of himself in front of other people with his ridiculous carrying-on. But Grampa, he just shrugged and said if he couldn't sit there on the chaff-cutter, then we could do it without him, and that's all there was to it.

So that's where he is now, sitting on the chaff-cutter, after all that fuss. Alvar went and dumped the whole bunch of carrots into the shoot and put a pail underneath so all Grampa has to do is drop the headless carrots into it. But Grampa, he almost never hits the pail. He almost always drops them right beside it. Just like when he eats. Mama's forever laying into him about that.

"You could at least stop spilling it all over yourself!" she says. "Maybe we should buy you a bib."

At times like this it's hard to keep from laughing, but if you laugh you've got to leave the table. So it's not easy. The worst is when we eat oatmeal, because the oatmeal gets stuck in his beard and then it's pretty much hopeless trying to get it out, says Mama. It sets just like cement.

But sometimes Grampa grins at the supper table and tells Mama how she ought to be thankful she's even got a father.

"It's not every child that's got one," he says, grinning at me. "Is it?"

And then Mama jumps up so quick that her chair hits the floor with a bang, and she runs into the bedroom and bolts the door. At times like this it's impossible to do anything with her.

It's nice to sit out here in the stable. The pile of carrot tops is growing and growing. Rain fingers the roof's shingles, and Sigrid says how it sounds so homelike.

"Yeah, if we only had a home," says Mama. "Then it sure would be real homelike."

The cat is jumping around up in the hayloft. All of a sudden he comes ripping down. He crawls into the chaff underneath the cutter and just lays there. I thrashed a kitten to death once. But I don't think it hurt, because it happened so fast. Back in the stalls, the horses are gnawing away on the manger.

"Alvar, go and quiet them horses," Grampa says. "They're good and hungry now, I can tell."

"Those old nags have been standing there idle the whole week long," says Alvar. "What have they got to be hungry about? Besides, they're yours. If you want 'em fed, then do it yourself."

Sigrid looks at Grampa with her jaw hanging wide open to see if he's going to turn purple and start yelling again. And Mama, she looks too. But there's no call for it this time. Grampa just sits there in the cutter, chopping away. But Alvar, he hasn't been chopping for a long time. So I stop, too, to take a look at what he's doing. Sigrid, she's not chopping. She's just sitting there gawking at Alvar.

But Mama, she keeps on chopping away, her knife flashing back and forth through the carrots like a streak of lightning in her lap. She must be good and mad, because that's when she works the best and doesn't say a word to the rest of us. She's almost always mad, and with all of us at the same time. She says if it wasn't for us, she wouldn't be wearing her fingers to the bone out in the boondocks. If it wasn't for us, she'd be working a good job in the city somewhere, in some fine store maybe. Mama's almost always mad at me in the daytime. But at night, when she thinks I'm asleep, she sits there on the edge of my bed and twirls my hair around in her fingers. God, I'm afraid one of these days I'm going to get curls.

Alvar's got a big carrot in his hand, one that he already scrubbed clean and scraped the dirt off of. He's been carving something into it with the tip of his knife and now he's showing it to Sigrid with a big grin. I want to go over and take a look, too, but Mama pulls me back by the seat of my pants and tells me to keep my nose out of their business. But then Alvar tells me anyway, 'cause Alvar's nice to me. Not like Sigrid, who just pinches and curses me all the time. Mama finally lets me go and see the carrot. What he did, he went and carved his and Sigrid's names in it, and the date too. It says:

ALVAR BERG SIGRID JANSSON 10-18-1937

I ask him to write my name on it too, so he does.

ARNE BERG

And then he throws it in the basket. But I don't think Sigrid likes it that I got to be on the carrot with them, because now she's glaring at me. But Alvar, he just tickles her under the chin with a carrot top.

"Just think," he says. "The fall's gonna come and go, and come winter we'll need to go down to the cellar to get some carrots for the animals. Then one day we'll find that one and we can go out

the snow and eat it up.”

~~So they probably didn't mean for me to be on the carrot with them, but that doesn't matter. I'm~~ already on a whole bunch of other places. I'm on the barn wall, I'm up in the haylofts, I'm over on one of the stall doors, and I'm even right here in this part of stable. We're all here, for that matter. Even Grampa and Gramma are here, on the stable wall, but their names are so old you can barely read them. *Gustav and Augusta Berg 8-10-1897*. In 1914 came Mama for the first time, and then in 1918 came Alvar. I'm here for the first time in 1933 and then came Sigrid in 1936. And right here in the stable even says Palestine on one of the beams. It happened last year, just before Gramma died. A tramp slept in the stable one night, but he left before anybody woke up. While the rest of us were having our coffee, Gramma went out to get the eggs like she did every morning. And then suddenly she came running in, all out of breath, and said: “You won't believe who slept under our barn roof last night! Jesus! That's who! None other than the Lord God, Jesus Christ Himself!” But then another tramp stopped off that night and I was out in the stable with him, showing him where the horse blankets were, so he wouldn't have to freeze to death. He wanted to shake my hand and thank me, but I was afraid he was full of lice, so I kept my distance. And then he got a look at Palestine on the wall and said: “Oh, Christ! Has that old scumbag Palestine been here? If that's the case, you can bet the blankets is just crawling with lice.” So Jesus was just another bum after all, and full of lice at that. When I told Gramma the truth at supper that night, she just sat there and cried. She told me I was too little to understand. But Mama stood up for me and said I certainly was not, and just because some lousy tramp came along who felt like calling himself Palestine or Jerusalem or the Holy Land, that that didn't necessarily mean he was Christ or the Apostle Paul, Mama said.

My carrots are just about done now, so I'm taking it easy. Mama's are almost done, too, and the same with Alvar and Sigrid. Only Grampa's got a whole heap left. Right now, Mama's over by the chaff cutter trying to get her hands on some of them. But this is only making Grampa really mad. He's telling her to leave his carrots alone, he's gonna chop them himself, damn it, and that's all there is to it!

“So, you're just going to go on chopping carrots when your sister gets here!” says Mama. “Is that it?”

She makes a grab at a bunch of them, and Grampa stabs at her with his knife. She's got one of Alvar's shirts on and the sleeve gets ripped. So now she's just standing there, looking at Grampa like he's not all there in the head.

“You just watch your step, Daddy!” she says. “Or else you'll go and do something real crazy, something you'll regret the rest of your life.”

This makes Grampa pretty sheepish for a while. And now all of a sudden it's real quiet in here. There's only the rain dancing on the roof, and the knives cutting away at carrot tops. Finally, I can't keep quiet any longer.

I say, “Alvar, tell what it's like on the Atlantic.”

And suddenly Alvar looks all deep in thought.

“On the Atlantic,” he says. “On the Atlantic, the waves are as big as houses.”

And I'm thinking to myself, “What kind of houses? Little red ones like ours? Or big yellow ones like the school teacher's?” Because when I think about waves being as big as houses, then I guess they must look like houses, too. The whole Atlantic is just one big county with waves of two-story houses and little red shacks. And over the waves, here comes Mama's aunt, just riding along. But actually,

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