

Vera Buck

THE TREEHOUSE – Seeking Paradise, They Found a Nightmare

Das Baumhaus

- Heart-pounding suspense: dark, unexpected, and absolutely gripping!
- *Wolfskinder* sold 30,000 copies! Rights were sold to France (Gallmeister), Italy (Giunti), the Netherlands (De Boekerij), Russia (AST) and Poland (Literatura Inspiruje).
- English sample translation available.



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Deep in the forests of Sweden, Bullerby comes to an end ...

When Henrik and Nora travel to Västernorrland, Sweden, with their five-year-old son Fynn, they expect an idyllic vacation. However, upon their arrival, they sense that the abandoned vacation cabin is surrounded by something ominous. Their impression is confirmed when a decades-old child's skeleton is found in the nearby woods. Then, Fynn goes missing. While his parents become entangled in their own guilt, investigator Rosa Lundqvist uncovers a dark secret deep in the forest. She has one advantage over everyone else: an extraordinary sense for death. Is there a connection between Fynn's disappearance and the dead child? And what about the long-forgotten treehouse in the old ash tree? A treehouse where someone still seems to reside ...

Rights sold to:

Italy - Giunti | Poland - Literatura Inspiruje

Vera Buck was born in North Rhine-Westphalia, and studied journalism, European literature and scriptwriting in Europe and Hawaii. She has been awarded grants and prizes both at home and abroad. Her first novel *Runa* was nominated for the Friedrich Glauser Prize in 2016. Vera Buck lives and works as a freelance writer in Zurich. Her previous novel, *Wolfskinder*, is a bestseller.

Vera Buck
The Treehouse

Sample translated by Helen MacCormac © 2024

PROLOGUE

It's a mean and nasty sea. The wind is pushing huge walls of water in front of it, as if it wants to rearrange the ocean and turn it inside out. I am shivering. My hair is thick with salt and far too long, blowing in my face and eyes. The man is very impatient. He wants me to strip down to my underwear and wade into the water. But I feel sick from the journey in the crate and I am freezing. I look up, to see if I can tell which direction we've come from, to work out which sea is in front of me. He's taught me how to navigate by the sun. But the sun is covered in dark clouds. There must be a storm coming.

"Come on! We're on an adventure!"

Shaking with cold, I take off my trousers and crawl forward. The water is so cold, I gasp for breath.

"No one can swim like you," the man shouts proudly and points out to sea. In the distance, I see the outlines of some rocks jutting out of the water. Or perhaps it's an island. The waves are going up and down like crazy, blocking the view and then showing it again. It feels like the whole island is rocking up and down. I clench my teeth and gasp again as the sea grabs my legs next.

The man knew I was a good swimmer before he cornered me at the swimming pool fourteen weeks ago. I won the talent race even though I am just ten years old and all my competitors were eleven or twelve. I felt so proud. When the man came over and asked if I'd like to swim for the national team and said he could train me and introduce me to all the swimmers, I nearly burst with joy.

That'll teach them! I thought. That'll show them that I am better than they are, even if my ugly swimming trunks are hand-me-downs, and my parents never come to support me like everyone else's do.

Now I wish I'd never won. That I'd stayed invisible, and hidden under the water instead. Maybe he wouldn't have noticed me then - wouldn't have lured me with sweets and taken me away.

The wind is getting stronger. Up ahead, the sea is roaring and howling. Behind me, the man lifts his canoe down off the car roof. The wind catches the hull of the boat and blows it this way and that. I watch the man struggling, but he doesn't give in. He's like the gnarly old trees in the forest, where I live. The wind tugs at him but he never breaks. The man jams the canoe under his arm, and fights against the wind as he crosses the stony beach. Then he pushes it out into the water. "What's wrong?" he shouts in my direction, his face all crumpled and dark in the wind.

"I am cold."

"You'll warm up soon enough once you start swimming, believe me! Come on, we are two pirates on the high seas! Ha-ha!" He laughs as he thrusts his arms up into the air.

I feel sick. He's always laughing, this man. He was laughing when he opened my gym bag and pulled out my blue swimming goggles from the damp bundle of towels. My swimming goggles got broken when the others ganged up on me outside the showers. They pulled them away from my face like a catapult and then let go so that they snapped back and hit my eyes. They took it in turns – every one of them. I didn't deserve to win as far as they were concerned. Because I don't even have a dad who can take me to school or pick me up from my swimming lessons. Because my dad did a runner and Mum wakes us kids up at night to feed us pasta with tomato sauce and any herbs she finds in the kitchen cupboards. Including the ones that taste like Christmas.

They made fun of me and made me cry. But it was nothing compared to the pain of living with the man. The man found my bathing cap as well and stared at it like he'd never seen anything like it before.

"What's this for?"

"It's so my hair won't get wet."

"But later on, in the showers, doesn't your hair get wet then? When you wash it?" he asked, booming with laughter that made his stomach wobble. "We don't need any of this fancy stuff. You just have to be strong and brave, that's all. Are you strong and brave?"

I shrugged my shoulders, but he made me repeat what he said out loud. 'I am strong and brave. I am strong and brave. I am strong and brave.' But, I was so scared I nearly wet myself. When he noticed, he said we would work on being strong and brave together. In the forest where I live now, there are plenty of lakes and rivers that were good for that.

Later on, he took me to faster rivers, to wild water rapids and canyons. And now we have come to the sea.

The sea bed is slippery. Stones and sea shells stab my bare feet. The second wave already knocks me over. I kick my legs as I lose my footing, trying to stay above the water as the sea sucks me under. The canoe beside me bounces up and down and up and down like a rocking horse gone mad.

"Right, off you go!" he shouts and digs his paddle into the white foam churned up by the waves. I try to swim behind the canoe. But the sea is totally different from a lake. It is nothing like a swimming pool or even a river. I am flailing around more than I am swimming, trying to keep my head above the water. And the sea pulls me this way and that, wherever it wants. Again and again, the waves crash into my face, or break over my head. I blink; salt water burns in my eyes.

"What's up?" the man yells. I can hardly hear him in the storm.

"The ... water," I splutter. "I can't see anything! The waves are too big."

"I'm here in the canoe, right beside you. We have to get over there. To the island." He points in the

direction with his paddle impatiently, and I try. I swim as hard as I can. To keep up with the canoe. But I soon have no strength left. And when I finally catch a glimpse of the island between one huge wave and the next, it is still too far away.

"I can't," I shout against the raging noise, I'm hoping the man will pull me into the canoe when he realises that I have never swum a distance like this in all my life. But suddenly he is gone. I turn around in panic in the gravel-grey foamy water, trying to spot the horizon in one direction or the other. I am all by myself in the sea.

"Help!" I scream. "Help!!!"

And then, I spot the yellow tip of the canoe just a few feet away, dancing up and down.

"Come on!" I hear the man shouting from somewhere. Or maybe it is just the wind in my ears coaxing me. Then I hear something else, something tooting and I turn my head to the left. There's a boat, very near. There are people. Other people. Coughing and spluttering water, I stop moving. Unsure what to do, I let the waves toss me about. Then I turn around and start swimming towards the boat.

"No! Not that way! Over here. Come back!" the man shouts. He is closer now. Not far behind me. The effort makes me squint but I keep on swimming. If I wave and someone on board sees me, they might be able to save me. Protect me from the man. I gather all my strength. I don't look up until I hear the tooting sound again. Loud and urgent now, it startles me. The boat is far bigger than I thought. It is a ship! I stop in my tracks. My arms hang lamely in the water, like bits of rope. My eyes widen in horror, despite the stinging salt water. The ship is almost on top of me.

"No-ooo!!!" the man yells. Not that way! This way! This way!" He sounds desperate. He sounds as if he is scared about me. I am scared too. But not for long. Then all I can see is a black wall of metal. A hard thud, a sucking feeling below my feet. My body is spun around, I want to scream, water fills my lungs, and I swallow more because I'm coughing so hard. Then there is only panic, pure, dark panic and metal pressing against my body, forcing me downwards, My lungs ache, it hurts in my chest, which is filled with sea water. I nearly drowned once, when Jannes and Mario held me under water in the swimming pool, Because I am such a loser. Because I don't deserve a medal for swimming. It felt just like this. Nearly drowning. Like knives slicing my lungs, I hear the ship tooting one more time and then nothing more.

PART ONE

ROSA

A spade full of soil flies through the air. In the spotlight, I see it land on my rolled up tent. If someone turns up and asks me what I am doing, I'll tell them I am digging a firepit because I want to spend the night here. We are allowed to do this in Sweden, out in the country. We call it 'Allemansrätten', the freedom to roam. Okay, so the pit is a bit deeper than usual for an open fire, but I'll say I want to make sure the fire doesn't spread to the trees. It's a stupid explanation, but people always assume young women are a bit naïve. I only ever get incredulous looks if I tell them the truth and say that I am looking for carcasses.

I marked the ash tree with yellow chalk yesterday. It is important to study the colour and properties of the leaves in daylight if you want to know where to find the carcasses. It's not possible at night. And sometimes it's not possible at all. Yesterday's dig for example, brought nothing to light. Not even a bare-bones carcass. That can happen. Science is all trial and error. It's even possible to read the leaves correctly, but end up digging on the wrong side of the tree, narrowly missing the area of decomposition.

When I hit roots, I place my wellington boot on the edge of the spade and thrust the blade into the ground with more force. It makes me angry that I have to do this secretly, at night. As if scientific research were some sort of crime. The churned-up forest floor smells musty and earthy. It smells familiar. Somewhere up above, I hear an owl calling. I get into a rhythm dictated by the sharp ring of my spade – and my laboured breath. I break off bits of earth, dig and thrust my spade into the ground again. It is hard work. I first encountered it when I did an internship at a graveyard. But that's few years back. My arms are already aching from digging the previous nights.

I wipe the sweat off my face with the back of my hand. Then I spot some small white pods shimmering in the spotlight. I pluck one of them out of the dirt and rub it between my fingers. The remains of a maggot cocoon. Bingo! I pick up my diary and make a note: Date. Coordinates of the exact location. Entomological findings. Soil condition. Condition of the potential decomposition site.

I always use diaries for my notes, I always have done. It's partly a habit and partly in memory of Oskar, who got immortalised in the entry of January 1. 1997. My very first carcass. My little tom cat. Watching his remains decompose was special.

Over the past few days, I've found and documented an elk skull, a perished beaver, and a deer. Their remains are stored behind my father's shed. Ready for metabolomic analysis: I want to find out how the decomposition of different animals affects the trees' metabolism. The leaves of this ash tree, for example, have a more intense colour than the other samples. During the day, they shine deep green like fresh leaves of basil. So I am expecting to find a carnivore. Maybe a wolverine, a lynx or a small fox. The three animals I found on the previous nights were all herbivores. Plant eaters.

I get back to work, and keep on digging in the growing light. Time is running out. It's been several weeks since Midsummer and the never-ending June days, but even at the beginning of August, the time available to dig in the forest while it is cloaked in darkness is very short. And my ditch is too deep now. No one is going to believe the story about a fire pit, no matter how stupid I look. Can the remains of a perished animal even be found this deep?

It's not very likely. But I was so sure! The colour of the leaves. The ground. And those maggot cocoons!

Feeling frustrated, I ram the spade into the black earth and pause. Something crunches. A gentle sense of resistance, too soft for a stone. As if I've driven the edge of my spade into porous limestone. Or a bone. I pull the spade back out of the ground carefully. Another crunching sound. I crouch down and scrape away the mud with my fingers, but the pit I have dug is too deep and dark to see anything. I have to climb back over the edge and fetch the spotlight in order to illuminate the digging area. There is something a dirty yellow colour shimmering in the soil. It is a bone after all! At first, I think it must be the breast bone of a large bird, or a shoulder blade from some animal. I gently blow on the bone and remove some of the dirt

stuck to it. Yes, a shoulder blade. I continue to push earth and stones aside, find ribs and a second shoulder blade. Now I am digging with my bare hands. It's not a very scientific method, but I manage to unearth more small bones, vertebrae and ossicles. I set everything on the edge of the pit, impatient to find the animal's skull. My fingers brush against something smooth and synthetic, like a sheet of plastic. But when I pull it out, it is a brown rag of material with the kind of metal eyelet you might see on the strings of a hood. I pause, feeling confused. And shift around as far as possible in this narrow ditch to get out of the light. Is that a bit of a rotting jacket? There is a screeching sound in my ears. I let go of the cloth. Now I can see the top of the skull. Like a half-buried ostrich egg, the bone gleams in the beam of my torch. Milky yellow and covered in stains. I grab it with both hands. The skull is small and light as I ease it out of the soil. Like the skull of a monkey you'd never find in Sweden. It is the skull of a young person. A teenager perhaps, or a child.

I stare at the dark eye sockets as I try to understand what this means. A child's skull. An old hoodie, bones, vertebrae and shoulder blades. Who on earth have I dug up?

HENRIK

I don't know why I didn't just lie. Tell her that a buyer had been found after all, before we were due to depart. For the house, I mean. I know I thought about it. I am good at bending the truth if necessary.

I lean my head out of the car window. My grandfather is everywhere. I see him standing by the side of the road winking at me, as the landscape flies past like an Astrid Lindgren film on fast forward. He steps out of the tall slender trees and presses a finger to his lips so I won't let on to my wife that he is there. She is gripping the steering wheel like the helm of a ship, whisking me away to Bullerbu.

"It is going to be great, as soon as we get the house sorted," Nora says now. "And when Fynn starts school, we won't have to pay extortionate rates for a place to stay during the holidays. Plus, you can come here to write whenever you feel like it! I mean, can you think of a better place than Sweden to write the next children's bestseller?" She turns to Fynn, laughing. He is sitting on the back seat behind me and sighs a sigh that speaks volumes.

The truth – and it's ironic that it's me saying this - the truth is, my children's books are nothing like Astrid Lindgren's beloved stories. Most of them take place in fantasy worlds full of all sorts of creatures and beings that Fynn and I have conjured up together. And there's a lot of darkness, nothing like the idyllic setting we are in now. My books are for children only, closed off to adults who lost their boundless imagination years ago.

Fynn slides half under his seat belt and pokes the back of my seat with his shoe. He is bored and he wants me to know. From Greifswald to our house in Norrland, it is a fifteen hour drive; and he deliberately dropped his book of Astrid Lindgren stories onto the car floor almost as soon as we set off. "Can we listen to Fireman Sam? Or Paw Patrol?" he whines. As far as he's concerned, Småland is the kids' play area at IKEA.

I leave Nora to answer. And stare out of the side window instead. Searching for my grandfather between the endless rows of trees. I soon spot him on the banks of the next lake. His back is turned away from me; he is claspng his wrinkled hands behind his back, staring into the water. In the past, shortly after he disappeared from the hospital, I often had nightmares about him standing by the shore of a lake, about to wade into the water. I would wake up screaming as I tried to hold him back; my parents were worried. But I can sit here calmly and quietly. I am older now, and his death doesn't haunt me anymore.

My grandfather drowned in Sweden. Not a good death and I still haven't forgiven my father for letting it happen. These days, I actually think it was probably better for Grandad to die in a place of his own choosing, in the heart of nature rather than in a care home in Germany. Which is where he would have ended up, seeing as neither my father nor my aunt were willing to take him in and look after him.

The sat-nav instructs Nora to turn left and although we are the only car in sight, she flicks on the indicator before turning off the main road. A scattering of red and white wooden houses comes into view. It reminds me of my childhood. I used to leap across these streams and play games with sticks just like the children of Bullerbu. Goodness! How long ago those days feel now.

The last time I was here, I was the one sitting on the rear seat in my parents' car. We were following the ambulance taking Granddad to hospital. I remember it was raining. I was trying to tell them something. Something to do with the dark fir trees in the forest. But my parents were arguing. They wouldn't listen to me.

Not the best way to leave Sweden. Maybe that is why none of us ever wanted to come back to the little house that used to belong to my grandfather. It is ours now.

We pass an island in the middle of a glittering lake. And suddenly, I remember one of the ancient stories that originated in this area. A story far older than the tales of Emil from Lonneberga or Pippi Longstocking. I tap the window and call, "Fynn! Look! Quick! Do you see it? The wolf?"

Fynn stops kicking my seat immediately. And sits up in his car seat. He presses his hands and face against the window, but the island has already swept past.

"Where?" he asks, squashing his nose against the glass.

"On the island," I explain. "I bet it was Fenrir, the giant wolf." I roll the 'r' to make the name sound scarier and it works.

"A giant wolf?"

"He used to prowl through this forest hundreds of years ago, making it unsafe. No chains could contain him, so he was eventually banished to an island.

"Why?" Fynn wants to know as he turns to stare out of the rear window at the lake now lying behind us.

"He eats humans and gods."

Nora raises an eyebrow. This is not the kind of story that suits her parenting principals.

"I mean, why did they put him on the island?" Fynn wants to know. "Can't he swim?"

"Of course not. Wolves can't swim."

"Well, that's not actually true," Nora says, frowning now as she joins in the conversation. "Wolves are very good swimmers. I just read an article in National Geographic about wolves on the British Columbian Coast. The animals live on tiny islands and forage in the ocean. They feed off prawns and mussels and the carcasses of whales, swimming miles and miles in search of food."

I turn back to the window, so Nora won't see me grin. This is so typical of her, trying to win Fynn over with facts. She was already appealing to his mind when he could hardly hold a spoon. When he comes to our bed in the middle of the night, scared of monsters, she refuses to pull back the covers and invite him in. Instead she asks him to say what kind of monsters exactly. Now, Fynn wants to know what a whale carcass is and why the giant wolf doesn't know that he can swim. I leave it up to Nora to explain, smiling some more. If he comes into our bedroom tonight, afraid the wolf might have swum across the lake after all, I'll remind her that that was her part of the story.

The sat-nav tells us to take the next turning. But the lane is so narrow and overgrown that we miss it and have to turn back.

"In there?" Nora asks in disbelief, before carefully manoeuvring the car off the road. We bounce along the rutted track. Tree branches scrape the car like blind giants trying to sense what has erred their way after all this time.

"We'll have to get someone to clear the path," Nora mutters and leans forward, concentrating hard as she drives towards the clearing up ahead. Her voice falters, but I don't say anything. It was her idea to do up the Swedish summer house, not mine. Somehow, she and my mother got talking about it during the Easter holidays, and then Nora's plans took off without me. My only contribution was the dead grandfather who used to own it all.

Nora parks the car in the knee-high grass and turns off the engine. All at once, I am flooded with memories. I spent the best summers of my life in this small wooden house by the lake. I can see the side of the old rowing boat sunk beside the jetty. This is where Granddad taught me to fish. Here he'd stand, waiting to dry me off when I came out of the water shivering with cold. He'd wrap me in a towel before I got to the dewy grass. My heart soars as I remember.

"Are we nearly there?" Finn asks. He leans forward between our two seats. He wants us to let him out. We are stiff, too, and aching from the long journey as we get out of the car and I open the child-locked door. Fynn has undone his seat belt already. He slides off the seat and races off, determined to be the first one to reach the house. He pulls down the door handle and shouts "It's not even locked," and then, "Wow! Cool! It's really smelly! Do you think something died here, Daddy?"

Nora gives me a look as if to say she knows where that comes from. Then we follow Fynn, leaving our suitcases in the car as we wade through the grass to the veranda. The house is showing its age. The paint on the wooden frames of the murky windows is peeling away. Some parts of the roof bulge upwards as if they've been pressed by a huge force from within. And the flag pole beside the front door, where a small

Swedish flag used to hang proudly, reminds me of a thin starving arm reaching out to us for help. It is disturbing to see that this place my grandfather so loved is crumbling into disrepair.

As we walk through the door, Nora wrinkles her nose. Fynn's right. It stinks! There is probably a dead mouse somewhere.

We start searching for it straight away, throwing open all the windows to let in the fresh summer air. And I go upstairs, carefully stepping onto the landing leading to the two bedrooms and the bathroom. Step by step, I check the creaking wooden floor to make sure none of us ends up falling through the ceiling. It is covered in dust and mouse droppings, but holds my weight. The bedrooms are like time capsules: open wardrobes, a messy bed. There is even a water glass still standing on the bedside table. The floor groans as I walk over to a bedroom cupboard. In it, time really has stood still. The clothes are hanging there as if they are patiently waiting for my grandfather to return. I recognise the scratchy Norwegian jumpers - I used to love burying my face in them when his stories got too scary and fear started tickling my chest.

I bend down to sniff one of the sleeves but recoil as a stark odour hits me in the face. There's a dead bird at the bottom of the cupboard.

"Poor thing," I whisper. I find an old yellowed newspaper in the bathroom and slide it under the bird's body to carry it outside.

Downstairs, Nora has made another discovery. She's taken care of a dead mouse and is diligently sweeping away mouse droppings with a broom while Fynn sits on the table, swinging his legs impatiently. He is waiting for the go ahead to start exploring on his own.

"Mummy won't let me play because of the mouse droppings," he complains.

"Mice spread diseases," Nora says, still swishing the broom.

"The other children at my playgroup spread diseases too," Fynn says. That's what Nora told him when he got chickenpox and had to stay in bed.

"Come on, Fynn," I say, "you can help me bury the bird in the garden."

"You don't have to bury it," Nora says pragmatically. "Just throw it in the bin."

Fynn stares at me looking shocked, and I shrug an apology before going outside. I throw the bird into the trees behind the house. I don't notice Fynn, who has slid off the table and followed me, until he is suddenly standing next to me.

"Where did it go?" he asks. I crouch down beside him and point to the top of the fir tree. "I threw it up into the air and it must have felt the wind under its wings and flapped away."

"Really?" Fynn leans his head back to see where I am pointing - luckily a bird starts chirping all of a sudden. "But it was dead."

"Well, now it's alive again, as you can see."

"Just because you threw it up into the air?"

I nod like an expert.

“How high?” Finn wants to know. “As high as the tree?”

“Higher!” I say. Then I grab him to demonstrate how high I threw the bird. And he starts squealing with laughter. My amazing son can fly all of a sudden, and once again I envy his ability to live in the moment all the time.

I throw Fynn up into the air again and he laughs and laughs. Suddenly I can feel someone’s eyes on my back and turn my head, expecting to see Nora watching us. But there is no one there, just the forest and our car. Nora is inside. I can hear her moving about in the house. And there’s no reason for her to be out in the forest anyway.

“Daddy!” Fynn cries, in a mix of fear and excitement and I manage to catch him just in time. He protests as I set him back down on his feet. But then he sees me staring into the forest again and his attention shifts.

“What is it Daddy?” he asks and when I don’t reply, he gets louder: “What’s out there Daddy? Daddiee!” He yanks my arm like a bell ringer. But my thoughts are elsewhere. I feel my stomach tingling with excitement. No, it’s not a feeling exactly, more like an echo of the tingling sensation I felt upstairs with the jumpers. *Come closer* it seems to say. *Let me tell you a story.*

Ignoring Fynn, I let my gaze wander across the house and the trees.

I am searching for the right word to describe an inkling.

«Daddy!” Fynn yanks my sleeve again. Harder than the first time and all at once the thought snaps like a thread. I look at Fynn and he looks back indignantly. I tousle his summer-blond hair. There’s a story on the tip of my tongue about trolls that live here in the woods. Fynn is at the age where he hangs on everything I say with shining eyes. But he would want to go and find the troll, and today something is stopping me. Perhaps I am feeling a bit guilty towards Nora - but really, it’s the forest itself. The way it crept up on me from behind and brought me a story.

“Did you just have another idea, Daddy?” Fynn asks, sounding puzzled. I am only beginning to realise how much he understands. I run my fingers through his hair, from front to back, making it stand up like dragon scales.

“Yes, I think so.”

“A children’s story?”

“Could be.”

“And will my name be on the first page again?” Ever since Fynn was born, I have dedicated all my stories to him. Even the ones that he is far too small for.

“On the very front page,” I assure him, lifting him up onto my shoulders. I start galloping across the field, whinnying like a horse. I’d do anything for my son. For him I am a horse, a pilot, a wizard, Viking or pirate. I invent stories for him and he is the best listener in the world. Fynn thinks anything is possible and believes everything I say. That’s why I write for children, not for grown-ups.

I hold Fynn's legs tight to stop him from falling off my shoulders because he is laughing so much. He giggles and squeals as I bounce along. It feels wonderful to carry such a bundle of joy on my shoulders. Maybe Nora was right after all. It was a good idea to come here. The forest and the black lake next to the house are the perfect place to start telling stories - and the very best breeding ground for all kinds of monsters.

MARLA

My home is high up in a tree. It's an ash tree, but we call it Yggdrasil like the sacred tree in the old stories.

Yggdrasil's roots reach down to the deepest parts of the earth and its branches touch the highest heavens. Beneath its roots, a dragon sleeps, and up above in its branches I curl up under the heavy woollen blanket. The house in the tree is my nest. My raven's nest. If I could be a creature, I'd be a raven. They see everything here in the forest. Ravens are hushed shadows, scouts and lookouts. When evil people lurk in the trees, they are always the first to know.

I shove my hand out under the blanket to the feather that I found in the clearing yesterday. It is so shiny and soft and big; it must come from a very special raven - Huginn perhaps, or Muginn, the two ravens that belong to Odin.

Odin is the most important god, the god of war and death, and he is the father of all the other gods and humans. He wears a helmet and only has one eye, because he tore out his other one and threw it down an enchanted well. I can't remember why, but I don't want to ask the man.

I roll onto my back. Holding the feather up to the light, I whisper the poem that we learnt off by heart together, the man and me.

Every day, Odin sends his ravens out to spy on the world for him. And each night they come back to report their findings. But Odin is afraid that they might not return. Ravens are wild creatures. If you dock their feathers, they grow new ones that are even bigger. You can't restrain them or lock them away.

The feather dances between my fingers. The mist outside the window shimmers. It is so blindingly bright, you can disappear.

The man explained the poem to me. Odin is worried about Huginn because he likes him so much. But he is even more worried about Muginn because he is more important. Without our memories, we are nothing.

I hold out the feather towards the milky sun. I long to be a raven, to fly out through the window and disappear into the mist, high up in the sky. I long to disappear in the shimmering mist and never return. I don't want to be a prisoner any longer.

The ladder creaks. I hear the ropes chafing against the tree. I shudder. That is the sound of the man stepping onto the first rung of the ladder. There are thirty-two rungs up to my nest. I count along, although it is always the same number. The ladder announces the man thirty two times. And the pain he brings with him. I hide the feather under my mattress, roll myself into a ball and wish I were dead. I hate the sound of

the rope ladder. When the man comes it always means something bad is going to happen.

NORA

The red wooden house with the white window frames. The forest. The meadow. The small lake gleaming in the sunshine and the swarms of midges above the water. Even the wood panelling in the kitchen is like a scene from an Astrid Lindgren story. There is a cosy arm chair in one corner that might have belonged to a story teller, and a beige telephone with an old-fashioned dial sitting on a telephone table. Delicate rose painting adorns the round wood burner in the other corner. I can hear Fynn and Henrik laughing outside in the garden - my two boys. I gave birth to one and married the other. I can't quite believe the feelings all this is generating. I'd never have thought that a place I've never been to could make me feel so nostalgic. I didn't even know I was susceptible to this kind of kitsch and wistfulness.

'Bullerbysyndromet'- that's the word used to describe the German craving for an idyllic Swedish lifestyle. The Sweden you find in all the Astrid Lindgren stories. The 'Bullerbu syndrome'. I googled it. In Sweden, there are research papers and TV programmes about this odd German behaviour, where people search for Bullerbu on the map, as if they could spend their holidays there. Their longing to visit somewhere that isn't real.

I haven't felt this child-like peace for a long time. It went missing in between worrying about the growing costs of a three person home, the challenges of work, and dealing with the people I have unwittingly allowed into my life. I take a nervous look out of the window and then tie back my hair crossly. I haven't come here to be petrified by fear all over again.

I want Sweden to be a safe place for us, not just for me, but for Henrik too. We've always dreamed of having something of our own — a little house that truly belongs to us. However, property prices in Greifswald have always been beyond our reach, even with our double income. Then, out of the blue, this place landed in our laps.

Before Henrik's grandfather retired, he fulfilled a lifelong dream by buying this house. The area is close to the last European wilderness, Western Norrland. Just north of here lies Lapland, and to the west stretches Jämtland and the mountains that separate Sweden from Norway. In the winter, reindeer herds are said to migrate here in search of food. The forests and moors stretch endlessly. You can wander for hours without encountering another soul. Right now, all I need is Henrik and Fynn by my side. I've even disconnected from social media for the duration of our stay. I want to be untraceable for a while.

The coast here is wild and rugged; the rivers are crystal clear. I read that elks retreat to these forests in the height of summer to cool down in the lakes. An elk can dive 6 or 8 metres to escape the summer heat. I'd like to do that too. It's been ages since I went diving anywhere. When I started working, connecting offshore wind turbines in 40 metres of water, I had no idea that one day I would spend most of my time sitting in front of a screen. But a lot has changed since Fynn was born. Before I got pregnant, I used to go free diving. It is amazing what your body can do without a flask of oxygen. And how lightheaded you become when you deny yourself the most basic human ability. Everything becomes soft and light when you stop breathing. You are close to being unconscious but at the same time you are unified with the water

surrounding you. I really miss those days.

I look out of the window towards our lake. It really is our lake. It is part of the property. I still don't understand why Henrick never mentioned this place before.

My telephone vibrates and I jump out of my skin, nearly dropping the broom in the process. It is infuriating, but I can't stop myself. Ever since Erik Bleike barged into my life, it just takes a text to make me freeze - I hardly dare look at the screen.

I'm standing in front of your window, darling.

Nice panties you're wearing today.

Take good care of Fynn. I have an awful feeling something might happen to him today.

Holding my breath, I tap the phone to turn on the screen.

'Is everything okay? You said you'd phone as soon as you arrive.'

I sigh with relief. It's a message from Mum. I phone her and she answers right away: "Thank goodness Nora! I thought something must have happened!"

"Hi Mum. What could have possibly happened. We are in Sweden!"

"Well it's a long journey, for one thing. How long did the drive take?"

"About 18 hours. With one sleep over."

"And what about Fynn? Is he okay?"

"Everything's fine. He's outside in the garden, playing with Henrik."

"Ah the wee devil." I can hear her smiling. "I bet he loves it. Sweden is said to be a paradise for kids. And you are so lucky to have Henrik. He is such a great help with Fynn."

"You think I should be grateful because Henrik helps with his own son?"

"Oh, you know what I mean, Nora."

I drop the subject. It didn't take Henrik long to wrap my mum and all my family around his little finger when we met. As soon as they asked him what he did for a living, they started flashing me impressed looks behind his back. For some reason, Henrik is considered my very best catch. Apparently, a writer is even better than the pilot I dated for a few months. Even though he ticks none of the usual boxes that make one career seem more attractive than another. He doesn't earn very much money, or wear a uniform, or save peoples' lives. Though Henrik might disagree on the last point – he's very passionate about his writing.

"Are you okay?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"You sound very quiet."

"I am just cleaning, Mum, There is an awful lot to do." I use the broom to sweep the cobwebs off the ceiling, and accidentally knock the hanging lamp, which starts swinging precariously, making me duck.

"You've always got so much to do, Nora," she sighs, while I grab a chair with my spare hand. "You are just like your father. He can't keep still either. You aren't going to accept that job in Iceland, are you?"

"I didn't get offered a job in Iceland," I say. What she means is an offer from Norway, where they are planning to build off-shore wind power stations, which will produce about 30 giga-bites of electricity per year. But it is easier to pretend I don't know what she is talking about for the next thirty seconds, and avoid a lengthy discussion.

"You know what I mean," my mother insists.

"Well, how are you?" I ask. "How's Dad?"

"I know you care about the world, Nora," Mum says, ignoring my questions. "But you can do things from Greifswald, you know. Environmental protection is something we have here too. On my walk yesterday, I spotted a group of young people collecting rubbish on the beach. They are doing their bit, you know"

"U-huh," I say.

My mother is the kind of person who wants me to save the planet in a more mummy-compatible way. By giving my son his sliced carrot sticks in an environmentally-friendly Tupperware box for example, or by explaining our recycling system to him. Or telling him why he should turn off the bathroom light after he's been to the toilet.

The chair wobbles as I climb onto it.

"Are you listening?" Mum wants to know.

"Of course! I'm just getting rid of the cobwebs at the same time."

"It's incredible to think that that house has been empty all this time! I went out for coffee with Doris and Christiane and told them all about your unexpected windfall. They were so jealous! Are you staying the night tonight already or are you sleeping in a hotel?"

I freeze, as I realise what she's just said. She told Doris and Christina about the house in Sweden? What if they spread the word? ...

Nora?"

"No, we are sleeping here," I say with a dry mouth and have to clutch the back of the chair to steady myself, so as not to fall. "Did you tell them where the house is?"

"In Döljamála you mean? I'm not sure; does it matter?"

"Just tell me what you said."

"I think I did mention it. Yes ... now that you ask, of course! Christine did a search on her phone to see

how far from Bullerbu it is. Did you know that Bullerbu doesn't exist?"

I don't say a word.

"It's all make-believe!" Mum exclaims.

I stab the cobwebs with the broom again and glance out the window. Another bad habit of mine ever since Bleike started lurking outside the flat in Greifswald with his hands in his pockets, watching me through the window.

"Well you aren't very talkative today," my mother complains.

"I am standing on a chair, Mum. Can I call you back later? Maybe tomorrow, when we've settled in a bit?"

"Yes, yes, get sorted first. But give Fynn a kiss from his Grandma, seeing as I can't actually speak to him in person.

"Will do."

"And send some holiday pics. As soon as you have time."

I nearly burst out laughing. This doesn't feel much like a holiday yet.

"Promise," I say all the same and we both hang up, I continue to stare out of the window at the clearing, which is so green and peaceful. I climb off the chair and take another look through the window before I open it and lean out. The air is warm. In the garden everything is quiet except for the birds twittering. I take a deep breath. I am in Sweden and Bleike is in Greifswald. He won't be able to find Bullerbu either. It's about time to start being on a ground floor without feeling scared.

I am just about to turn away when something rustles under my fingers. Surprised, I take my hand off the windowsill. A small and shining sweet wrapper is stuck to my palm. Turquoise with neo-yellow stripes. I pluck it off my skin and it takes me a moment to realise what is bothering me: the wrapper is too new and shiny for this place. I look around confused. Suddenly I am acutely aware that the house wasn't locked all these years.

I pick up the broom cautiously and go to the door. Now that I am looking, I can see signs everywhere. Shiny cupboard handles. Bare, worn drawer knobs in the living room and kitchen, worn spots on the sofa, flattened cushions. Someone was in the house before we arrived. Perhaps that someone is still here? The sense of peace and tranquillity is gone instantly. Clutching the broomstick to my chest, I turn around slowly. There are hiding places everywhere. The gap behind the old dresser. The heavy, long curtains. The dark corner under the stairs. And the cupboards! I bend over, peer into every crevice, poke the living room curtains with the broom, while a familiar film starts to play in my head. Does Bleike know about our summer plans after all? Has he found out about this place?

«Buh!»

I jump and let out a shriek as I spin around. Henrik and Fynn have crept up on me. Fynn is laughing so much he can't stop.

"We startled you, Mummy!" he giggles. Henrik is grinning too. But he frowns when he realises that I am clutching the broom like a club, ready to defend myself.

"You okay?"

"Of course," I say a bit too cheerily and let the broom drop, feeling like an idiot. I must be getting paranoid. Bleike's phone calls, his stalking and threats are getting to me. I was always the sensible one, the one who stays calm and knows what to do when we break down on the motorway. The one with all the emergency numbers who knows what insurance cover we have. I even Hoover the spiders out of the corners when Henrik asks. I am not going to let a stupid creep affect me like this.

The worst thing is that it is all my fault. I was the one who gave Bleike insights into my life and my family. In all sorts of small insignificant ways that only became important and gained intimacy and meaning, when he started using them against me. When I decided to end our affair, the WhatsApp messages and calls started. Sometime while we were dating, his interest in me must have turned to obsession. When I came out of the shower I would find messages waiting on my phone, telling me how much he liked my damp hair and the short towel I'd wrapped myself in. Sexy. These weren't the sort of crude remarks I was used to getting on social media, about my tits or my role in society, or my hormones - the root of all evil apparently. I've never understood what having a period has to do with structural engineering or the calculation of flow velocities, and I usually ignore any comments. But Bleike's messages were different. They got under my skin.

In Greifswald, we live in an old building with tall windows and I knew he must be out there on the street somewhere, watching me. But instead of contacting the police, I just closed the heavy curtains.

I decided the best thing to do was ignore him too. And hope he would lose interest in due course. Which he did from time to time.

"What were you doing to the curtains?"

"What?"

"You stabbed the curtains with your stick."

"Oh, that was because of all the dust."

Fynn gives me a sceptical look. He can probably tell that there is something not quite right about the way I am reacting. Our son understands the mood right away. He sucks in vibes like a sponge. We have to be careful what we say in his presence.

"Right, who wants to go down to the lake with me?" I call to clear the air. I take off my clothes right there in the living room, run out of the house onto the wobbly jetty, and leap into the cool glittering lake. The water closing around me feels like a hug, as if it wants to say: *At last Nora, what took you so long?* I dive under, holding my breath. It is fantastic. This is exactly what I needed. My frayed nerves, all my anxiety – due to the heat and the long two-day drive, that's all. I resurface and see Fynn running out of the house. He can't believe it when he sees me splashing around in the lake. Is that the kind of woman I have become? My five year old doesn't think I'm mad enough to leap into a lake in my underwear. I am just a working, stressed

mum as far as he's concerned. When did I stop being more than that? The rucksack tourist, the free diver. Someone who would drop everything in an instant to travel around Eurasia on a motorbike!

Henrik comes out onto the veranda too. He lets out a yell and grabs Fynn, running towards the jetty and hurling him into the lake with such force that my heart nearly stops. Fynn, still in his clothes, screams as he flies through the air. I swim over and reach him just as he pops his head out of the water. He coughs. Henrik crouches down on the jetty and starts spraying water in our direction.

"Everything all right Fynn?" I ask and he nods bravely, swimming doggy paddle as I help him back to the jetty.

"I'm hungry, Mummy."

"We didn't go shopping on the way, darling. We'll have to drive to the supermarket."

"But I am hungry now!"

"Then we'll just have to get a fishing rod and catch a big fat fish," Henrik says, booming with laughter as he grabs Fynn's arms and pulls him out of the water, as if he's the big fat fish. I heave myself up onto the jetty beside the two of them.

"Who's going to drive?" I ask, as I wring out my hair, remembering everything that still needs to be done.

"I'll go," Henrik says. "I hear they sell amazing cinnamon rolls at the bakery. With powdered sugar icing. We must get some!"

"I'm coming too." Fynn shouts, jumping up and down on the jetty. It's a good thing he's so light, otherwise it would fall to bits.

I watch the two of them leave. As they go to the car and start rummaging through the suitcase for a towel; everything feels perfect all at once. We are a family again. Wasn't that the whole point for coming here? A new beginning? This is it: a house, a jetty, a garden that looks like a jungle - dark and mysterious in a good way. I shiver without really knowing why. Then I stroke back my wet hair, stand up and walk back to the house through the knee-high grass to gather up my clothes.