

A COFFIN FOR SNOW WHITE

A Case For Ingrid Nyström And Stina Forss

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Take the child out into the forest. I do not want to see it any longer. Kill it and bring me the lungs and the liver as proof.

Snow White, by the Brothers Grimm

PROLOGUE

1971, Summer

He stumbled down the gentle slope towards the bank of the lake. Once he had almost tumbled into a tangle of low cranberry bushes, but he had just managed to keep his balance and stay upright. He did not know how many beers he had drunk – at some point he had stopped counting, but there had been plenty of schnapps, too. It made no difference: he desperately needed to empty his bladder. Once he had gone far enough from the noise of the party he paused at a pine tree, rested his forehead against the rough bark, unzipped the flies of his suit trousers and peed. The relief was wonderful. But when he was done, he noticed the toes of his shoes were wet. Christ. He had peed on his new shoes. He looked around. Was there anything here he could use to dry them off? Even though it was already late and dusk was drawing in, there was no way he could go back to the party with urine-soaked brogues. A few metres further on, down by the water, there was a patch of tall, dry grass. Better than nothing, he thought, annoyed that he had forgotten to bring a handkerchief. The shame of his little accident had sobered him up somewhat and he went down to the tussocky grass and tugged up clumps which he rubbed over his wet shoes. The effort yielded only modest rewards: the fine leather was stained dark at the toe and the grass could do nothing about that. He swore. Just as he decided to abandon this futile undertaking and return to the

party he heard muffled footsteps not far from him. Somebody else needing to relieve themselves? Cautiously he peered through the tall grass, but the figure showed no inclination to stop at a tree or squat behind some bushes. They were making straight for the rowing boat tied up at the jetty. He recognised the tool the figure was holding and could hardly believe his eyes. What on earth would they want with a drill? The shadow which climbed down from the jetty into the boat answered his question soon enough: there was no mistaking the twisting arm and the scratch of metal against wood. It all lasted less than a minute, then the shadow stood up, tossed the drill into the lake, climbed back onto the jetty and went back the way it had come.

SWEDEN, THE PRESENT

SATURDAY

1

Something was brewing. Since lunchtime the mild summer weather of the past few days had been growing stickier, oppressive and unpleasant. The sky was closing in and it was only a matter of time before it started to rain. But Inspector Stina Forss made no effort to get up from the lounge in her garden. She stared at the lake, whose unmoving surface reflected the grey blanket of clouds. The film of sweat on her skin was attracting midges, but she was too lethargic to reach for the insect repellent. She managed a limp, half-hearted wave – a tactic that was of no effect against the little creatures’ persistence. They were not going to be driven off that easily. That said, lethargic was the wrong word. Her body was almost like a stone while her thoughts, her feelings, her whole being was really elsewhere, far away from the here and now, from the small, secluded house nestled in an idyllic spot by a lake in Småland in July. She was miles away from the stretch of woodland which had become a new home for her since she moved here from Berlin years ago, giving up her career in the homicide division to be back in Sweden, the land of her childhood, and close again to her gravely ill father. Forss had entertained a vague and ultimately futile hope of sorting things

out between them, but her father had been dead a good while now, and she was still here in the back of beyond. The forest, a lake and solitude – quite the opposite to the life she had once lived in Berlin.

In her career – if not her social life – she had at least gained a foothold here, but that was not why she had stayed out in the sticks. No, a stronger pull came from the events of the last couple of years, which in recent months had acquired such tragic power that Forss herself had long since given up trying to understand them. It was this power that trapped her in the lounge, sapping any capacity for movement in spite of midge bites and the approaching storm.

Exactly when did all this start, and what brought it all about?

She had been turning these questions over in her mind for months but the answers still eluded her. Of everything that had gone on, what troubled her most, what woke her each morning, terrified, bathed in sweat and with her jaw clenched, was the murder of her boss' daughter-in-law. The shots, fired at a moving car from a hideout two hundred metres away, had almost certainly been intended for herself, not the innocent young mother. A fatal case of mistaken identity. She should have died that cold April evening. Maybe she was still marked to die, but strangely she felt no fear at all. Perhaps she was just too numb.

How much guilt can a person bear?

She gnawed her bottom lip.

A midge bit the back of her hand.

The grumble of the approaching storm was close now.

She reached for the G&T which stood next to her on the low table. The ice cubes had long since melted, but she noticed that no more than she felt the first drops of rain. It was only the sound of her phone that snapped her out of her lethargy.

2

Rain had been threatening for hours when at last it crashed down on the windscreen of her Toyota, but the tears came without warning. Though Superintendent Ingrid Nyström was surprised by the intensity of this crying fit, at the same time she simply gave herself up to it. Why fight it, now, when she was alone? If only for a moment, letting go and relinquishing control offered a release, of sorts. Her little hatchback was still in the carpark at Växjö airport, where, ten minutes ago, she had hugged her husband, daughter and grandson close as they said goodbye. Anders, Anna and little Albert were flying to Stockholm and then, via London, to Tanzania where Anders was involved a church project to build a school and a well. Anna and her son, not even a year old, were going with him. Anders had already gone out there four months ago, the beginning of a year-long sabbatical away from his pastoral duties, but Healey's sudden, inexplicable death brought him home straight away. Her daughter needed him now. She needed him now, too. At

times like these a family pulls together. Her husband's calm and strength had been a haven for the family in the weeks after Healey's death. Anders' presence had been a kind of crutch to Anna in her grief at the death of her partner, support her mother could not give her. She could not say why, but it had hurt and made her feel a failure. She had forced herself just to suck it up: in the end it was not about her, but about Anna and her nine-month old son Albert who had lost one of his parents. It was about Healey's family.

Anna and the Harringtons had agreed to have Healey buried in Sweden. Though she had never really been the religious type, Healey had always found the small churchyard under the tall trees a special, romantic spot. It was a good place, an appropriate place for her final rest, if that is something you can say about a woman who had not even reached her thirtieth birthday. Anders took care of all the arrangements for the funeral: he put up the Harringtons and even friends travelling from far away, either in their own large house or with neighbours and hotels. He led the service in two languages and organised the meal and get-together afterwards in the church hall. In other words, he held everything together and buttressed the family against complete collapse. She could only be grateful and admire him for what he was: a wonderful husband, a doting father, a caring grandfather and, not least, a good pastor.

And her?

Of course, she had done her bit. She looked after all the guests. She had done the laundry, cleaned, cooked, baked. She had taken care of Albert. She had tried to console Anna, even though she usually came across as awkward and stiff.

But that was never enough, of course, not by her standards. She could not live up to what was going on, neither as a mother nor as a police officer, and she could not say which weighed heavier on her.

The fact was that the perpetrator had not been caught. Healey's murderer was still on the run and there was no sign of any arrest being made. There were no suspects, the evidence was scant nor was there even any sign of a motive. Her daughter's partner had been a respectable businesswoman who ran a boutique in Brighton. Who could have wanted to kill a young woman like that, a young, helpless mother? Someone who hated lesbians and same-sex relationships? A fanatical defender of 'family values'? It was hardly conceivable, especially in the light of the facts of the case: an ambush, carried out by a sniper with military precision. It called to mind a professional hit or political assassination. Nothing about it made sense.

The most plausible explanation, one she grudgingly had to concede to her supervisor, Erik Edman and her colleagues in the state police, was that it was a case of mistaken identity. In their view, the target had not been her daughter-in-law, but Stina Forss. Even though the shooter – whose work bore every mark of the professional – had fired two precise headshots at the perfect moment of surprise, carefully eliminated all evidence in his hideout and made a clean getaway, it was possible that he had confused Healey for Forss. Healey had been sitting in Forss' car and she had a head of unruly curls just like the German-Swede; and, of course, there was also the poor visibility at dusk and the extreme distance.

Unlike Healey, Forss was anything other than a closed book. Exposing a far-right terror cell and foiling an attack on a

football match between two teams of immigrants had thrust the police officer into the national consciousness. Her face had been on the front pages of all the main newspapers, hailed as the 'Heroine of Södertälje'. The theory that someone would want to avenge the foiled bomb attack and their comrades killed in the police operation made perfect sense. And of course, the masterminds of the far-right and their co-conspirators were not the only serious criminals whose wrists had felt Forss' handcuffs over the course of her career. Taking into account her time in the Berlin Criminal Investigation Division, Forss could put her name to more than three dozen arrests which led to long prison sentences: it was an impressive tally. Then there were the many times she had drawn her service weapon in self-defence: on five occasions the suspect had been seriously injured, two had died. There was no question about it: Forss had made plenty of enemies for herself in her working life. But everyone agreed that the most convincing theory was that it was a reprisal for the bomb attack on the football stadium. That was why the state police had immediately taken over the investigation. And that was why Nyström's hands were tied.

"Trust me, it's better this way," Edman had said, hardly able to conceal his pleasure at having the case passed over so quickly to another division. "And in any case, emotionally you are just too close to the whole affair."

An affair.

That was how her boss saw it, then. Of course she had reacted emotionally. Of course she was prejudiced. This was her own family, for heaven's sake! Wasn't it just this that would have made her a dedicated, meticulous, untiring detective? Now she would just have to be grateful to be kept abreast of the latest

developments. Not, of course, that there was much in the way of developments. The only lead worth mentioning was the search for an old blue Ford Galaxy. Forss had told the investigators that she had noticed a car like it in various places in the weeks leading up to the attack. She'd had the feeling she was being tailed.

Forss' statement had only puzzled Nyström all the more. If her colleague had felt like she was being followed in the period before the dreadful incident, why hadn't she told anyone, for God's sake? Why had she not gone and reported it to her boss? Why had she not confided in Nyström?

The superintendent swallowed. Her shirt was wet with tears and her eyes were burning. She knew the answer, if she was honest with herself: Forss had a disturbed personality, her social life was a wreck, she did not trust anyone and did not let anyone get close to her. Nyström swallowed again. It tasted as salty and bitter as the realisation that was forming more and more clearly in her mind: if Forss had not been so messed up, awkward, so weird, then Healey might still be alive.

Nyström gripped the steering wheel so tightly the skin on her knuckles turned white.

The instinct went against everything she believed in and stood for, but there was no getting around it: she wished that on that damned April evening in the gloom outside her front door it had been the right person who had died, not the wrong one.

Just then her mobile rang. She cleared her throat and took the call. Then she dried her eyes, waited a minute, started the engine and turned on the wipers.

3

From its position alongside the Småland Museum and the 'House of Emigrants', the Swedish Glass Museum looked down over Väckjö Lake from a hill behind the railway station. The three exhibition buildings, one postmodern, one modernist and one classical, made for a discordant ensemble in a public garden which called itself a culture park but was better known for its dealers than its museums. Grass, not glass. In any case, this was how Forss, who took little interest in either glassmaking or local history, saw it. At least the pouring rain appeared to have driven off the dealers as she made her way up the gravel path to the glass museum. Having no umbrella with her and not even a hood on her coat, she was glad to reach the foyer and shake the water from her hair. A moment later, Ingrid Nyström arrived. The two women exchanged a few words of greeting. Since the terrible incident with Healey the atmosphere between them had grown even cooler than ever. Forss could understand the subtle distance her boss now maintained. She herself was still light years away from finding the right words to deal with everything that remained unsaid between them.

They went over to the ticket counter and the attendant announced them by phone.

The museum manager swept into the entrance hall accompanied by a uniformed police officer. There was no other way of describing her arrival. Her fluttering hands gave the surprisingly young woman – late twenties, maybe, early

thirties? – the appearance of a hummingbird. She was every inch a woman of culture: funky glasses, asymmetrical fringe, chunky wooden jewellery and a vibrant silk scarf.

“Oh this has been such a drama, hasn’t it?” she cried. “What an awful drama! And today of all days!”

“What’s happening today?” Forss asked. She had no time for theatrics.

“The private view!” Her already shrill voice leapt another octave in indignation, as though it was unfathomable that someone could not know about such an important event. “*Gustavsson at 250 – A Cultural History in Glass.*”

“Of course, I read about it. It sounds very interesting,” Nyström observed, as always striking a note of balance to take the heat out of the situation. “But perhaps you could explain to us what has actually happened.”

“Absolutely, absolutely,” the young woman replied, her tone a touch more businesslike now. Her name badge identified her as Emma Herold. “Perhaps over a cup of tea? The Japanese restaurant here does *gyokuro*,” she trilled. “It’s just wonderful.” The fat wooden beads on her necklace clacked together and the prospect of a revitalising hot drink seemed to lift her spirits. “Or perhaps you’d prefer *sencha*?”

“I think we ought to get straight down to ...” Forss began.

Nyström interrupted her with a smile. “That sounds lovely,” she said and turned to the uniformed officer. “We’ll handle this from here.”

Herold led the two investigators down a series of corridors to *Izakaya Moshi*, one of the best restaurants in town, though at this time in the afternoon there was little sign of life. The three

women sat at one end of a long row of tables and placed their orders.

“Tell us about the private view,” Nyström said, by way of a prompt.

Herold nodded solicitously.

“Exactly. *Gustavsson at 250...*”

“...Cultural History in a Glass.” Forss completed her sentence impatiently.

“*In glass*,” Herold corrected her, screwing up her nose. “This isn’t about drinking. It’s about a fascinating material, part of our region’s heritage, craftsmanship, design, art. *Gustavsson at 250* – we are telling the story of the success of a global business.”

The last word resounded in a reverential tremolo.

Forss shrugged.

“Never heard of it.”

“We have a set of their wine glasses at home,” Nyström interposed. “The Orchid.”

“That series is a classic,” Herold sighed. “Did you know there are five countries around the world who rely on *Gustavsson* glassware for their official state receptions? Of those, two are royalty! Of course, in cases such as those we’re talking about bespoke designs, nothing you’d be able to buy in the shops.”

“Goes without saying,” Forss replied, suspiciously eyeing the tiny, paper-thin bowls and cast iron teapot which the waiter was bringing over. She was in no mood for the pretensions of exotic tea: she wanted to inspect the crime scene. If there was one at all. “But let’s get back to the private view, shall we?”

“Absolutely, absolutely,” Herold said again as she poured the tea with the furrowed brow of the expert. “We’re talking about

over four hundred exhibits, a year and a half's preparatory work, highly complex insurance issues – all in all the most incredible responsibility, especially for the curatorial team.” She looked at the two detectives over the rim of her glasses, a look that left no doubt as to who was the bearer of this responsibility. “It would be almost impossible to assess the value of many of the pieces on display.”

“But I take it we're not here because something has been stolen,” Forss observed.

“No,” Herold replied, setting the teapot down on the table with a dramatic look. “We had to call the police because a certain exhibit, well ... has raised a number of questions.”

The rain was hammering against the window and thunder rumbled close by.

Forss decided to push her. “I still can't see what this has to do with violent crime,” she said.

“Wait until you see what I'm talking about,” Herold said, casting a demonstrative glance at her watch. The wooden beads on her bracelet, a counterpart to her necklace, clacked together. “I think he should be ready by now.”

“He?” asked Nyström.

4

Herold marched them through the museum's exhibition rooms. As far as Nyström could make out, the exhibition was arranged chronologically. Two and a half centuries of glass: antique chandeliers, bulbous bottles, mirrors, carafes, vases and wine goblets. There were preserving jars, water jugs and tea-light glasses. There was clear glass, cut glass, etched glass and engraved glass. After the functional objects came rooms filled with decorative objects and art – things got brighter. There were huge marl vases swirling with colour. Human-like figures, lovers entwined, stood next to amorphous forms resembling an alien from a horror movie. One piece looked like an oversized condom. A huge cloud hung from the ceiling, a piece of such fineness and fragility that Nyström could only wonder at the skill of the artist who made it.

All the rooms were empty of people.

“Where are the visitors?” Forss asked. “I thought this was the exhibition of the century.”

“There were three hundred guests at the private view, all of them by personal invitation,” replied Herold, tight-lipped. “After the, shall we say, *incident*, we had to send them all home, or direct them to other parts of the museum. He gave us express instructions – our hands were tied. The whole thing was a fiasco! That's why we are so concerned to have the facts established as quickly as possible.”

“Facts,” said Forss. “Yes, an apt word. Perhaps we might get round to discussing what has happened.”

Was her colleague mumbling a little, Nyström asked herself. Had Forss already had a drink today?

By this point they had arrived at some double doors. They were shut.

“I think he can best explain that himself,” Herold said, knocking and opening the door. The room they entered was dark with only one source of light: an illuminated glass sarcophagus. Nyström took a step forward and it was then that she made out the human skeleton behind the thick glass panels. It was wearing a dress. Her first reaction was revulsion. The bones and skull looked disarmingly real, especially in the dirty, threadbare dress. Death behind glass. Even though Nyström knew little about art, the sight touched her to the very quick. Quite apart from the skeleton within it, the coffin was a symbol of the transience of life, the border between within and without, between life and death. But on the other hand, its transparency invited scrutiny, even a kind of perverse voyeurism. Why had they been brought here?

“The installation is called *Snow White*,” Herold whispered reverently.

Nyström’s eyes had taken a few moments to adapt to the twilight, and only now did she realise that there was another person in the room with them. An old man with a walking stick was sitting on a folding stool, the kind you find in every museum, apparently lost in contemplation of this bizarre object. Herold cleared her throat audibly.

“May I introduce Gunnar Gustavsson, chairman of *Gustavsson Glass AB*. Detectives Ingrid Nyström and Stina Forss.”

The man’s head turned a little, just enough to cast a glance in their direction. Then he turned back to the installation.

“Two women,” he said hoarsely. His tone left the listener in little doubt of his view of the circumstances. “They send two women.”

Something tightened inside Nyström. Situations like this didn’t come up every day, but often enough all the same.

“Superintendent Ingrid Nyström,” she stated coolly. “I’m the senior detective for violent crime in the region. Inspector Stina Forss is the most able of all my colleagues.” Even though the final words seemed to stick in her throat, they were still true. “I propose we discuss the purported *facts*, or my colleague and I will be on our way.” God knows she had better things to do than be given the run-around by an old chauvinist on a Saturday afternoon. It was ridiculous that she still did not know why they were even here. Erik Edman had given them personal instructions – itself most unusual, as they were usually assigned their duties over the phone by the dispatchers. But of course it made sense that her career-obsessed superior should want to send his best officers as a personal favour to the influential head of a family firm like *Gustavsson’s*, even if Edman’s phone call had only provided irritatingly nebulous fragments of information and vague, disconnected allusions.

“The facts,” said Gustavsson without looking up, “are as follows: this here, the bones in the coffin,” and as he said this he tapped the tip of his walking stick on the glass case, “do not

belong to some *Snow White*. They are the mortal remains of my wife Berit.”

For a moment it was silent in the room. Only the neon tubes on which the skeleton in the coffin was resting carried on their quiet hum.

“How is that possible?” Nyström asked eventually. As Gustavsson made no reply, she turned to Herold for assistance.

The manager shrugged.

“This piece has been loaned to us by an American collector. It was made by Jan Hesenius, a master of his craft. In the early eighties he produced a number of sensational pieces for *Gustavssons*. *Snow White* was completed in 1982 and it is an artistic milestone, one of the high points of the exhibition. We were thrilled to be able to include it in the show. The collector lives in New York and, until it arrived here a week ago, I only knew it from photographs. The logistical and financial difficulties alone...”

“This isn’t Jan’s work,” Gustavsson hissed. He rose slowly to his feet and turned towards the three women, breathing slowly in a visible effort of self-control. “I was there when he worked in our foundry,” he went on, a little more measured now. “When he had finished the thing I found it disturbing for many reasons, but he would not take on any of my proposed changes. Artists are pig-headed and maybe that’s just how it should be, but his *Snow White* did not fit the aesthetic direction of our company. And it called up too many... In any case, I did not want it exhibited under our name.” Gustavsson scowled. “I handed it over to him. He kept it and sold it afterwards. Who could have known it would become such an iconic piece in the annals of glass art? Be that as it may, I don’t begrudge Jan his fame, and

it was very generous of the present owner to make it available for the jubilee exhibition.” His light blue eyes glowed in the cold neon light. “Nonetheless, this is definitely not Jan’s work,” he repeated. “The bones in the original were glass. Weeks of work went into making them true to life. This skeleton here, though, seems quite real to my eyes.”

“But what causes you to think that this could be your deceased wife?” asked Nyström.

The blue eyes pinned her.

“The dress. The original had a light shift dress with a bright red stain over the crotch. It was one of Jan’s little jokes – Snow White’s deflowering, her period or suchlike. Maybe the dwarves were supposed to have raped her, who knows? This, however,” he pointed at the display with an outstretched arm and shaking index finger, “is my wife’s wedding dress.”

Nyström looked more closely. The dress was old, torn in places, and the material, which had clearly once been white, was dirty and yellowed. There was a prominent dark stain over the breast, possibly congealed blood. For all its tattered appearance, Nyström, who had once done a good deal of sewing, could see it was a dress of considerable quality. The cut was refined, and the synthetic fabric so popular in the seventies was decorated with skilful touches of lace and striking buttons made of shimmering mother-of-pearl.

“No possibility of mistaken identity?” asked Forss.

Gustavsson’s voice shook.

“Berit had it made for her by a dressmaker in Stockholm, designed to her own specifications. There’s no chance I’m mistaken.”

“When did Berit die?” asked Nyström.

Gustavsson's arm sank back down and all the rage and strength seemed to drain from him in one go.

"That's just it. I don't know," he said softly. "No one does. She disappeared on the evening of our wedding reception, August 29th, 1971. No one ever saw her again."

The detectives looked at each other.

"That's nearly fifty years ago," Nyström observed.

5

Stina Forss and Emma Herold were in the latter's office. Framed posters recalled previous exhibitions. How one could make such a fuss about glass was beyond Forss.

"Do you think what Gustavsson said makes sense?" she asked.

"Hmm," was Herold's only reply. She was at her desk, bending over a huge coffee-table book. Forss had to stand on tip-toe to see over the director's shoulder as she tried to reconcile the photographs of *Snow White* with the old man's description. Though the reflections from the coffin's transparent surface made it hard to tell exactly, it looked as if he was right when he said the bones were made of glass. "The dress is a different one, that much is certain. It's in much better condition and the prominent mark is in a different place. Shit! How could

this have happened? Why didn't I notice? And it's such a famous piece, too! The insurance alone was two and a half million krona."

"When you're dealing with over four hundred exhibits, it is the most incredible responsibility," said Forss, quoting Herold and trying not to sound too snarky as she did so. "These things happen."

The last thing Forss needed right now was a potentially important witness beating herself up instead of casting her mind back and making a constructive contribution to the investigation. Nevertheless, it occurred to her that the young museum director seemed to lack the specialist knowledge you might expect of someone in her position.

"Even the dimensions don't add up," Herold observed as she set the exhibition catalogue down next to the large volume. "I measured the piece for the catalogue myself, but compared with what is in this reference book what we have downstairs is five centimetres too short, three centimetres too tall and seven centimetres too wide. Another stupid mistake on my part." She seemed genuinely torn up about it. "It's not just the bones that were replaced, but the glass case as well."

"Let's try looking it from a purely logical perspective," Forss said. "If this piece is on loan from a collector then I can see only three possible explanations."

"Edmund. His name is Joseph Edmund," Herold interposed. "He made his money from a chain of dry cleaners in America and has been a connoisseur of fine glass for over twenty years. We have four pieces of his on loan."

"Well then. Either Edmund deliberately sent a modified version of the original piece, perhaps trying to shock or frighten

or provoke Gunnar Gustavsson. But unless the two men know each other and there's bad blood between them that explanation is highly unlikely. The second possibility is that Jans Hesenius – or whichever gallery was representing him – sold Edmund a forgery. But that sounds very doubtful to me, too. A man who has been collecting famous glass art on that scale will know his stuff; he won't just let someone pull the wool over his eyes, especially when we're talking about the sums of money you just mentioned." Herold's mouth seemed to twitch as Forss said this. "The third possibility, and the one I consider most likely," Forss went on, "is that the original was switched on the way from New York to Växjö, maybe even right here in the museum, and neither Hesenius or Edmund have anything to do with it."

"What, here?" Herold's voice leapt another octave. "No, not a chance. I trust my team implicitly. And in any case, how could you even do it? You can't just swap an object like that and slot another one in its place. The coffin weighs more than three hundred kilos. It took a fork-lift truck to move it into position."

Forss shrugged her narrow shoulders.

"If not here, then the exchange must have happened somewhere else. Or, as I said, the artist or the collector are implicated in the matter. In any case, I need to know who you spoke to and when, I need the shipping documents, the insurance papers, the customs forms, every last scrap of paper documenting *Snow White's* trip across the Atlantic."

"Of course." Herold's tone was assiduity itself. She set about locating the necessary files on one of the shelves. But a moment later she froze and the colour drained from her face. Herold looked aghast at Forss. Something awful must have occurred to her.

“So if what we have downstairs really is a forgery, where in the world is the original?”

Right now, Forss thought to herself, that is the least of my problems.

6

Ingrid Nystrom had managed to get Gunnar Gustavsson out of the exhibition room and steer him into the Japanese restaurant. The atmosphere in the darkened room and the sight of the macabre artwork had become oppressive and she tried to ignore the lump in her throat, even though that was easier said than done. Right now what mattered was detective work, not her sensibilities. If the strange tale the old man had told was true, then the matter was not just deeply puzzling, but did seem to indicate a crime had taken place. As they waited in *Izakaya Moshi* for Gustavsson’s double espresso and treble cognac, Nystrom scrutinised him. His strength may be on the wane, she thought, but mentally he was clearly still sharp. He certainly didn’t come across as a fantasist and she reminded herself she was dealing with the head of an international business. The walking stick, which she had taken as a sign of the infirmity of old age, seemed more likely a sign of a leg injury than frailty. Or

perhaps it was just the eccentric quirk of a conservative patriarch.

The drinks arrived and Gustavsson tossed them down one after the other. Nystrom waited for the alcohol and caffeine to take effect, but she didn't have to wait long. Something stirred in Gustavsson's eyes.

"We should talk about your wife and your wedding reception," she said at last, "even if the events are a long time ago now."

Gustavsson nodded firmly. If he still had a problem with sitting opposite a policewoman, then he wasn't showing it. Quite the opposite: he opened up with unexpected directness – perhaps the effect of the cognac.

"I'm not a man to beat about the bush." He cleared his throat. "Of course, it all started with Berit," he began, and his hoarse voice acquired an almost dreamy quality. "Everything started with Berit. She was the first girl I loved, and the last. She grew up in the next village, we were the same age, went to school together, and like me she came from what people called a foundry family. When it came down to it, all that mattered was her, her empathy, her creativity, the life in her smile. She wasn't just a beauty; she had the soul of an artist – I realised that very early on – she was a free spirit, the perfect counterpart to my analytical (and, to be honest, rather reserved) nature. I was fascinated by her, but daunted at the same time and that, I think, explains why it took me so long to express my feelings to her. You can only imagine my happiness when she said she felt the same for me. We were eighteen when at last we became an item and we got engaged when we were nineteen, though I had known for years that she was the right one – the only one – for

me. Really I'd known since I was a little boy." He paused for a moment as if touching on a precious memory. "After that it all went so quickly. Back then so many glass foundries were merging and Berit's family firm, the Thurstan foundry in Bytorp, was taken over by ours. The move made sense, economically as well as emotionally. Two years later we set the date of our wedding: August, Berit's favourite month of the year. It was to be in a meadow by a little grove of birches down by the lake, Berit's favourite place. It was to be the most splendid affair, everything we had ever wanted: two families coming together, two foundries and two villages you could hardly tell apart back then. The Gustavssons and the Thurstans, Rödahult and Bytorp. The weather was perfect: it was the most beautiful late summer day." The old man broke off and signalled to the waiter with his empty cognac glass. He clearly needed some fortification for the next part of his tale.

The next glass arrived and he drank it, more slowly this time. "What am I to say?" he went on. "Our fairy tale ended there and in its place began a nightmare that has gone on for decades." He gave Nyström a haunting look. "But one thing at a time. The party was in full swing, the tables were groaning under all the food, the beer and schnapps were flowing, the band played for the dances – you can picture it for yourself. There were more than two hundred people there, everyone was having the most wonderful time. The evening went on – I can still feel it today – and then suddenly a gusty wind set in, setting the lanterns in the birch trees swinging and giving a chill to the air. After all the speeches and the traditional songs we were supposed to play a sort of game, a tradition from Austrian weddings, one Herbert had insisted upon."

“Herbert?”

“Berit’s adopted brother, or as good as. Like so many skilled artisans, his parents had emigrated from Austria in the mid-sixties to work in the foundries in Småland. Herbert’s father was a gifted glass cutter, but died tragically only a few weeks after he arrived. It was the most awful accident: one of the furnaces blew up and killed him. His wife died eighteen months later of a stroke, leaving the thirteen-year-old Herbert behind. Back then the foundry owners really looked after their workforces, and the Thurstans were such a caring, generous family that they took in the young lad and brought him up almost as if he was their own. Herbert was a year younger than Berit – they were very close. I have thought about this a good deal in the years since and it struck me that when he and his family left their homeland, Herbert must have been much too young to remember this curious tradition for himself. But there were three or four of his compatriots, older fellows at the foundry, who I suspect put the idea into his head.”

“What idea?”

“Kidnapping the bride.”

“She was kidnapped?”

“Oh, just as a game, of course. At some point during the evening the bride would disappear with the best man or a close friend of the family and hide out in an inn or a tavern in a neighbouring village. The bridegroom – and usually a number of the guests, too – would go on the hunt for them and release his bride. It goes without saying that you’d have a good few drinks on the way. Anyhow, that’s how they do it in much of Austria and parts of southern Germany.”

“Rödahult and Bytorp aren’t really known for having a lot of pubs, are they?”

A fleeting smile passed over Gustavsson’s face.

“You’re right, they aren’t. Nowadays you have to drive twenty kilometres if you want to pop out for a drink in the evening, and back then it was even bleaker. But for Herbert the drinking wasn’t what mattered. He thought it would be much more fun to row Berit out to one of the islands just off where we were having the party. We had a little fishing hut on Österö and the plan was to wait there until I paddled over to complete the ritual of reclaiming my bride. We were going to have a glass of real champagne Berit’s father had brought back from a business trip to France. You hardly ever saw the stuff back then. We were going to use one glass made by Gustavsson and one by Thurstan to put the final stamp on the unification of our two families. At heart it was all a bit of silly fun, but Herbert was absolutely crazy about the idea and we didn’t want to get in the way of his little brainwave. If I’m honest, I found the whole plan rather over the top, not quite in keeping with how we do things here, and fitting it into the plan for the day at only two weeks’ notice was very difficult, but I sensed that Berit did not want to disappoint Herbert. He was, after all, like a brother to her, so I gave in and agreed to it. So Herbert’s so-called kidnapping was added to the ceremonies, and I think most of our guests found the whole thing rather funny – not least because I had the job of rowing over to Österö in a child’s rubber dinghy.”

Gustavsson drained the rest of his cognac in one go and waved for a third glass.

“As I mentioned earlier, the weather turned as the evening went on. The wind became gusty and the temperature dropped

suddenly. A while after Berit and Herbert had stolen off as planned I was to pretend I was furious, march down to the shore while all the guests cheered and clapped in time and then climb into this tiny little rubber boat in my best suit. Of course everyone found this hilarious. One of the junior partners was playing the fool but I didn't mind one bit. It was the best day of my life, I was drunk on joy and I'd had a drink or two as well. I was so happy. But the fun didn't last long. An hour before, the lake had been a mirror, but now it was churned up and waves were breaking over the little boat. It had no keel and the current was bearing me off in the wrong direction. I had to fight, really fight, to stay on any sort of course at all. I was soaked through with sweat within minutes and my muscles were burning. The crowd on the shore had no idea how serious my situation was, and a good number had already gone back to the tables to for another drink or a dance. It seemed like an age, but after three quarters of an hour I at last reached Österö, a trip that on a calm day and in a proper rowing boat would have taken five minutes. Exhausted, soaked through by the spray and frozen to the bone I stumbled up onto the island." He picked up the glass the waiter had brought over and let the cognac swirl slowly round it as he watched. "Finnish made," he said at last.

"The brandy?" Nyström asked, perplexed. Wasn't cognac called cognac because it came from the part of France with that name? Just like Champagne?

"The glass!" replied Gustavsson emphatically. "In the Swedish glass museum they serve their drinks in Finnish glasses." He shook his head disdainfully. "But to go back to my story, although I have already hinted at the *denouement*."

"Berit and Herbert weren't on the island," Nystrom replied.

“No,” he said, “they were not. They weren’t on Österö or back at the party or at home or anywhere to be found. They were gone, disappeared without a trace, as if the earth had simply swallowed them up. For forty-seven years I have heard nothing from Berit, no indication she was still alive, no proof that she was dead. The same goes for Herbert.”

“What happened to the rowing boat?” Nyström asked, the detective in her stirring to life. “Did they recover it?”

Gustavsson shook his head.

“As you would imagine, I moved heaven and earth to find Berit. That very night we organised search parties, combed the lake in motorboats and searched the other islands and the other parts of the lake shore. We went to the villages round about and asked the inhabitants if they had seen anything. But nothing. No-one had seen or heard anything.”

“What about divers? Wasn’t the most likely explanation that they capsized? In your account of what happened you were quite emphatic on how bad the conditions were.”

“Of course divers were deployed in the days that followed, but they found nothing. That lake covers seventeen square kilometres, the shoreline is over forty kilometres long, and some stretches are almost inaccessible. There was no way we could search that area systematically, and you must remember that our equipment was very primitive in comparison to what you have today. We had no sonar, no GPS. More than a decade later some fishermen came across the carcass of a sunken rowing boat but what does that mean in a lake of that size? We could not reconstruct it to find out if it was the boat in question. And in any case, the lake is of great depth. In some parts the water temperature never gets above five degrees, even in summer. A

forensic pathologist told me sometime later that a corpse falling into water that cold would not necessarily float back up to the surface.”

Nyström nodded. One of her friends, a pathologist called Ann-Vivika Kimsel, had often explained in great detail how bodies behave in water: the process of decomposition is retarded by low temperatures, such that the gases released by putrefaction never build up in sufficient quantities to bring the body back to the surface.

“So it is impossible to exclude the possibility of a capsizing?”

“Until I came to this damned private view this morning and walked in and saw Berit’s wedding dress inside that glass coffin, that was the only explanation I ever believed,” said Gustavsson and finished what was left of his cognac.

7

Stina Forss and Ingrid Nyström were sitting opposite each other at the desk in Nyström’s office.

“What do you make of this whole affair?” Nyström asked.

Forss was inspecting her fingernails. They bore the last remnants of their blue varnish. It was high time for a proper manicure. Maybe gold this time?

“It’s a strange tale, whichever way you look at it,” she said, adjusting her eye patch. “One thing is certain and that’s tomorrow everyone will be talking about it. According to Herold there were three or four journalists at the private view. Old Gustavsson chucked them all out on their ear when he made his discovery – the members of the board, the whole Gustavsson clan, all the arty types, too. It will be a proper scandal.”

“Edman will love it,” said Nyström, quietly.

“That’s if it even is a case for us and not just a tasteless joke by the artist or a New York art collector.”

“First we need all the old police files. Gustavsson came across as entirely plausible to me – his story had the ring of truth to it. Nonetheless, he may still be mistaken about the dress. Forty-seven years is a long time, and people do sometimes see what they want to see. What can really give us a lead are the bones, assuming of course they are real.”

“DNA will only help if we have something to compare it to.”

“Gustavsson has preserved all his wife’s belongings ever since.”

“So a romantic heart does beat in the chest of the crusty old patriarch.”

“You’d be surprised at how open he was about his feelings.”

“A blood sample would be ideal, but why would anyone hold on to something like that? Failing that, then a comb with a few hairs caught in it, though without the roots they can’t provide information of much significance. An amulet with a lock of her hair wouldn’t help us much, either.”

“Thank you for the forensics tutorial,” replied Nyström, tartly. “Of course the chances are slim, but let’s keep our fingers crossed all the same. The crime scene squad are already on their

way to the family estate, and the coffin is being brought to our investigation suite so Ann-Vivika can have a closer look.”

“I hope they’ve got a forklift handy,” muttered Forss.

“We’ll go over the rest with the team tomorrow morning. Can you dig out the old case files and have a look through them by then?” *Berit Gustavsson* and *Herbert Moosbrugger*.”

“Aye aye sir,” Forss replied. This was going to be a hell of a job, but what other plans did she have for her Saturday evening? Apart from a G&T, not much else, to be honest. Still, she waited for a little “thank you”, even if only because Nyström was usually such a polite person.

But there was nothing.

And Forss knew exactly why.

She gave a thin-lipped smile, rose and left the office without a word.

1968, Bytorp

My God, how much did I dance last night? It went on for hours, dancing like we were crazy! My feet are still glowing. Oh yes, the punch had a kick to it, and then there was the vodka which Maja had hidden in the toilets. I probably made a right fool of myself, dancing barefoot on the table like that! But it felt so good, just being free, not a care in the world. You only finish school once in your life, don't you? And I'm free at last! Never have to go back to that intellectual prison and nod along like a good girl in front of old Abrahamsson. Best of all? No more French verbs! They used to put the fear of God into me. I think the only teacher out of the whole lot I'll actually miss is Miss Clarin. She may not be the best artist in the world, but without her I'd never have got my drawing and watercolours up to where they are today. Her taste in art history was always too stuck in the nineteenth century for me, too much Monet and Manet and her darling Anders Zorn, as if the exciting stuff didn't really happen later. But at least I could gen up on modernism in the library myself. True, I'm sure there are still plenty of gaps, but I hope they won't be too obvious at art school. That is, if they accept me, and that's not a given, not by any means. I feel queasy when I think of all the polished application forms tossed in offhand, you know, by those young bohemians in Stockholm with their private art teachers and great museums on their doorstep where they can just wander in whenever they like and study the originals. Have I even got a chance? Miss Clarin did support me all the way and keep encouraging me, but let's be honest: when it comes down to it she's a provincial art teacher at a provincial grammar school

with a provincial girl for a student – yours truly – who she tries to inspire with her tales of her ‘Années parisiennes’, though I’m not even sure any more if they ever really happened. Well, we’ll see, won’t we. All I can do is trust my abilities, believe in myself and hope for the best.

Anyway, it’ll be some time until I hear back from them. I’ll probably spend most of my time in the foundry, even if daddy doesn’t like it – in any case, he gives the impression he doesn’t. Herbert gave me the idea a while back. He sometimes makes these things on his breaks: animals, plants, all kinds of things. I wouldn’t say it’s art, even if they are pretty pieces to look at, though you could make art out of them. Glass art, that’s what you’d call it. Miss Clarin would throw her hands up in horror, daddy would shake his head and my industrious little brother would probably look aghast. Why is little Petter always so serious and so stubborn? I’m not going to let it get to me: I’ve decided I’m going to try experimenting with glass – formal abstraction, lots of colour. Kandinsky in glass. It sounds pretentious, doesn’t it! Ha ha! Daddy is bound to grumble about the cost, but of course I know he can’t refuse me. He never can, the old softy. And who knows where it might lead. If Stockholm reject my portfolio this year because they’ve had enough of earnest still lifes and worthy watercolour landscapes, I’ll just give it another go, turn up on their doorstep with a portfolio full of abstract objects. It sounds pretty philosophical, doesn’t it, but they would never have seen anything like it, that’s for sure. Ha, maybe there is something good to come from being a Småland country bumpkin after all.

And ‘good’ is the right word, too, dear diary. I’ve saved the best for last. “Le meilleur vient à la fin”, as Miss Clarin would

say – yes, yes, those lovely years in Paris. Yesterday evening he kissed me! At last! I'm worried he's been building himself up to it for years. It was, well, a bit strange. He always comes across as so stiff. Is he a charming British "gentleman" or a square at heart? Those suits he wears, are they quirky or just terribly conservative? Or both? Politically and culturally he's so stale, but he's clever, quick-witted and he gets straight to the point. I like our discussions, the intellectual ping-pong – I like the way they challenge me. When he kissed me I was ready to go further, but that was obviously going too fast for him. Have I frightened him off? That's hardly likely – he's been pining for me since forever. He's like a dotting puppy, that's what Maja always says. But I don't want to judge him prematurely. Let's wait and see how things turn out. The summer is long, and I can get to Rödahult in fifteen minutes on Petter's moped, even if my darling brother would rather saw his own leg off than lend me his pride and joy. It's no bad thing I know where he hides the key (under the underwear catalogues in his chest of drawers – how original!!) It's quite a thought, isn't it: stolen mopeds, midnight visits, ladders leant against windows, whispers in the moonlight, two families, each alike in dignity... Romeo and Juliet in the glass foundry, where we lay our scene.

[END OF SAMPLE]