

# *Mamma Karasjok*, by Per Hansson

Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1970

## Chapter 1

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Two days after her father had gone out to hunt wolves, he was brought home as a dead man.

When the nomadic Sami neared the farmstead with the body in their sled [pulke], the dead man's youngest daughter, Kirsten, was out in the farmyard, teasing the aurora. Cheekily, she yelled mocking words up toward the gossamer curtains of light, shining like silk and waving in the black polar sky.

People said that anyone who provoked the aurora could become cross-eyed. But her body reverberated so well when she laid her head back and hollered and made faces, and the aurora shot yellow and green tongues of flame down toward Haldefjell and the fields, heavy with snow.

The child closed her mouth to a small furrow in her round face, and she gathered herself into her reindeer jacket [pesken] when the quivering tongues of flame cut so deep down toward the earth that she believed they might tear and sweep up the snow and snatch her away as well.

She raced into the barn to hide among the cows, when suddenly the clatter of a sled on the hard-packed path from the river drove away her fear of the groping aurora fingers. And just as quickly her anxious little face became gentle and joyous. She laughed while she ran to meet the men and reindeer.

Her father lay stiffly in the sled. His face was white and his brown eyes were still and half closed. Kirsten took his arm and cried out, "Father!"

One of the men said in a soft, weary voice, "Your father is dead..."

Johannes had been in the grip of fever when the two other hunters set him in the sled, in a spot deep in the forest by the Anarjokka River. Cautiously, they had tied him in securely so the sick man would not be thrown out in rough terrain.

Through the fir forest, birch scrub, over the bare white tundra and ice-covered rivers, they had mercilessly driven their reindeer to bring Johannes home. There were almost thirty degrees of frost and the animals' hot breath had risen like gray-white streams out of their quivering nostrils.

But even though they had run so the snow sprayed up around their hooves, nothing in the world could have run fast enough to save Johannes. Before they were halfway there, the fever broke his heart. If he was aware

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of anything in his last hour in the swaying sled, it must have been the shimmering, waving aurora.

He had been nearly seventy years old, but for a man who, at that age, goes hunting wolves, death is just as distant as it might be for much younger men. And his wife, twenty years younger, had never thought about Johannes' death, so she did not weep when they came with his body.

With eyes as motionless as the dead man's, she stared at the nomadic Sami men and said, "Carry him into the bedroom--" "--Carefully," she added.

Her gaze continued to be frozen still with shock. She walked with stiff knees and arms held straight down along her sides, very softly after the two men, when they carried Johannes into the house. As soon as they had laid the corpse down on the bed, they hurried out again into the kitchen.

Johannes lay in his full winter attire with his reindeer jacket, fur boots, and mittens; dressed in death as he had been two days earlier when he went wolf-hunting near the Anarjokka.

Marit took off his fur cap, and his thick grizzled hair made his face even whiter.

When she closed her husband's eyes, anxiety washed over her. Not for Johannes, not because he lay lifeless and stiff. Johannes had been patient and righteous. But it was terror of that which no one has seen, that which is on the other side of life. She felt *that* in the bedroom. The air was thick with *that*. She breathed *that* in, and *that* smelled like rotten swamp water, and it was clammy against her face and knotted on her shoulders.

In the kitchen the two men sat along with three of the large flock of children she had together with Johannes. There was Elen, and the youngest boy, who was named after his father, and the youngest child, Kirsten. The two eldest sons, Anders and Josef, were out with a horse and sled, bringing home hay from an outlying barn near Bakkeljokk.

Elen cried and Kirsten did too, because her sister was sobbing. The boy stood with his head bowed and stared at the floor.

Marit put the coffee pot on the stove. She turned then toward the two men at the big kitchen table and the older one cleared his throat and told her, "It must have been pneumonia Johannes got. We had not gone long after the wolves before he began to sweat so frightfully. We went on a bit, but soon he couldn't stand up, and we cut some fir branches and he lay

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down. We melted snow and gave him water, and he drank and drank. His face became red with fever, and we held snow against his forehead and cheeks. Then he became delirious, and we put him in the sled and drove home as fast as the reindeer could run. When we were about halfway here, his face was no longer red, but white, and we thought the fever had gone away. We stopped to look more closely at him, and then we realized Johannes was dead..."

The man stopped speaking.

Marit went from child to child and stroked their hair. No one could find a word to say. The only sound was the nomadic Sami men slurping their warm coffee. They felt helpless and longed to get away from the widow and the dead man and the crying children.

When Marit heard her older sons come with their load of hay, she went out into the farmyard to tell them that their father was dead. Out there in the dark she would not have to see the sudden pain in the faces of Anders and Josef, and afterwards they could take their time to look after the horse and get the hay into the loft.

Marit told them about the pneumonia, that their father had died on the way to the farm, and the sons asked no questions.

Anders just stroked and stroked the horse's neck, and Josef pulled straw after straw out of the load of hay and dropped them on the snow. So they stood until their mother went inside again, and then they took the hay into the barn.

Marit left the paraffin lamp burning all night, and everyone slept in the loft.

The next day, Elen was sent to Kirkestedet to inform the relatives. Anders and Josef went out into the forest to cut fir trees and saw planks for the casket. No one needed to measure the corpse to make the casket big enough, and wordlessly the brothers worked hour after hour.

Two of Kirsten's sisters worked at Kirkestedet for board and clothing that year, and together with other relatives they came home to Svineng in the afternoon.

Marit had help taking care of Johannes' body. They put on brass rings before they moved him and put him in the coffin. Sawdust was spread on the bottom and a cushion was set under the dead man's head.

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Johannes had left for the wolf hunt a healthy and strong man, and when death takes people without warning, they go alone over the last boundary. And even in a home where there had been only good words and deeds, the sorrow is more than sorrow if the living do not have a chance to ask forgiveness for times when their love and affection was not perfect.

Up in that harsh country, god-fearing people had their own way of finding comfort in the face of sudden and violent death, and one of Johannes' relatives made sure that Marit and the children took a proper farewell from the dead man.

He set a stool on each side of the casket. Then he climbed up, and holding Marit's hand, he stepped over the casket onto the stool on the other side and said, loud and clear, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..."

He went around the casket and up onto the stool again, and stepped over time after time while repeating, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..." until he had held all the children's hands while he carried out the procedure.

In the light from the paraffin lamp, the flickering shadow of the man in his traditional coat [kofte] towered high on the log walls, but Kirsten was not afraid of anything in the bedroom now. She cried a little because her older sisters cried a lot, but she couldn't grasp that her father would be gone forever, when he lay in the coffin. And her mother and sisters were wearing their Sunday best clothes even though it was a weekday and she herself had received a new kerchief from Ravna...

It was crowded in the little bedroom, and Kirsten stood with her face right against the casket. It smelled so pleasantly of the fresh, unpainted fir boards that she began to think of the lush grass up on Assebakte-seter. And when she herself, as the youngest, was finally taken in hand by her uncle, the green meadows waved in her imagination. When for the tenth time he climbed from stool to stool over the casket, she had to stand on her toes in order to keep from losing touch with his big hand, which was smooth and wet with sweat.

But then Kirsten began to tremble with fear, for Ravna's sobbing gave over to a long quavering tone, a loud monotonous wail that cut through the weeping of the other women. Kirsten had heard a bird shriek like her sister on the edge of the forest the previous summer...

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Marit drove the horse that pulled the coffin to Kirkestedet. Kirsten got the place beside her on the sled. The other daughters and sons went on skis to the burial.

A group of Johannes' relatives had broken up the frozen sandy earth in the little churchyard.

On her father's side, from time immemorial, they had lived and died in Karasjok and on the wide tundra plateau [vidda] around the great valley. Johannes was one of that heritage and stock who had right of inheritance to the endless wild lands, lakes, and rivers. On maps and in documents it was called Finnmark; Johannes would call it Sami-land.

Certainly they were Norwegian citizens, but their rights of citizenship were marked by language coercion, taxes, and grueling toil for a living.

In order to wrest from meager nature the necessities of food, clothing, and fuel, thrift and untiring effort was the rule for those who did not want to meekly descend into hopeless poverty.

Johannes had accepted those conditions without protest from the age of seven, when he began his working life, until he collapsed, more than sixty years later, in the forest by Anarjokka – hunting predators, which had killed reindeer far and wide during that snowy winter.

He had been respected even by the Norwegian officials, who had appointed him as a permanent court witness at the Karasjok parliament.

He had received a little cash compensation to hear complaints, defenses, and judgments concerning reindeer theft and assaults. And even the smallest payment was a large sum in a society where men drove their wares in sleds many miles over the tundra and were paid by the merchants with alcoholic drinks or a syrup cake.

The day Johannes was buried, the ice fog lay thick and gray as a wall over the river ice. There was no breath of wind in the air, and over the unpainted log houses at Kirkestedet the smoke from the pitchy fir firewood coiled up from the chimneys.

The priest spoke of the darkness of death and the light of blessed salvation, and the interpreter translated easily and quickly into the Sami language. When the hymns were sung, Kirsten could join in for many verses. Her mother had always sung at home in the kitchen while she wove cloth or tanned skins.

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The priest spoke of Johannes as an industrious, skilled, and god-fearing man, but Johannes didn't need to be dead in a coffin to deserve that testimonial. When he was sixty years old, he had sold his land in Kirkestedet and bought land from the government a Norwegian mile farther up river on the banks of the Karasjok River. At that time the authorities did not want to sell government land to farmers who could barely speak their Norwegian mother tongue. But Johannes could both read and speak Norwegian, and he got as much land as he could pay for.

At first, he and Marit had lived together with the children in a one-room cabin. But they had worked hard, and the next year at Svineng there stood a log cabin with kitchen, bedroom, and loft, and a barn.

The strong, callused fists were white and bloodless now, but in a few months the fields he had managed to put in order would become bright green meadows in the Polar lands' nightless summer.

The priest was so cold that his voice shook when he continued, "From earth have you come, till earth you shall go, from earth will you be resurrected..." He hurried home as soon as the psalm was finished.

The Sami were slower to take their farewell of Johannes. They sang two more hymns with many verses. Then, in small groups and with quiet conversation, they walked to their log houses, which crouched down in the snow, their windows caked with ice.

Marit remained behind with her children and watched the gravediggers shove frozen clumps of earth over the coffin. The clods banged against the fir planks, and she pulled her kerchief tighter around her ears.

The coffin lay in a deep crevice, which was dug up before the frost made the earth as hard as stone and iron. They dug it each summer, making it as long as they reckoned necessary, in their experience, to accommodate those who would die in the coming winter season.

When the soil became soft and pliant under their shovels in early summer, the coffins would be placed wherever the families wished them to be.

Johannes would be placed beside his mother's grave. She had been named Anna and belonged to the powerful Sami-Finnish Heino family with thousands of reindeer in the expanses near Palojärvi...

But Marit did not want Johannes to be invisible until he could be buried next to Anna. Now she sent Josef to the sled to fetch the cross she

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had placed under the furs. It was made of the most knot-free fir the two oldest sons could find. Anders, who had the cleverest hands of all the sons, had carved into the unpainted wood:

† Johannes Josefsen †

They didn't want to step right on the casket, so Marit and Josef squeezed themselves into the side of the crevice and held the cross between them. They bent themselves over the grave and pressed it down into the hard-frozen clumps of earth. Then the sons collected small stones which they piled around the cross, so that it would not be knocked over by wind or animals.

A mere stone's throw from the Karasjok river, Johannes had built the barn and log cabin.

Another man, before them, had lived in the level strip of land between the riverbank and the mountainside. That was so long ago that the man's name was forgotten, but not the animals he had kept.

In Karasjok they had not seen pigs before he came with them over the vidda, and they made such an impression that people called the place "Spinegädde". Some decades after Marit and Johannes had bought the land, the Sami name was Norwegianized to "Svineng".

So the pigs were remembered for all time, whereas all that was left of the unknown Sami settler were some ruins of a cabin covered with birch bark and turf [gamme], which was cleared away the first year Johannes came to the farm.

After the casket had been placed in the winter grave at Kirkestedet, Marit could not smile again for a long time. They all noticed Johannes' absence, now that he was gone. They felt insecure, and that had been a foreign feeling for them as long as he was alive. He had had a great inner warmth, though it was as though he had arthritis in his arms when he clumsily tried to stroke the children's cheeks. He could never really say what he felt. Both laughter and weeping had lain so deep that only his eyes could tell Marit and the children whether he felt joy or sorrow.

In the evenings he had sat on his spindle-back chair in the kitchen with crossed arms. Most of the time he sat quietly and followed Marit with his eyes, while she worked with pots and pans, butter churning, weaving, and preparing skins. He had the good light in his eyes, for Marit mostly told him about things he enjoyed hearing.

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Everything around Johannes had been secure, quiet, and unchanging. The only unpredictable thing he had ever done was to die suddenly during the wolf hunt by the Anarjokka.

Marit possessed many skills. She could heal sore fingers and boils with resin and sap from fir trees, and a bad cough could be helped with a mixture of tar and water, which she boiled and gave to the children. She traveled around as midwife and predicted the weather after studying the sky and other signs in the forest and water. And so, she had the means to make life bearable without Johannes. She could manage that by working harder than ever. Outdoors and in the house they toiled all together until they crept, dead tired, under the fur covers in the evening, and slept long and well.

The sons freighted wood and fetched hay from the outer fields, far away. Reindeer moss, which was harvested and stored in the mountains in late summer, was brought to the farm for winter feed. A single sled load required a whole day's work. No, they didn't have so much time to think about Johannes that it might cause them pain.

There were five cows and many sheep at the farm, and Marit was especially careful with looking after the stables. True enough, she had inherited some reindeer, which traveled with the herd of a nomadic Sami, but the stable was the wall that held hunger away from Svineng.

They almost never had money. Those who, from time to time, bought milk, butter, and meat in Karasjok were so few that they could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The people in authority mostly bought from the farmer nearest to Kirkestedet, and he was in such need of cash that he was grateful to sell at the spot price.

In the big kitchen at Svineng, Marit and her daughters worked every day throughout the winter. They carded and spun wool. They wove homespun textiles and colourful belts, tanned reindeer skins and sewed summer and winter boots and leggings. They needed much clothing to keep the cold out, but most of what they made was traded away.

The nomadic Sami paid for boots and leggings with meat and reindeer skins. Marit also traded with the merchant in Kirkestedet. The things she had woven and sewn from wool and reindeer hide at home in Svineng were exchanged for flour, grain, salt, and a little coffee.

The things she offered in trade were beautiful and durable, and the townsfolk never forgot that her father, Anders Jonsson, had been the bailiff



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[lensmann] in Karasjok, with all the authority and expertise that Norwegian authorities had in other districts.

Long after wild berries and moss had covered his grave, and the cross stood crooked with age and the force of many winter storms, people talked about Anders Jonsson with respect. They had good reason for that. A Sami-born man must have particularly great abilities in order to get a post that a Norwegian middle-class man would like to have.

Over all of Karasjok she was called Lensmanns-Marit, and often her name was mentioned because she never refused to help in a house or cabin or tent where people lay sick or a woman was giving birth. Herself, Marit used her mother's family name. Her mother had been called Elen Lindi, and had as a young girl driven with sled and reindeer over the tundra from Swedish Lapland to the market at Alta.

The Swedish Sami, with whom she had traveled through the wilderness, went home again after several days, but Elen Lindi never crossed the border again.

Anders Jonsson was also at the Alta spring market, and he didn't go back to Karasjok alone. Elen Lindi traveled with him, and the first house they stopped at in Kirkestedet was the priest's farm, where they took out the banns for their marriage.

The bride did not have her parents there, but still she didn't come empty-handed. From Sweden Elen Linki had brought along everything she owned, and that was more than twenty reindeer, four traditional Sami coats [kofte], clothing, much reindeer hide and a copper coffee pot.

Before the time came when his hair and beard became gray, Anders Jonsson could sing special Sami songs [joik] about her when he drove his sled over the tundra, where no human ear could hear that a bailiff sang anything other than hymns.

"As soft as silk she is, and gentler than a summer night, and wiser than a bear, she is, Elen Lindi, from a land far away..."

Kirsten didn't tease the aurora any more that winter. As soon as she felt the urge to run around the farmyard and shout mocking words up toward the waving vanes of light in the dark sky, she saw her father's white face and motionless body in the sled. If she was together with other children, it happened that she cried a little because they had fathers...

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Mostly, she was in the kitchen and watched her mother and sisters as they wove and spun, tanned skins and sewed. Kirsten was to make sure there was always enough wood by the fireplace, and she had her own little low stool by the hearth.

She could sit still for hours and listen to the others talk about the nomadic Sami and reindeer herds, about preachers and people who were filled with the Spirit at revival meetings.

Sometimes they chatted about wolves and bears, about summertime up at Assebakseter, and the Russian merchant, who came with sled full of milled grain and rye flour and traded for textiles, boots, and belts. In between the chatter, they sang hymns, and Kirsten climbed up on her stool so her mother and God could more easily hear that she knew most of the verses.

Her sister Ravna laughed easily, and when she looked over toward the hearth at her little sister singing, her face would get red with suppressed laughter... She had to force herself to think about Hell and everlasting damnation in order to subdue the welling-up of her high spirits.

The strict teaching of Lars Levi Læstadius was the law for the people of Svineng, and the sudden glitter of laughter in Ravna's dark eyes in the middle of hymn-singing was sin in her mother's view.

Marit stretched the tunes out, lengthened each verse, and held every word so long in her mouth that single notes vibrated four or five times between the log walls. The slow singing could make you feel so heavy in spirit and body, and that made Marit feel farther from sin.

Kirsten could not manage to sing "fa-a-a-a-ther". She could not manage more than one long and one short "a", so if she knew the text well, she would get several lines ahead of her mother and sisters.

Everything was of God's grace for Marit; even the food they toiled for from morning to night. God was thanked before and after meals, and every evening Marit collected everyone in the kitchen to say the Lord's Prayer.

Marit interpreted the Bible such that the way to eternal salvation could not be found without the strongest will to resist the world's temptations. For her the God of prayer was unconditional, and if His requirements were impossible to fulfil, she was always hungry that her sins should be forgiven.

Everything that was not strictly necessary was seen as sin in disguise. But because meager nature offered them so little in any case, the teaching of

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the preacher from the Swedish wilderness and his fervent disciples was more of a comfort than a sacrifice in life's struggle.

Marit didn't need to fear censure if a preacher came to Svineng. In the kitchen they had the fireplace, table, benches, two low stools, and two spindle-back chairs. She used the one chair, and after Johannes died, the eldest son sat in the other. The furniture was unpainted, like the house and barn, and everything was cut and carved with their own hands... In the bedroom stood a chest, and the bed was built into the corner, so that the walls made two sides and two wide planks made the others. In the loft there were also built-in beds. Two people slept in each bed, and if everyone was home at the same time, two children slept on the floor with a sheepskin and reindeer skin underneath.