

Mamma Karasjok, by Per Hansson

Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1970

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In February, for the first time since November, they saw the sun again. Wild with happiness, Kirsten ran from the kitchen to the stable and then to the edge of the forest to tell Anders, Josef, and Johannes that the sun had come back. And though they were already aware of the light, they let Kirsten believe they hadn't seen the brilliant radiance over Haldefjell before she called to them. She stumbled into the snow pile along the side of the road in her eagerness, and Josef ran laughing from the wood shed and picked her up. He swung his youngest sister in his arms and threw her down in a giant snowdrift. In her reindeer jacket she rolled like a ball of fur down toward the road again, and Johannes, who was six years older than she, laughed until he hiccupped and threw himself down on his belly beside her. She was so joyful that she had to help the laughter out of her body by kicking her legs and beating her fur-mitted hands on the ground.

The daughters were outside to look at the sun, and Marit was alone in the kitchen. She stood over by the window and scraped the condensation and ice off the windowpane that faced toward Haldefjell. Marit thought there would be good and lush grass on the flat field that Johannes had cultivated by the river banks the last summer he was alive, and she also thought that, before the sun disappeared again, both Anders and Josef must stay home and take in the hay harvest, while she and the others were up on the summer pastures at Assebakte-seter.

Little Johannes came out from the fir forest on the other river bank and walked across the ice to Svineng. He had run and climbed in order to stand on the mountaintop in the sunshine. But before he got to the top in the splendid light, the year's first minutes of summer were past. Ravna saw her brother come and felt the need to be kind to him. She said, "Go up on Haldefjell before the sun comes up tomorrow, then it will shine a long time on you." "Yes, I won't make that mistake twice," the youngest boy answered.

Ravna twirled her forefinger in the black hair that flowed over her forehead, out from under her red Karasjok cap. She felt like singing a joik, but didn't dare so close to the house.

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Their mother thought that joiking was a sin, for that was what Sami had done before they became Christians. These days, the only people who joiked were those who were not saved, or who couldn't resist the devil's brandy and caroused around Kirkestedet and the marketplaces.

The sunny times that they always longed for had come back to the land of winter, and their steps became quicker and they smiled more often. Now they sang hymns so loudly in the kitchen that even Marit came in with a less-slow rhythm.

She didn't watch for the sunrise the way the others did during those first days after the light returned to Karasjok, but still her spirit was lighter. Her humour became even better because there were so many ptarmigan in the snares.

Ptarmigan were the only thing they could always get cash for, and the birds in their white winter plumage were a financial rescue for many on the tundra. "It is such a good year for ptarmigan that we can manage the taxes," people would say.

Anders, Josef, and Johannes twisted together horse-tail hairs to make a continuous supply of snares. The horsehair didn't get stiff with frost, but twined itself smoothly and tightly around the foot or neck of the ptarmigan when it had scratched unaware into the slip-knot, and it cut in deeper with each despairing struggle that the bird made trying to escape.

The sons pursued their hunt over the whole area, and each one had a day when he would ski out for hours to check all the snares. They never came home empty-handed that winter.

The snares were in the birch scrub on the ridge that meandered through the flat stretches of land where the hay fields lay. It was a short distance away, and because no wolves had howled near the farm for a long time, the siblings thought that Kirsten could also look after the snares.

When the little fur-clad figure ran pulling her sled up the path toward the ridge, there was great amusement in the kitchen. Only their mother remained serious.

Marit had raised many children, and they could definitely feel empathy with others' pain. But all, with the exception of Kirsten, had fenced boundaries in their spirit, so that the misfortunes of others did not become

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their own. Therefore, Marit was unhappy with the thought that Kirsten would be taking dead birds out of the snares.

There was a ptarmigan in the first snare she came to. The bird lay so white and cold that for her, it had never been alive, and shaking with eagerness she loosened the slip-knot.

There were ptarmigan in snare after snare. Some were caught fast by the leg, some had the twine around their neck, and all were cold and white as the snow. Time after time she threw herself down on her knees and tore and pulled the slippery horsehair thread.

With the long leather strap Josef had given her, she fastened the birds tightly on her sled, and down the ridge she ran.

Her round face was red from the running, and she could hardly speak from excitement, when her siblings stood in the barnyard and clapped their hands.

Quietly, Little Johannes said something or other that made them laugh, and Kirsten laughed the loudest, from joy over all the ptarmigan on her sled.

Kirsten must go the next morning too, they said, and right away they bubbled over with excitement, and Kirsten howled with laughter, because everyone was so happy.

The next day, Kirsten was up several hours before the sun lit up the summit of Haldefjell, and in the dawn darkness she ran off with her sled behind her.

There were ptarmigan in the first and second traps. In the fourth and fifth she also found birds, and they all seemed as though they had grown up out of the snow and had never been alive. But when she knelt down at the seventh snare and pushed her fingers in under the slip-knot, she fell backward in terror. There had been a heartbeat in the bird and it had felt warm in her cold hands.

Kirsten got to her feet and wanted to run back to the farm, but she knelt again and carefully loosened the slip-knot from the bird's neck.

She clasped the bird and felt its life beating against the palms of her hands.

The eyes!

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Her father's eyes were half-open when he lay in the sleigh, and she bent over and looked at the bird's eyes. They were black and round like crowberries and wide open.

She remained sitting with the bird in her lap. It had become cold long before she dug a deep hole in the snow. When she placed the dead bird in the hole and pushed snow over it, she said, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..."

From the kitchen window, they saw her come with her sled. Her head was bowed toward the ground, and she stumbled several times before she stood in the yard.

They wanted to give her the same welcome as they had the previous day, but the shouts stayed in their mouths when they saw Kirsten's face and the sled.

She had only four ptarmigan, but Anders and the youngest brother had taken ten from the storage house the evening before and hung them in the snares on the ridge so Kirsten could have fun one more day.

Josef looked at the little girl in her too-large jacket. She had cried, and he asked why she did not have more birds on her sled.

When she didn't answer, he said, "Go in and get something to eat." He fastened on his skis to fetch the other six birds on the ridge.

Kirsten lay with her mother in the bed in the bedroom that evening, and Marit held her with both arms around her little body and said, "So, so, my child..."

Kirsten felt her mother's heart beat, and again she held the dead bird between her hands, and all at once the round, black crowberry eyes stared at her from the walls and ceiling.

Her mother spoke of the cows and everything they would do on the seter the next summer, but only when she began to talk about the strange goldminer did Kirsten relax in her arms.

One evening the previous spring, a goldminer had come and asked to stay overnight. He had traveled a long way, and he must have been a stranger to the highland tundra, for he could not speak anything but Norwegian.

Marit had gone to the county school and in her younger years she had worked in the magistrate's office in Alta, and when the goldminer heard that

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she could speak his language, he made up, that evening, for many days of silence.

A sheepskin was placed on the kitchen floor so he could rest comfortably, and in the morning he had been so grateful and happy that he wanted to pay Marit two kroner.

But even though he was Norwegian, Marit didn't want to take the money. He just stood there with the coins in his huge hand, and he was such a giant that even Josef looked like a dwarf next to him.

Kirsten remembered him better than anyone else who had asked to stay overnight at Svineng. For the giant had a long beard as yellow as cloudberry, and he had given her the two kroner that her mother had refused.

The only coin Kirsten had ever had was a five-øre piece that a relative gave her. The two shiny kroner had been a sum so unimaginable that she stood with her mouth agape and the coins in her open hand. Over her, the goldminer had towered and been so enormous that she actually felt bigger at the foot of Haldefjell.

He had smiled in his cloudberry-beard right up under the ceiling, and when he left, Kirsten had run after the giant until the edge of the forest to see if he knocked over the trees instead of going around the thickets. He carried a lot on his back, but his steps were light and long. He walked toward the gold fields along the river Sargejokka, and he had given away his last two kroner because he was young and full of dreams of finding bags of gold before the winter drove him back south.

Kirsten had the two kroner in her hand, but they were less real for her than the hills with gold dust in the man's dreams.

There were valuable items at the village store. She had seen things on the shelves. But the things that were on the far side of all possibility, she never thought to wish for. She had never had a toy from the shop, and had never missed such things.

At Svineng there were plenty of twisted roots, rags, snow drifts and icicles, stones and sand, flowers and old reindeer antlers, sheep and cows and human kindness.

Therefore, it had never happened that Kirsten had bought anything with money, but she received, nonetheless, much for those two kroner. For a long time, she felt rich and significant after she had lent them to Ravna.

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Afterward, she forgot the debt, but she never forgot the giant with the cloudberry-yellow beard.

In the dark, Marit's hand gently stroked her child's face, and now she felt Kirsten's mouth smile under her fingers.

The frozen rivers were winter roads for the people of the tundra. Covered with snow, they lay like streets heavy with snow, mile after mile between the forests, flat land, and steep mountainsides. With reindeer or horses, one could travel long days over the even, thick carpet of snow, and no one would get lost if they kept going along the river banks.

Because Svineng was a Norwegian mile from Kirkestedet and only a small stone's throw from the Karasjokka river, many people sought a night's stay at the farm. And never did anyone stand outside the log cabin and hesitate to knock.

In Sami houses, turf cabins, or tents, everyone went right in if they needed warmth or a place to sleep. The rule of hospitality was unwritten, but as dependable as the reindeer herds' migrations every spring and fall. If anyone did the unthinkable and refused a peaceful traveler a place to sleep, his name would have been despised over all the Arctic lands, and in the worst snowstorm he would knock in vain on closed doors.

Such had been the custom for thousands of heathen years, and Marit saw it also as part of her responsibility as a Christian, to provide travelers the greatest possible help. If elderly people came to the farm, the younger family members at Svineng would give up their beds and sleep on the floor, and if a visitor had no food, he was satisfied at Marit's table. But most had with them a sack of reindeer meat and a little leather bag of coffee beans.

From the wilderness there sometimes came travelers who almost never saw other people. They sat silent as though they had forgotten every word, and the custom was to ask no questions of those who remained silent.

Kirsten liked best the talkative guests, and there were very few who didn't ask for news and tell where they came from and why they were traveling...

Many from Kirkestedet and the vidda around also came to the farm and spoke the best words they had thought out in order to get Marit to come with them. She had such sharp eyes, they said. Such skilful hands, and

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such a unique understanding of illnesses and childbirth, that they didn't know how they could possibly manage if she couldn't help the pregnant women or sick people they came to plead for. They knew, too, that she would do God's will as far as any human had the power to do, and no one denied that the Lord stood behind her at the sickbed or childbed and helped with anything that Lensmanns-Marit could not manage alone.

She had come by her reputation as a midwife many years before, and respect for her increased continually because she always helped those who asked for help. If those who sent for her thought about the fact that she managed the large household at Svineng, including both the barn and work in the house, nonetheless they asked her to come. Marit went out to help and toiled hard at home, and only when she was praying were her hands still, between dawn and evening.

Word of the accomplished and kind Lensmanns-Marit spread in ever-larger areas in Tanadalføret.

In winter conditions, the nomadic Sami who needed help rushed to Svineng. It never occurred to them to doubt what answer she would give. They raced to her with their finest sled and strongest reindeer, so she could follow as quickly as possible to their tent or gamme where a woman perhaps already lay, writhing in the pain of childbirth.

After Marit became a widow, she often took Kirsten with her when she went out as midwife or nurse for the sick. In the sled, she held the child tightly to her on her lap with her left arm while she managed the reindeer with the right.

The nomadic Sami didn't need to hurry Marit. She knew herself how to urge the reindeer up to a gallop. Like a slender boat, the sled glided over the tundra's winter sea, and it was as though the cold, dry pressure of the air took the furrows of hard work from her face.

When the snow surface raced by under the sled, sometimes the young nomadic Sami in the group sang a lively joik to Lensmanns-Marit. They snapped their reins in order to catch up with her, and half upright, they sat on one knee while they swung the other leg self-importantly over the side of the sled. And in a short moment in the great space between the starry sky and the white tundra, they waved off the heavy burden of sin, away with the flickering aurora flames, and she laughed at the men who joiked her in full voice.

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And the log cabin by the river bank, which otherwise loomed large and wide in her thoughts even when she was far from home, became, in the swaying sled, pushed back to a little four-cornered fleck, and in some moments it disappeared completely.

She was Elen Lindi's daughter, and Elen Lindi had first seen daylight in a tent in Lapland's wilderness. On her father's side she also had strong nomadic bloodlines. They had lived and died as settled people for only two generations.

Kirsten lay in her mother's lap, and she wasn't thinking of anything. She was one with her mother's body, the blue-white tundra, the wild speed, and the rough sound made by the sled on the crusty snow. Everything in the child was an intense, sweet experience of the reindeer's gallop toward Suosjavrre.

For many days Kirsten and her mother remained among the tents of the nomadic Sami and his wife, who sweated and groaned with ferocious pains.

Kirsten slid on her stomach down the snowdrifts on a reindeer skin with the smooth side down and she learned lasso-throwing from the older children in the camp. But she missed Svineng and her siblings, and in the end she wept with homesickness.

Her mother took her outside the tent, and they sat and talked a long time. "You don't wish that I would leave Lille-Johannes or Ravna, if they were lying sick," she said. No, Kirsten cried still more at the thought.

So then, Marit told Kirsten that all suffering people were her brothers and sisters.

Kirsten didn't understand how she could have other brothers and sisters than those at Svineng, but she wanted to hear more, because her mother had never before said such a strange thing to her. "Yes," continued Lensmanns-Marit, "we are all God's children, you know that. And if you are in pain, I am in pain, and if any person is in pain, God, the father of all, is in pain."

"Poor God," said Kirsten, "just as Sara lies in the tent and writhes around and groans every day..."

She didn't beg any more to go home, until the birth was over. And the strange thing her mother had said outside the tent became less strange. For Marit said it in many ways, and in her deeds she showed it even more.

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Lensmanns-Marit never asked for payment, but those who had something to spare, came, as a rule, with a gift. From the nomadic Sami she received meat and fine skins, which she and her daughters had great use for in their sewing of boots and leggings. On the other hand, farmers couldn't offer much different from what they already had plenty of at Svineng.

Lensmanns-Marit had knowledge of many kinds of magic medicine, and she knew of women who massaged the sick with churchyard sand or mixed consecrated earth in brandy to heal those suffering from internal diseases. But Marit viewed magic as sacrilege, and she became harsh when a sick person hinted about such healing practices. Marit cared for and comforted the sick, but she left medical practice to the doctor and the final outcome to the Lord.

The district doctor had such confidence in Marit that he trusted her to give smallpox vaccinations throughout large areas of Karasjok.

But the doctor was annoyed with her sister, Anne-Marie Lindi. She had a reputation as a healer of eye complaints, but even though she was the sister of Lensmanns-Marit, he refused angrily to give her even the most harmless eye drops that she wanted.

When someone with a gray eye inflammation came to Anne-Marie, and the doctor had refused to give her drops from his cupboard, she dripped sugar water in the eye and loosened the encrusted matter before she carefully scraped the eyeball with her gold ring.

No one was ever said to become worse after Anne-Marie's treatment. She didn't ask for payment either, and because the nearest specialist and hospital were many days' journey from Karasjok, she was allowed to continue in peace, treating those who believed she could help them.

People with a toothache gladly went to her husband. He was a master smith, and had made a pleyer that was unique in the region. At Isak's, they were quickly rid of both the tooth and the pain.