Backwoods Fable

Original Title: *Planterhaug* (Norwegian) */ Láŋtdievvá* (North Sámi)

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English sample translated from the Norwegian/North Sámi by Olivia Lasky © 2025

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Huuva watches the widow, expecting her to say more. But nothing more comes.

‘Why are you telling me this?’ he asks eventually, when she still doesn’t say anything.

‘What do you mean?’ the woman asks.

‘Why are you telling me all this about your husband if you haven’t told the police officers from Harstad? Does it concern the case?’

‘It wasn’t something I chose,’ she says. ‘The story made the choice, as it often does. It came now, when it wanted to, not then. I don’t know why it happened that way. Maybe you do?’

Huuva stares at her, puzzled, unable to give her an answer. Finally, after clearing his throat, he repeats a question he had already asked:

‘Was there anyone who might have harbored some resentment against your husband? Someone who wanted to get rid of him?’

‘Resentment?’

‘Yes, as far as you know, did anyone have a motive to murder him?’

‘He wasn’t really worth going through the trouble of murdering. He was steering himself toward death just fine on his own.’

‘Did he have a drinking problem?’

‘Who doesn’t?’

‘Do you believe he died of natural causes?

‘Natural, ha… What does that even mean?’

‘If you aren’t murdered. That would be natural causes.’

‘I understand that, I’m just questioning how you’re looking at it. You should think about that term. Natural death. Doesn’t death, in the end, always belong to nature?’

Huuva doesn’t get any further than that.

Outside the high rise, Huuva spots two young boys standing at the edge of the plain near Nordskogen, a few barrels scattered around them. He heads toward the boys, wading through the grass. Or, is one of them a girl? A wild-haired girl? The meadow hasn’t been mowed, and withered grass scratches against his pant legs. The boys—let’s assume they’re both boys—are standing with their backs to him, unaware that he’s approaching. He’s quite close when one of them suddenly shouts, *NOW!* and drops something into one of the barrels. They bolt in opposite directions. Neither of them notices Huuva. What are they running from? Is the weather about to turn? The clouds do seem to have sunk lower, a thick, gray layer encircling the Tower.

The blast wave hurls Huuva backwards. His ears are ringing when he sits up. The barrel is no more, and everything is quiet in Nordskogen. Nothing but a high-pitched whining in his ears. Huuva slowly gets to his feet. He scans the treeline, but the boys are nowhere to be seen. He cautiously approaches the remaining barrels and peers inside one of them. Empty. Same with the others. Not a trace of explosives. Was there any here? Is there any here?

A ringing starts to pulse in Huuva’s skull. He walks slowly back to the boarding house.

The boarding house woman is nowhere to be seen on the second morning, but she’s set breakfast out for him. She taped a note next to the food that reads: *I’m out for the day. You can get dinner at the café.*

The ground outside is white, frost waiting to be breathed away. Huuva pulls his coat around himself more tightly as he steps onto the porch and inhales the crisp air that comes with autumn frost. He plods inward, taking the same route as the previous day. When he reaches the end of the road, he glances north toward the high rise but makes no move to go inside. He has other business. Instead, he veers east, making his way down the tractor path toward the river. He thinks he can hear the clanging of sheep bells around the high rise, but apart from that, everything is silent until the rush of the river rises and the clanging of sheep becomes a far-off din.

There are grain crops growing on Jonneengene, and Huuva follows the tractor path where it curves around the threshed fields. Down by the riverbank, the path turns and houses come into view—a cluster of low log buildings tucked behind a thicket. Pigs are shuffling about in every direction.

‘Well, well, is that a curlew I see?’ someone shouts as he approaches the houses.

Someone is sitting in the shade by the corner of the house—an old codger.

Huuva steps forward, lifting a hand to shield his eyes for a better look.

‘W-what?’ he stammers.

‘A rare guest has arrived,’ the codger translates.

‘Do I know you?’ Huuva asks cautiously, taking a few steps closer.

‘No, and I don’t know you, that’s why you’re a rare guest,’ the codger replies.

‘I see,’ Huuva says when the codger doesn’t say anything else. ’I’m looking for the Johnsens,’ he continues.

‘I’m a Johnsen,’ the codger says. ‘Josva Johnsen. And you are?’

‘Hello. My name is Huuva,’ Huuva says, extending a hand to the codger.

‘And you’re from the Food Safety Authority,’ the codger says.

‘No, no, you’ve misunderstood. I’m with the police,’ Huuva says quickly.

The codger studies him.

‘You’re not from the police around here,’ he says.

‘That’s right, I’m with the criminal police in Oslo,’ Huuva says.

‘Aha,’ the codger says with an indeterminate smile. ‘A real curlew, then. So, what plans does Oslo have for us up here in the pigsty?’

Huuva straightens and clears his throat.

‘My apologies, I should have introduced myself properly right away,’ he says. ‘My name is Huuva and I work for the criminal police in Oslo. I would like to speak with you and your family regarding a death.’

‘Huuva. Who has that kind of name in Oslo?’ the codger interjects.

‘What?’ Huuva says.

‘You say your name is Huuva.’

‘Yes.’

‘Huuva is a Sámi name.’

‘That’s right. I’m Sámi.’

‘You’re Sámi?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re a Sámi from Oslo?’

‘Well, I grew up in Mysen, but…’ Huuva hesitates. ‘But my father is from here.’

‘Here in Planterhaugen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who is he, then?’

‘His name was Ragnar Pedersen.’

‘Magnar Pedersen’s little brother?’

‘That’s right, Magnar was my uncle.’

‘So you’re Ragnar Pedersen’s son.’ The codger pauses, rubbing his chin as he thinks. ‘But you have the Sámi last name Huuva.’

‘Yes, it’s an old family name. I took it back as an adult.’

‘Family name? What family?’

‘On my father’s side. They’re Huuvas.’

‘Are they now? So you got the name Huuva from the Pedersens, then?’

The codger looks at him, still smiling that unreadable smile.

‘I guess you could put it that way,’ Huuva says, looking toward the potato fields stretching out on the other side of the farmyard.

‘That’s quite a story,’ he mumbles. ‘Anyhow. Why’d you come here, then?’

Huuva hesitates, staring at the old codger blankly. Childhood memories flood his mind. Trains coming and going. And Berit Brødremoen. Or was it Bertha? His head starts ringing again. He shakes it and blinks, and his thoughts clear. The codger is still sitting there, studying him. Huuva clears his throat once again.

‘How many people are living here?’ he asks the codger.

‘I have three brothers who live here,’ the codger replies. ‘And a sister.’

‘I see. Well, I would very much like to speak with you all together if possible.’

‘Sure, my sister is here, the others aren’t.’

‘When are you expecting them back home?’

‘Who knows,’ the codger replies. ‘We can head inside if you want to talk to my sister.’

It’s glaringly bright in the house. Huuva follows the codger into the kitchen, where he’s offered a seat. Someone is already sitting at the kitchen table. It’s hard to say exactly what or who because of the blinding light, but it’s most likely a woman. Huuva sits down while Josva makes coffee. The woman is like a pillar of salt, sitting motionless behind the flood of light and staring at Huuva, or at least that’s how it feels. She might be younger than Josva, or maybe older, and blonde—or is she brunette?—it’s hard to tell when you’re being blinded. She only presents herself when Josva returns with the coffee.

‘I’m Jenny,’ she says.

Huuva tries to look at her at the other end of the table, but his vision blurs when he looks directly at her.

‘My name is Huuva,’ Huuva begins, but stops as he has to close his eyes until they adjust to the light.

‘Huuva,’ Jenny repeats. ‘Haven’t heard a name like that in ages.’

Huuva blinks rapidly.

‘I couldn’t see that power lines had been set up down here?’ he stammers.

On the other side of the table, the figure moves for the first time, gesturing toward the river.

‘We make our own power here,’ she says. ‘You’ve got to use it up, then, right? What’s the point of autonomy if the resources just go to waste?’

‘Right?’ the figure repeats, turning back to Huuva.

‘I suppose,’ Huuva answers, perplexed.

The siblings pick up their coffee cups, sipping it in small slurps filtered through a sugar cube, completely unfazed by the silence settling over the visit.

‘I was hoping to talk to you about the death that recently occurred,’ Huuva says after a while.‘Nilsen.’

‘Oh?’ Jenny replies.

Huuva goes through the same routine as he did with Nilsen’s widow. The pigs squeal outside.

‘Is it feeding time, or…?’ Huuva asks.

‘Not a chance,’ Josva says.

‘No? Okay,’ Huuva says. ‘I wanted to ask you about your previous relationship with Nilsen. I understand you were together before he got married?’

Jenny leans forward over the table, and for the first time, her eyes become visible behind the wall of light. Green.

‘Yeah, I was with him,’ she says, staring at Huuva intensely.

‘You must have been very young?’ Huuva asks.

‘Very young, yeah,’ Jenny confirms.

‘How young?’

‘Who even remembers or cares about those numbers now? It was such a stormy time,’ she replies. ’I remember he used to take me up to the mountainside. There was a gorge where no one ever went. That’s where he did me. And goddamn, it was good. There were these nice bowed birches up there that he’d bend me over. And I got on my knees in front of him before and after. Those were good times.’

‘But you stopped seeing him once he got a new girlfriend and got married?’

‘Little by little,’ Jenny says. ‘Habits aren’t something you just change from one day to the next. Our relationship ended when it was supposed to, not any sooner.’

‘Where is this gorge?’

‘Between Skáiddegeaidnu and Moskkegeaidnu, where the Duolba comes down from the mountain.’

‘I need to ask you something a bit personal—it’s information that might be relevant to the investigation. His behavior toward you… how would you describe it?’

‘Oh, he was skilled. Masterful, you could even say.’

‘I meant otherwise. What was he like as a person? Did he ever hurt you?’

‘If I wanted him to.’

‘Were you ever afraid of him?’

‘There was no room for fear between us.’

‘Do you think he took others to the gorge? Or elsewhere? As far as you know, was he involved with other women?’

‘I don’t know. He was a very private person, and other people didn’t talk about our relationship either. But he wouldn’t have had a hard time finding others if he wanted to, that’s for sure.’

‘I’m asking in connection with another case, a disappearance around that time, a while after he got married. A twelve-year-old girl who went missing here in Planterhaugen. Do you remember that?’

‘Sure, I remember that well. She was three years younger than me, but I didn’t really know her.’

‘Were you still involved with Nilsen at that time?’

‘I guess it was starting to end around then.’

‘Was Nilsen a pedophile?’

Jenny stiffens and leans back until she disappears behind the blaze of light. Josva has remained silent throughout their conversation, but now he turns toward his sister.

‘It was Huuva’s cousin. The missing girl,’ he says.

‘Rakel Pedersen was your cousin? Then whose son are you?’

Jenny leans forward again, studying Huuva even more intently than before.

‘He’s Ragnar Pedersen’s boy,’ Josva answers for Huuva. ‘Magnar’s little brother.’

‘Oh, is he, now?’ Jenny asks with interest.

She leans forward even further. A ring of light hovers around her head. Her face has softened, and she smiles.

‘Yesss. Now I remember you. You’re the boy who used to come up from the south in the summer,’ she continues. ‘I saw you sometimes down at Reinmyra. I’d sit in the thicket by the edge of the marsh and watch you. You and your father. But where does this Huuva name come from?’

‘He’s already explained that,’ Josva interjects. ‘I’ll tell you later.’

‘What was your name again?’ Jenny says with a smile. ‘John Edgar, wasn’t it? Yesss. Let me have a look at you.’

Jenny leans as far forward as she can, reaches out, and strokes Huuva’s cheek. Now, her entire head is visible in front of the shield of light, and he can see that the hair flowing freely down her shoulders and chest is dark but graying. Huuva jerks his head back, away from her hand.

‘It *is* you,’ Jenny murmurs. ‘And now you’re looking for your little cousin Rakel. Or was she older than you? But I guess you’ve long since surpassed her in years now, don’t you think? Or do you believe she’s still alive?’

‘I came up from Oslo to investigate Nilsen’s death,’ Huuva says firmly. ‘Anything else is secondary unless it connects directly to that case.’

‘Of course, of course, but you can kill two birds with one stone, can’t you? Take down a beautiful bluethroat and an ugly raven with the same bullet? If they happen to be sitting on the same branch.’

‘Enough, Jenny,’ Josva cuts in. ‘Leave the man alone.’

Jenny leans back behind the shield of light. She becomes a diffuse shadow again.

‘I don’t know anything about Rakel anyway,’ she says.

Huuva looks at her. Is he toying with the thought that Jenny might want him? Or is he merely wondering why they aren’t feeding the pigs? He looks out the window. They’re still milling around out there, squealing louder and louder.

‘They’re lazy bastards,’ Josva says, looking out the same way. ‘We left some potatoes in the ground after the harvest so they can dig them up when they get hungry. We do that every autumn. But do you think they bother?’

‘Were you here that summer? When Rakel disappeared?’

Jenny’s face re-emerges from behind the shield of light. Her expression has changed now; she looks obliging.

‘I remember it so well,’ she replies. ‘How the villagers and the police searched for her for days. And how Magnar kept looking long after all the others had given up. He walked around the forest all autumn, searching. Were you there then? Was that the autumn they slaughtered all the animals and sold the fields? It turned the tides, what happened. Then when the high rise came, there was no way back. And you? Did you ever come back here? After that? Did you ever return, John Edgar?’

Huuva swallows.

‘I’ve been here afterward as well,’ he says quickly.

‘But it wasn’t the same, was it?’ Jenny continues. ‘The rivers, they’re still here, sure. The marshes, the lakes, the ravines. But something has changed, hasn’t it? You see it yourself when you come back, John Edgar, don’t you? Don’t you see it?

Huuva looks perplexed, staring at an imaginary point above Jenny’s head.

‘My father died the year after,’ he says. ’We didn’t visit Planterhaugen as often after that.’

‘How’d he die?’ Jenny cuts in.

‘He had an enlarged heart. But that’s not relevant to the case. It’s Nilsen’s death that’s on the agenda.’

Jenny leans back again, so far that she is no longer even a shadow behind the fog of light that fills the room.

‘Ingvald spent a lot of time with us when we were young,’ Josva says.

He’s sitting where the shield of light divides the room. It’s as if half of his face is split: one side is clear, the other misty. He’s not looking at either Huuva or Jenny; his gaze is fixed straight ahead, following the light’s edge.

‘Ingvald Nilsen, I mean, the one whose death you’re investigating,’ he continues. ’He was a few years older than me, but we went to Boltås School together my first year. And we spent some time together otherwise. Ingvald, my brothers and I. Jenny wasn’t with us as much. She was too little back then.’

‘You’re brother number two, if I’ve understood correctly?’

‘Right. Joel is older than me, Hjalmar and Jason are younger. And then Jenny’s the youngest.’

‘And Nilsen was here a lot, also after you were done with school?’

‘He was.’

‘He didn’t get a job after?’

‘Well, he kind of worked here in Planterhaugen. He was one of the people we call Itkosat. They moved down here from the mountains and tried to start a farm in Nordskogen, a bit further in from where your family farm is. He worked there a lot, but if you’re asking whether he had a paid job, then no. Who has that around these parts anyway?’

‘Where are they now, these Itkosat?’

‘Gone. The farm didn’t work out, I don’t really know why. Maybe they couldn’t handle living so deep in the forest. Weren’t used it, I guess. The ones who stayed moved into the high rise when it was built.’

Josva lifts his gaze, and for the first time, he looks directly at Huuva.

‘Now there aren’t any Itkosat left here, at least not as far as I know,’ he continues. ‘Gone or dead, every last one of them.’

‘That’s also how I understand it,’ Huuva says. ‘Why did your friendship with Nilsen end?’

‘It didn’t really end. We still saw each other. Planterhaugen isn’t that big.’

‘But you stopped spending time together?’

‘Yeah, I don’t really know why,’ Josva says. ‘That’s just how it goes sometimes, isn’t it? People get older. They change.’

‘So there wasn’t a specific incident?’

The pigs’ squealing rises suddenly. Josva jumps to his feet, glancing at Jenny. As if by instinct, he disappears out the door, muttering under his breath. Jenny has also stood up on the other side of the room, her shadow almost floating in the flood of light. She leans in against the shield of light as if trying to push through it.

‘You have it, don’t you, John Edgar?’ Jenny says from behind the shield. ‘You inherited it from your father, didn’t you, that enlarged heart? I can see it clearly now. Your heart is rushing you forward, it knows it doesn’t have much time.’

Huuva gets to his feet as well. He stands there for a few moments, staring at the hazy shadow floating in front of him.

‘Thank you for your time. I might reach out again,’ he manages to say before slowly backing his way out toward the door.

‘See you soon, John Edgar. I know you’ll return. It’s written all over your face. The path is a circle. Go now, John Edgar. Adieu, adieu, remember me.’

The pigs have fallen silent. Josva is standing in the middle of the yard, watching them as they shuffle around quietly. He doesn’t seem to notice that Huuva has come outside. He slowly starts walking toward the potato field, the pigs following behind them. Huuva follows at a distance. They stop at the edge of the field. Josva stands still while the pigs start digging up potato plants.

‘Even the pigs can’t manage without some help these days,’ Josva says, his back still to Huuva, who has stopped a way behind him. ‘You shouldn’t let Jenny bother you,’ he continues, turning toward Huuva. ‘Our family has had powers. Jenny thinks she has some of those.’

‘And you don’t believe in them?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe they exist.’

‘And the Devil nickname comes from your family’s powers?’

Josva studies him before answering.

‘The name comes from fear and envy,’ he replies. ‘From people who can’t handle independent thinking.’

‘Do you know who killed Nilsen? I’m only going to ask once.’

‘I didn’t know he was killed,’ Josva replies, turning back toward the pigs.

When he leaves, Huuva doesn’t take the same path he used on his way here. Instead, he cuts down to the river and walks over to Six Finger Falls. It’s sparse. Huuva thinks: Do they still exist, the guđágak, the six-fingered people? And if so, who are they? He stands among the fir trees for a long time, watching the water flowing down the rapids before disappearing into the ponds, the lakes, the sea.

What Huuva Thinks Might Have Happened to Rakel

Rakel wades across and a shadow moves with her. Or is it after her? This is the crossing point from the Johnsen farm up the mountain. Wade over Six Finger Falls. Who is Rakel when the rope is loosened? When the family’s gaze no longer weighs on her? Uncle’s, Auntie’s, her cousins’ and brothers’. And mine. Who is Rakel when I don’t see her?

Rakel wades across and who is moving with her? Or after her? Is it Nilsen’s face beneath the shadow, or is it another’s? The shadow follows Rakel into the forest on the other side, up the mountain. Is she free now, or is something else binding her, ropes not tightened by Auntie’s hand? Or is it the same rope no matter who is holding it?

Rakel wades across and climbs the mountain. To a place where Uncle keeps searching for her throughout the autumn. Where he thinks she can be found if he searches just one more time, just one more time.

Rakel wades across and the shadow follows/guides her. A devil wades in the river, wanders in the forest, hovers perceptively above them all, discordant and faithless, until Planterhaug falls. Father dies, Uncle dies, the fields fall into the hands of others, a stone god rises from the earth.

Rakel wades across and a devil follows/guides her.

Rakel wades across and out of sight.

***Excerpt from Chapter 6***

Gáddjá and Jenny Reminisce

Gáddjá: They said I was eyeless. Not from birth; life made me this way. As a child, I had eyes like everyone else. As I got older, too. The years went by. Little by little it darkened. When I finally wound up here by this riverbank, I no longer had eyes.

Jenny: They said I practiced witchcraft. People thought I had extraordinary powers, that I had a cat that could read people’s minds and bring me news. Your fate was a foreshadowing of mine, they said. It was predestined that I should end up on this same riverbank where you had lain before. They whispered that I knew this and steered myself here.

Gáddjá: What did I see in the shadows? People don’t know. There was no language for that sort of thing back then. I had no eyes. I was eyeless. That was that. I came from Áravuopmi to this place they used to call Poorman’s Bluff. I had no husband. No children. It was only me. A lonely old crone whose scope of vision narrowed year by year until there was no place for me anywhere. In the end I had to go to Poorman’s Bluff as a beggar. In retrospect it’s almost comical. But it wasn’t back then. An old spinster moving from farm to farm, at my sister’s mercy when she would have me, otherwise elsewhere, where out of goodness or need they found space for me until I had to move on to the next farm, always sustained by others since I had no sustenance of my own. A lackey waiting for the day they would no longer have space for me. My ties to Áravuopmi were broken long ago. I was finished with that place. I no longer yearned to go back. Yet when I closed my failing eyes, I could still see my childhood land. The spring ice on Fishless Lake, the gushing water of Rávddas, the bottomless ponds in Jogasiidjeaggi, the grave in Máhtte’s Pit. *Máhtte, Máhtte, luokt' ruokt', dál lea diibmu guokt' guokt'; min leap sávžžaid ožus das*, we used to whisper when we passed it by to appease whomever or whatever had its home in Máhtte’s Pit. A ceremony passed down from child to child, where it came from, I don’t know. We always scurried past, never stopping. But my recollection of that place is nevertheless clearer than that of most others. I can see it now, too: the creek that trickles down from the mountains and disappears into the earth exactly where the grave is. A creek beneath the earth. Is that still part of our world or does it pass over to someone else when the water plunges into that subterranean darkness? When my eyes started going I could no longer see those places, but they linger inside my head—fresh, clear, seductive.

Jenny: There they sit, encircling my corpse. My brothers. Where were they when my life ended in this watery hollow? I cannot see my own death, but everything before. My childhood, my mother, my father, my life and how it turned out in this pigsty after they both left us so early. After that it was me and little Josva. The rest of them were pigs, every one of them rooting around on our farm, both those who lived there and the visitors they made room for day and night, four-legged or two. I was so young. So terribly young. The only thing that kept me standing was my little Josva. It was on me to make sure that the pigs didn’t hurt him. Better to let them hurt me than him. And now my brothers are sitting there around my corpse, heads bowed down like oxeye daisies. Mourning is a stage. A stage for those with no hearts. And little Josva standing there bewildered on the outskirts of that circle. My frail little Josva. Who is he now in a world where I am no more? When all but pigs remain in his life? Who will hold their hand over your head now, little Josva? How could the world still keep turning without me in it?

Gáddjá: To wait on others. To toil. To wash and scrub. De-hair hides of reindeer and sheep. I used to tie the hides upstream from here. I couldn’t see the fur loosen in the stream, but I could feel it with my hands. Feel the soft skin, know when it was time.

Jenny: The fetus they put inside me wound up on the riverbank. I made a scraping from a birch branch like I’d heard one could. Become a pig or be eaten by pigs. What kind of world would the child have been brought into?

Gáddjá: I too had a brother whose path wound differently than others. Ándáras was my eldest brother, already seven when I was born. I remember how he always orbited around me, ever since I was a toddler, how he held me by the hand, helped me, how he was the one who was always by my side. It was only when I grew older that I realized he wasn’t how he should be. That while I was growing, blossoming, evolving, he remained that same child his entire life. He became my little brother, following me around the farm, and into the wilderness as far as he could manage, *Máhtte, Máhtte, luokt' ruokt', dál lea diibmu guokt' guokt'*. Oh, well. You get the picture. And when the Ofotfjord rose in all its might, it swallowed our parents. And we became orphans. Ten children our mother brought into this world. Big brother Ándáras was the seventh child and those who had come before him were either dead or long gone. We were just four children left on our own on the farm. Responsibility fell into the hands of middle brother Duomis, the eldest of the able male heirs. And to me, the lone girl on the farm. At seventeen years old, I became the farm wife of my three brothers. As well as a mother to the eldest.

Jenny: I pushed the fetus away from between my thighs onto the edge of the bank. Such a tiny creature, a bloody little mouse. I shoved it over the riverbank into the currents. I spoke nothing of it to anyone, I couldn’t bear to see or think about that little soul again. No one helped me, no one redeemed me. When I returned to that spot a long time after there was no longer any trace of that little mouse. And her soul? Had it taken abode in the bird that undoubtedly ultimately swallowed her body? Or was it just lost? A soul torn between worlds, belonging nowhere?

Gáddjá: And Duomis. Duomis was a devil. Nothing on his mind but power and money. The farm must expand. Production must be modernized. Us sisters and brothers became only lackeys, tools for him to achieve his goals. And Ándáras, the poor thing. My little big brother. He was only able to stay on at the farm because I insisted. He stumbled around helping with trivialities but by no means pulling his weight. Because of my toil, Duomis let his brother stay on the farm. I was the one who had to pay for him with my sweat and blood. Then my eyes started going. And when I could no longer manage to keep slaving as hard as before, there was no longer room for either of us on the farm. I was forced to work hand to mouth here on Poorman’s Bluff, living on the mercy of my brother-in-law or other places where they would take me in. And Ándáras was sent to the asylum in Bodø. I never saw or heard from him again, I don’t know even if he’s alive or dead. I lost him. The child for whom I forsook marriage, my own life. Losing him was like losing all familiar ground beneath my feet. I became nothing more than a lonely, eyeless drifter.

Jenny: Gruesome. Oh, gruesome life.

Gáddjá: Only in death when I no longer have feet to stand on do I have a place on God’s earth that I can call my own.

Jenny: Are you happy here?

Gáddjá: I don’t think I would be happier somewhere else.

Jenny: Did people come to your aid? To bind your soul to the earth?

Gáddjá: They came to my help back then the same way they are here for you now. When you’re good and dead. Then they show compassion.

Jenny: They used to say this is a Čuoppomáddu place. They say she appears on midsummer’s eve, that primordial frog. If you want to see her, you should stand over there on the spit of the river bend, then you can see her pop her head up above the surface for air, that old ogre, before she delves down into the murk again. Right over there, do you see that man?

Gáddjá: What man?

Jenny: The one that doesn’t seem to quite belong here.

Gáddjá: I can’t see a thing.

Jenny: Oh, right. Well, there’s a man standing on a spit in the river bend. A misplaced wretch who doesn’t know up from down. At that exact spot, that’s where you should wait for Čuoppomáddu on midsummer’s eve. So they say. But of course, it isn’t midsummer now.

Gáddjá: What does she want from us, Čuoppomáddu? Or what do we want from her? They say she sometimes attacks people for no apparent reason. Spews poison in our eyes and tries to drag us down to the bottom to drown us in the murk. But what do we know about her world? Is she a beast with an identity of her own, does she live there among the reeds, or is she simply a reflection of ourselves? I have never in my life heard this is a Čuoppomáddu place. But I’m not that familiar with the tales around here, even though I’ve been roaming around here for decades. I used to lay hides in the river to soak. And check on them often to see if the hair had gone with the currents. If they were good hides. Would I have gone here at all if I knew this? That Čuoppomádduis lurking among the reeds? Would I have dared? Would I have still been alive if someone would have told me there was a predator hiding in this pond?

Jenny: You would’ve been a hundred and fifty years if you were still alive.

Gáddjá: True.

Jenny: Can you remember your death?

Gáddjá: No. I only remember my life. And my drowned corpse here on the riverbank.

Jenny: Like me.

Gáddjá: Will you stay here?

Jenny: I think so.

Gáddjá: Good. I’ve been puttering around here on my own for God knows how long. You kind of end up in your own bubble. Lovely to not need to wander alone through eternity.

Jenny: Will we be lost?

Gáddjá: There are people here watching over you.

Jenny: I can see that. But when the people leave and there is no one left?

Gáddjá: Then we’ll no longer care whether we’re lost or not.

Jenny: So that is the life of a redeemed soul?

Gáddjá: When the corpse is taken away and everyone thinks the redeemed soul has found peace at the place of death, then they don’t bother with that soul again. People take the corpse and leave, they never look back. They don’t come looking for us or acknowledge us if they’re nearby. My life is the life of a tapeworm. I’m a shadow creature that absorbs whatever people bring my way, without them knowing. I chew, swallow, grow, but my life isn’t connected to anything besides this riverbank. What I swallow goes nowhere, I share it with no one, it stops and stays within me. I’m not tied to anything. I waddle in my designated loneliness, and if I grow it’s for the sake of growing. Just like a tapeworm.

Jenny: Now you have ties to me.

Gáddjá: Yes, now we are two. We could leave the world to itself. I hear the ozone layer is depleting over the South Sea. The ice is calving. The sun burns birds’ eyes to ashes if they look at it directly. Soon we won’t need to think about the world at all. When all that’s left is ashes, when the human race is toppled, then

Jenny: Shhh, it looks like Huuva is about to say something.

Gáddjá: Who’s Huuva?

Jenny: The one who doesn’t quite belong.

Gáddjá: Why doesn’t he quite belong, this Huuva?

Jenny: He’s our kin. He thinks he belongs here. He wants to belong here.

Gáddjá: Where *does* he belong?

Jenny: I don’t know. But he certainly doesn’t quite belong here.

Gáddjá: Why?

Jenny: He’s not like us. He doesn’t see with our eyes. He doesn’t smell with our noses.

Gáddjá: And his heart?

Jenny: The blood-pump in his chest belongs here. But his heart doesn’t.

Gáddjá: What is his quest here?

Jenny: What he says is not what he seeks. But shhh, now his mouth is opening. Let’s listen. I’ll explain later.