

# **BLINDS**

**by Guri Idsø Viken**

Aschehoug, 2026

Original title: *Utyske*

pp 2 - 18

Translated from the Norwegian by Lucy Moffatt

Sample translation supported by Norla

Foreign rights by Oslo Literary Agency

evy@osloliteraryagency.no

## **Prologue**

**Lissmoen, 20th April 1940**

The morning the Germans raze Namsos to the ground as a birthday present to Hitler, Sveinung Lissmoen is standing with his hand in the vagina of a birthing sheep. It's already several weeks since Mother read aloud from the newspaper that the Germans had entered the fjords. The newspaper lay open on the kitchen table for days. And now the war has arrived here. They've heard planes flying overhead for days.

'The soldiers will need food and clothes,' Father said, and set his two sons to work packing eggs, cured leg of lamb, flatbread, sheepskins and mother's woven wool blankets. He loads up the cart that he and Arnstein will be taking into town. Mother protested, but Father stood his ground. They might not bid the Germans welcome but surely they had a right to make money off them. Times had been lean at Lissmoen in recent years.

Sveinung was glad to stay at home with the livestock. Every time he lies down, he hears Hitler's angry voice on the radio. He thinks he can feel the German soldiers approaching. Crawling up the country like ants teeming towards a sugar-bowl.

Allied soldiers in Namsos are bad news, says Arnstein. It's a bad omen. Norway's at war now. Sveinung can't understand his father's indifference.

The soft new snow has begun to settle on the windows of the shed now. It makes the whole room cosier, shutting them in beneath the yellow light of the single lamp Sveinung has left lit. He speaks calmly to the sheep, which lie curled up together in the two largest wooden pens. Some are sleeping, others are chewing the cud and keeping an eye on Sveinung. The lambs that were born a week ago, lie snuggled up to their mothers. The tiny bellies rise and fall evenly.

Blossom breathes heavily and stamps one of her feet. She's been given her own place in the little pen. Sveinung gives her a little extra hay. Scratches her chest and starts to hum softly. He remembers that time they lost both ewe and lamb because the little creature didn't come out in time. Arnstein insisted they didn't need to call the veterinarian. And by the time Father came home from the forest, it was too late. It can't be too late this time. He must go in and get a dish of soapy water so he can wash his hands properly and offer a hand if necessary.

Sveinung has to pass through the stable to leave the sheep shed. Mother's chickens are all roosting comfortably here now and cluck quietly when he disturbs them. On the other side, Braga turns his head towards Sveinung, who usually brings him a treat. He sticks his hand in his pocket and takes out a little piece of dried bread. Gives it to the horse as he pats its neck.

Just then a loud noise roars past them overhead. He and the horse both jump. And then there's another noise. Sveinung stretches his hand out towards the horse, talking to it gently, as if to calm both himself and the animal.

'It was a plane,' he says. 'They're just flying by, nothing to worry about.'

Blossom watches him with big eyes as he comes back into the shed with a saucepan full of boiling water. He's particularly fond of this sheep. Father let him call her Blossom for the black pattern on her otherwise white face, like small, dark violets pushing up through the snow. Now a string of shiny slime hangs from of her vagina, dangling towards the floor. Why doesn't she lie down? Isn't her first lamb soon due? There are two of them – that much Sveinung knows, at any rate.

Just then, he hears an almighty boom. He jumps. Surely it can't be snow falling off the roof? The walls didn't rattle the way they usually do. Some sheep start to bleat and others wander around restlessly. Blossom pulls away, tries to burrow her way into the corner of the pen. Her head bobs from side to side. Braga whinnies uneasily in the stable.

Then there's another boom. Louder now. Like the sound from the Namsen when the river ice breaks up in the spring. But this isn't water. It's something else. Something Sveinung's never heard before, something more than the many planes that have flown over them. And this time the boom is followed by a loud, heavy howl.

Sveinung pats Blossom, does his best to calm her down before hurrying out into the farmyard. His mother is standing by the main house. She barely notices him. Just stands there peering up into the sky.

'I thought it was the snow falling off the roof,' he says.

Mother stares at him stiffly. The corners of her mouth are tight.

'We need to go down into the root cellar,' she says. 'Johan said that's what we should do if they came.'

'What? If who came?'

He puts a hand on her arm. She looks up again. Another boom comes. A dark movement glides across the sky, like a flock of birds of prey or a sudden thundercloud. The noises are

louder than before, they force their way into him and lay themselves around him. Sveinung's heart beats faster because now he realises what his mother means. These planes aren't out taking a look around. They're dropping bombs. They can't be far away either.

Mother seizes him and pulls him towards the root cellar. At first he goes with her. But then he remembers Blossom.

'I can't. I have to go and see to her.'

'Are you out of your mind, lad! You can't think of the animals now!'

Mother tugs him again. The trapdoor into the little cellar room they've dug out is right inside the door of the sheep shed. He opens the door for Mother and puts his arms around her tightly. He feels her frail body tremble. Tries to calm his own breathing. Both give a start as a new plane roars overhead and he pushes his mother firmly towards the small stairway, lighting the way for her with the little lamp.

'You go ahead, Mother. I'll check on Blossom first.'

When Sveinung comes back into the shed, the sheep have all stood up and are clearly unsettled. Blossom has heeded the contractions at last. She stretches her head and curls her upper lip. He walks along the wall of the pen to get close to her. Two hooves are poking out of her vagina. But they aren't the forelegs.

He takes the rope out of the saucepan. Quickly washes his arms all the way up, applies some oil and makes a loop in a thin hemp rope. Holding the loop in his right hand, he folds his fingers gently around the rope and inserts his hand into Blossom.

Sveinung manages to loop the rope around the lamb's legs, but the little one is jammed tight. Blossom makes wailing noises and protests every time Sveinung tugs gently on the rope. He tries to hold her firmly with his legs as he pulls. A new boom sounds overhead. The sheep mill about.

‘Easy now, Blossom love. I know how you feel,’ he says. ‘But we can’t get around this.’

He pulls again, then a little more. And then, at last, Blossom’s body yields and out slides a slippery, slimy lamb. He quickly pulls the new-born over to Blossom. Gets her to lick it as he massages it with a fistful of hay to clean off the amniotic sac and get its blood circulating. He doesn’t have much time. As a new boom sounds above them, another lamb slides out of the ewe. This one’s much smaller and, luckily, the legs are the right way round this time.

Sveinung pulls the little lamb over to Blossom’s warm muzzle. But she pushes it away as she continues to lick the first one. Leaves it lying there, covered in dark-yellow slime with stripes of red blood. Sveinung rubs the lamb to clean it up as best he can and get its circulation moving. The first lamb finds its feet and latches onto a teat, just barely able to stand up on its own. Sveinung squeezes a few drops of milk from of the other teat and tries to get the second lamb to suckle too, but Blossom pushes it away again.

Luckily, Sveinung has some raw milk left in the bottle he gave to another bottle-fed lamb earlier in the lambing season. He takes the smallest lamb in his arms and sits down on floor outside the pen. Lifting the little head up, he forces its mouth open wide enough to insert the soft rubber teat. As gently as he can. Luckily, after a couple of tries, the little creature starts to suckle.

Sveinung glowers at Blossom. She’s always been a good mother before. Now she looks happy, lying there warming one of her lambs. Just as firmly as she pushed the other one away.

Another boom is followed by another howl. The sheep wander restlessly round and round their pen. The little lamb lying alone in the corner of Blossom’s pen. Sveinung can’t leave the animals now. He gives them a little hay and tries to talk calmly to them. He takes down the little lantern that’s hanging from a hook on the wall and Mother’s woollen blanket. Then he

turns off the overhead light and climbs into Blossom's pen. Just as he hears a new boom, he lifts the lamb onto his chest and lays the blanket over himself and the new-born.

Slowly they find the warmth together. The lamb's breathing and Sveinung's settle together into a calmer rhythm. The noises of the aircraft grow fainter. They seem to be finished for now. Sveinung dares not think about the damage they may have done. But here, safety returns as more and more snow settles on the window.

In the end, there's no more noise. Not until Arnstein comes bursting into the room some hours later. Sveinung gives a start and looks at his brother in terror.

'We were in the grocer's cellar,' he says. 'But Father, he wanted to help out. Wanted to go with the firemen. The idiot.'

Sveinung blinks. He feels his belly knot. The lamb jumps down onto the ground and runs across the floor.

'What do you mean? Why aren't you in Namsos?'

'Namsos is gone,' Arnstein says. 'The whole town – and Father with it!'

## **Rose Thorns**

**Stormoen, Overhalla, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1944**

Synnøve slowly runs her finger over the naked branches of the rosebush by the wall of the house. She's taken her gloves off again, preferring to tend the roses without them, even though her mother scolds her for all the scratches on her arms. The thorns are sharp against her skin, it doesn't take much for them to scratch her. Tiny red drops of blood on her fingertip have a sweet taste of iron and grass stains.

Synnøve doesn't think there'll be any more night frost now – although spring in Namdalen can be capricious, the hillsides white with wood anemone one day and with snow the next. This is a particularly bright and calm day. The air is heavy with the smell of manure because Anders is muckspreading in the fields now. The springtime sun coaxes out the red roses in her face, and the scilla shines blue against the white birch trunks in the yard.

Great tits and willow tits sing love songs to each other as Synnøve carefully lifts up branch after branch. She takes pride in doing everything properly. She isn't afraid to prune too much, trusting that more will come. Grandmother showed her how to do it. Right above a bud: a precise cut that's slanted to stop any water drops from collecting on the fresh wood and damaging it. All the dry, unhealthy and weak branches must be pruned. Everything that has died in the winter. Everything that's growing in the wrong direction.

The next rosebush is outside the parlour. Mother is walking around in there checking that everything is in order after the departure of the German officers who stayed here in the spring.

Solveig the maid has already washed the curtains three times to try and get rid of the smell of smoke. The Germans had wandered around in their house, sleeping wherever they pleased and opening all the cupboards. They'd ruined the Swedish family china and glasses. They'd shouted at Anders and the other working folk. They'd gone around, helping themselves to milk and egg and vegetables as if they owned the place. Even when they slaughtered the best ox, there was little Synnøve and her parents could do. Except hope they would soon be stationed elsewhere.

It only made matters worse when the officers backed her father when he'd stood for mayor in the autumn. After that, he seemed to feel as if he owed them something, a debt he couldn't shirk, and they were welcome to help themselves. It brought about a change in

mother too. She seemed almost contented now. Proud in a way Synnøve had never seen her before.

Synnøve herself had tried to ignore the war. At first, she'd thought it wouldn't last very long, that everything would go back to normal. Instead, more and more soldiers have arrived around her, in the village and in her home. Not that anything interesting has happened as a result. Even in wartime, it seems as if everything happens elsewhere. What good are lovely roses when all she wants is to get away from here?

For as long as Synnøve can remember, she has been promised that she can move to her grandparents in Stockholm the summer she turns eighteen. She won't spend her time *there* tending rosebushes. There, she will wander in her grandparents' gardens in Lidingø with her aunts and cousins. Live in Østermalm and cycle to university. Go to parties and dance something other than the pols at the village hall with the local lads. She'll dress up in Grandmother's frocks. Be asked on dates and take trips out to Djurgården on beautiful boats. That's how it will be, she can't imagine it being any other way. If only the war would end.

When Synnøve is almost finished with the next rosebush, one of the windows in the parlour opens.

'Mind you don't ruin your dress,' Mother scolds.

'Yes, Mother,' Synnøve says, turning quickly away.

She knew she'd get a telling-off when she put on her white linen dress. But this is the first really warm day of the year and it's nice to wear a summer dress again. Besides it's May 17<sup>th</sup>, Constitution Day. She doesn't dare join the villagers who go into the forest to raise the flag. But surely she's allowed to wear a summer dress in her own yard? And she doesn't have to tell anyone that it's because she longs to leave and yearns for peace.

She has barely finished the thought before she hears the sound of a car. Shading her eyes against the sun with her hand, she sees a dark blue Mercedes driving slowly up the birch avenue along the farm road. Just as slowly, it rolls into the farmyard, towards the entrance they only use for fine company. The freshly raked gravel crunches as the car drives all the way up to the door and parks.

Two officers climb out. One of them has dark hair slicked back over his head with a pomade that makes it shine in the sun. The sprightliness of his body makes him seem more like a young boy than a grown man. He seems happy and energetic as he raises his sunglasses and looks around.

The other one is sterner. More authoritarian. Synnøve feels her stomach knot. The pleasant lightness she felt earlier has gone. Even the birds have stopped singing. She didn't think the Germans would come here today. 'Not for a few weeks,' Father had said. Oh, why couldn't they just go somewhere else? There are plenty of other farms in Overhalla where they can stay instead. Plenty of other people for them to shout at.

The man arranges his face into a friendly expression as he comes towards her, raising his hat.

'Good day, Fräulein. Is this the Mayor's house?' he asks in Norwegian.

Synnøve straightens her neck and smooths her dress.

'He's my father. He isn't at home.'

'He said we could come here. I hope we are not disturbing you, Fräulein?'

Father had said that, had he! Synnøve looks at the rosebush. There are a lot of clippings on the ground that she hasn't yet had time to clear away. She'd been looking forward to carrying on for much longer in peace. Couldn't Father at least have warned her? Does he think she doesn't care who's wandering around in their home?

The man reaches out a big hand. His cheeks grow round as he smiles. The corners of his mouth lie at a gentle angle, so she can't tell whether he's genuinely being friendly or just wants her to believe he is.

'Colonel Lehmann, at your service. Please call me Hugo. This is my secretary, Mario Fischer.'

He nods towards the other officer, who is roaming the yard, looking around. As if he thinks it's his farm, and he wants to get to know it right away. Their chauffeur opens the boot of the car and lifts out four suitcases. He clearly isn't going to be introduced.

Synnøve looks at Colonel Lehmann in surprise. She's used to Germans being much more formal than this. She has never found out the names of any of the others who have been here before. His large hand is also warm and soft around her own.

'Synnøve Stormo,' she says. 'I didn't realise you were coming.'

'We had a mission in Hamar that we finished early. And Mario here said that Namdalen was beautiful in the spring.'

The colonel laughs and looks at his companion, who has wandered over to the calf that's standing alone in the enclosure by the corner of the cowshed. He's about to say something else. But then he notices Synnøve's finger.

'Has the Fräulein hurt herself?'

He takes out a handkerchief and holds it out to her. She blushes when she sees that the blood has run down one side of her finger and has partly congealed. Still, she takes the handkerchief, which is clean and white.

Just then the door opens, and her mother comes out onto the steps. The colonel turns towards her.

'And you must be Frau Stormo.'

He reaches out a hand and greets her warmly, as if she were an old friend.

‘What a beautiful farm you have here, Frau Stormo. We have already had the pleasure of meeting your husband in Sletta.’

‘And my dear daughter, I see.’

Her mother smiles at Synnøve with unaccustomed warmth. She seems neither surprised nor troubled by the visit.

‘Things aren’t quite ready inside the house yet,’ she continues. ‘We’ve had a lot of clearing up to do after the people who were here before you.’

The colonel seems upset.

‘Madam must forgive us. Naturally, we shall pay. And she need not concern herself about us. We shall take good care of this delightful place.’

‘I’ll have the maid bring some rhubarb cordial out to you in the summerhouse,’ Mother replies.

He follows Mother to the summerhouse. The other officer stands scratching the calf on its head. Its light hide is almost golden in the sun. It has only one tiny dark star on its forehead. They’ve never had a finer calf, Father says. It will be good breeding stock. But who knows how long they’ll get to keep it, now that new Germans are here.

‘Would you like some too, Synnøve?’

Mother nods in the direction of the summerhouse and Synnøve obediently follows her.

‘We are so happy that you have come,’ Mother says as they sit down on the whitewashed benches in the octagonal summer house.

The colonel smiles and nods.

‘We have just come from a visit to Egge, outside Steinkjer. Another lovely farm. But I think it’s prettier here.’

He gestures towards their house with an elegant wave of the hand. Synnøve looks at it. Perhaps it isn't so odd that the Germans want to come here, just like the English salmon-fishers used to want to come here before. The magnificent long farmhouse in traditional Trøndelag style – the finest in the district – shines white and gleaming with lovely carvings at every window and around the large, two-storey veranda. It has no fewer than four entrances, two at the farm end, one shared entrance and one at the other end of the house, which was traditionally reserved for elderly family members – the wing to which Synnøve and her parents have now been banished. Inside, several splendid rooms await visitors. But they were never intended to be filled with soldiers.

Synnøve has always been proud of her home. She's dreamed of great parties and crowds of people filling the place. But now their fine home feels like a curse. Why couldn't they have lived in a little house that no one was interested in?

'Yes, there's been large-scale farming here for generations,' Mother says. 'As for myself, I come from Swedish aristocratic stock. Synnøve too, of course.'

Not again. Synnøve blushes. Mother always had to boast about her family in Sweden. Even now, when the colonel was saying such nice things about Stormoen. She has this constant resentment, an urge to elevate herself above everyone and everything. Nothing is good enough for her here and that means nothing is good enough for Synnøve either. Or for Father, who works so hard to keep them both happy.

They hear the clink of glasses as Solveig approaches the summerhouse. Without a word, she sets the tray down on the table before them. She glances quickly at Synnøve, but keeps her eyes lowered as the colonel scrutinises her.

Synnøve helps herself to an oat macron as she serves the freshly made pink rhubarb cordial into small crystal glasses. Something hasn't been quite right since Laura left and Solveig started working in the kitchen. Laura had taken pride in her work, but it felt as if Solveig didn't want to be here. It's also irritating that Mother insists on calling her the maid. Synnøve remembers Solveig very well from school. She was quiet and gentle but always clever. She had no friends though, and always had to stay at home to look after her younger siblings.

'We have planted rhubarb from Sweden here,' Mother says. 'It's unusually pale and mild. Not coarse and woody like the varieties that grow around here.'

'This cordial is delicious!'

The colonel smiles and raises his glass to Synnøve. She lifts her glass to her lips. Doesn't drink. Just holds it there.

'We are happy to have you here, of course,' Mother continues as she offers the colonel a macron. 'You are doing such important work here, protecting our country against the Bolsheviks.'

The colonel nods contentedly.

'Norway is important to us and areas as strategically placed as Namdalen are at risk of attack by many foes. But you need not be alarmed, Madam. We will naturally do our best to protect both country and people.'

'I read in the newspaper today that the Englishmen's attacks are in breach of international law. To think that they can carry on like this, so shamelessly.'

'It's a good thing we have loyal Norwegians who know right from wrong.'

'And Swedes,' Mother smiles.

The oat macron expands in Synnøve's mouth. Lately, she's been worrying about how one-track-minded her mother has become. It just pours out of her, everything she reads in the paper, especially the local papers, *Nordtrønderen* and *Namdalen*. About battling Germans and the Englishmen who do not wish them well. Synnøve agreed with her at first, but now she's not sure that it's all true. A lot of people in the district talk about how ruthless the Germans are; how they simply come here and help themselves without offering anything in return. It isn't hard to believe that, considering the way they run in and out of her family's farm. Even Father seems a little less convinced now. But not Mother: she sits here telling the colonel exactly what he wants to hear.

Luckily, they're interrupted by the other officer who comes strolling over to the summerhouse. He has a lighted cigarette in one hand and some wood anemones in the other.

'I beg your pardon. I spent a while with that sweet calf. You have lovely animals here.'

'And naughty ones,' Synnøve says. 'That calf ran away earlier, so Anders has moved him here.'

'He even gobbled up some of my flowers,' Mother laughs.

That's the cue Synnøve needs. She asks to be excused and gets up to go back to the rosebush. Hugo shows no sign of moving, so she has to push her way between the table and his knees to get out. Her naked calf brushes ever so slightly against the smooth fabric of his uniform. He exudes a fresh scent of eucalyptus and hair pomade. She doesn't look back, doesn't want them to see that she's blushing. Instead, she goes straight back to the roses. Tries to ignore Mother's jabbering behind her.

Later, Synnøve eats supper with Mother and Father at the old coffee table at the end of the house where they now live. Before the war, she thought it was cosy in here. She and

Sveinung used to hide in here, secretly drinking redcurrant wine. Or she'd sit here alone on the settle bench imagining what it would have been like to have grandparents here to make cocoa for her, the way they would traditionally have done at the old folks' end of a magnificent, long Trønder-style house like this one.

Synnøve could even picture herself coming home from Stockholm with a husband and children and moving into the farm end of the building while her parents moved into this end. Then she could send her children through the corridor that joined the two parts to spend time with their grandparents, the way they do on other farms.

None of Synnøve's fantasies in any way resembled how things were today. Not once had she pictured herself sitting here with her parents because they had given the farm end of the house, with all its magnificent rooms, to a group of uniformed Germans. Or that they would sit here pretending it wasn't Constitution Day.

At least Solveig has cooked creamy porridge for them. But it's lumpy and Synnøve has trouble swallowing it. Mother doesn't seem entirely happy either as she sits stirring the porridge around in the bowl with her spoon and pretending to eat it. Only father shovels it down as if he's never tasted better.

'I do think Colonel Lehmann is quite delightful,' Mother says.

Synnøve gives her a resigned look.

'I don't understand why more people had to come here. Couldn't they at least have lived in this part of the house?'

Mother puts down her spoon. Straightens her back and purses her lips. Exchanging a glance with Father, she fixes Synnøve with a stern gaze.

'That can't be done, Synnøve. It would make things difficult for Olav.' As always when she doesn't have a proper answer, Mother has slipped a Swedish phrase. It's as if she does it to

emphasise whatever she's saying, to assure herself that Synnøve understands. To push Synnøve away while simultaneously punishing her a little bit more. Synnøve takes a sip of beer and looks at Father. He just gives her a gentle, confirmatory nod. What little hair he still has is neatly swept over his shining pate. He has some porridge in one corner of his mouth.

'What about me?' she asks. 'Have you considered how difficult this might be for me? I have to sleep in that stupid little room while they lie in my four-poster bed. Imagine – in Grandmother's old four-poster bed.'

'I'm sure you'll get your bed back, you just need to be patient.'

Mother reaches out a firm hand to tip Synnøve's elbow off the table. Synnøve wrinkles her nose at her father, but he clearly has no intention of saying anything.

'Hasn't it occurred to you that I'll be eighteen this summer?'

Synnøve wipes the corner of her mouth with her napkin and looks from Mother to Father.

'You have reminded us often enough,' Mother answers drily.

'And that I was supposed to be moving to Stockholm to study.'

Mother sighs in resignation. Synnøve knows what she'll say. They've had this conversation before.

'You must realise that it's not possible now,' Father says at last.

'Why not? There's no war in Sweden.'

'We can't just move to Sweden, *it can't be done*,' Mother answers.

'And people shouldn't move into other people's homes either.'

Father has finally finished eating. Synnøve gets up. She collects up the plates and spoons and walks over to the sink with them.

'Colonel Lehmann and I have been talking about all the things we can do here,' Father says suddenly. 'He wants to make Overhalla into an industrial centre for central Norway, and

Stormoen will be the most important farm. If we work well with him, the future may be very bright, especially once the war is over.'

Synnøve turns around. She studies his face. It's like hearing him in the old days. He constantly used to present them with all kinds of dreams about everything Stormoen could be. It seemed he was at it again now.

'Why should I care about that kind of thing?' Synnøve asks. 'If I won't even get to go to Stockholm?'

Now Mother gets up. Picking up the bowl containing the remains of the porridge, she comes over to Synnøve.

'You'll be inheriting this farm one day,' she says. 'You should listen to your father and be grateful.'

'Should I really now?'

Synnøve walks towards the hall door. She lays her hand on the latch to open it but turns back to her parents one last time.

'Right now, it looks more as if you want to give the farm away to the first officer who happens to be passing through,' she says.

## **MUCK**

On 17<sup>th</sup> May, Sveinung and his mother take the ferry across the river with the horse to go shopping in Ranemsletta with their new ration card. In the little market town everyone is behaving as normal. But one girl is wearing a red, white and blue ribbon in her hair. A few daisies have been placed outside the florists, as if by accident. A piece of traditional silver

jewellery shines on the lapel of a coat. There's something in the air, a silent mobilisation, but those who notice do not show that they do.

After they've managed to get their hands on soap and a little sugar at the shop, they plan to drop in at Hildrum Farm to exchange eggs and woven blankets for more artificial fertiliser. Mother has an arrangement with Beret at the Women's Public Health Association.

'Her husband is so useless, he'll never notice it's gone,' she says as they turn into the farmyard.

Sveinung doesn't reply. He's ashamed that they have to go out in the district and barter on the black market in order to run the farm properly. He wonders what Father would have said about the situation on the farm where he'd grown up. But they need all the fertiliser they can get. It's only a few days since all the farms in the village were told by the Germans that they had to grow more potatoes to secure winter supplies. As if Overhalla could feed both Norwegians and Germans all on its own.

Beret is small but broad and wears an apron tied tautly over her striped woollen skirt. The fabric reminds Sveinung of the sail on the boats that used to sail on Namsfjorden before the invasion. That's not allowed any more and Beret has probably found a better use for the cloth.

He follows his mother obediently into the kitchen corridor, the way he used to as a boy when she was also a member of the association. He didn't have to do much wrong in this house to get a scolding from Beret. But there was always plenty of cake.

'Now we have to celebrate with what little we have,' sighs Beret.

She serves them coffee in her best china, and sets out a dish of potato lefse and *gomme*, the sweet dairy spread. It tastes better than it has for ages. Beret has been squirreling away sugar and cinnamon over the spring for the occasion.

Sveinung leans back on the deep settle bench. His fingers run over the notches that criss-cross the old folding table. It must have stood here almost as long as the farm and must have seen so much.

Outside the window, he sees they are busy with the spring farmwork. On the southern side of the Namsen, they themselves have been delayed by the late ice breakup on the river and Sveinung hasn't been able to plough a single field yet. But Arnstein must surely be able to help him out; there isn't so much work in the forest now and his brother has been home for several days.

When he hears footsteps in the room above them, he gives a start. Shortly afterwards, Espen comes down the stairs and into the kitchen. Beret's son is wearing a white armband around the right sleeve of his green-grey jacket. It bears an insignia – a spade and cog twined together beneath an eagle.

'Must you really wear that horrible garment?' Beret asks.

'I'm a Labour Services conscript. I have no choice.'

Espen spreads a thin layer of *gomme* onto a lefse which he wolfs down in three quick bites. Sveinung nods to him shortly, trying not to show his unease. Espen is Arnstein's friend, but he used to bully Sveinung at school. Morning and night. Indoors and out. Sometimes it was just talk, comments he'd hurl at Sveinung for hanging around with the girls or being good at dancing. He'd call him mummy's boy and sissy and teacher's pet. Other times, he would follow Sveinung. Shove him. Puncture the tyres on his bike. But he always did it on the sly. Always so far out of the teacher's sight that it never led to a scolding. Espen was a good boy, all the grownups said so.

Now he stood there and greeted Sveinung as if none of this had ever happened. But Sveining still sees that gleeful gaze, the one that looks down on Sveinung because he's sitting

here with the local gossips. He makes the gesture that shows he's pleased with himself. A tiny toss of the head that makes his blond fringe dance above his bright blue, teasing eyes.

People in the district have realised that Espen's working on transport for the Germans, but no one looks down on him for that either. Espen always gets away with everything. Does exactly as he pleases. Unbelievable that he's allowed to keep on doing it. Behaving like a prick and getting away with it time after time. Because everyone thinks he's a good boy. He has never been good. Why is Sveinung the only one who sees it?

Eventually Sveinung learned how to cope with it. He found a place behind his upper molars where he could hide his feelings. If things ever get too bad, he presses his tongue against the little groove where teeth give way to palate. That keeps his face still. Stops him thinking. Stops him crying. He doesn't care. He doesn't care about anything any more. Just nods to Espen and acts as if nothing's wrong.

'Parson Kopreitan was good today,' Beret says when Espen has left. 'You should have been there, Alise. He speaks about freedom and justice. I saw the Germans sneering. He isn't afraid.'

'They probably don't feel all that free themselves either, in those buttoned-up uniforms of theirs,' Mother smirks.

Beret laughs so hard the cat jumps out of its chair over by the stove. Sveinung shakes his head, but can't help feeling grateful. There are few people who can make Mother smile any more. Since Father died in the bombing, his mother has faded away. She mostly keeps herself to herself, goes for long walks without saying where she's been or sits working at her loom. He often hears her shuttle going late into the night.

Mother can't praise Espen enough at supper. She holds forth to Arnstein about how plucky he is as she lays out the soup and flatbread on the table.

‘Some contribution,’ Sveinung says. ‘A bit like playing fiddle for the German riffraff.’

Arnstein’s eyes flash angrily. Over recent years he’s done little other than play for all and every idiotic party the Germans have thrown during the spring. As soon as they’ve finished working in the forest at winter, he and his pal Ivar start travelling around with their fiddle and accordion to entertain the many Germans in Namdalen. It doesn’t occur to him for a second that he’s bringing shame on Sveinung and their mother, or think about how people see him in the district. He noticed it in Sletta today. No one says anything, but they aren’t especially friendly either. Lissmoen won’t come out of this war well, that’s for sure.

‘I thought you and Synnøve could come along to the dance tomorrow,’ Arnstein says.

‘Show off Norwegian dancing to the newcomers.’

‘You have to be joking.’

Sveinung tries to see whether his brother’s just needling him. But he seems to be completely serious.

‘There’s going to be a barn dance in Sletta to welcome the new colonel. The one who’s staying at Stormoen Farm.’

‘Have new people moved into Stormoen?’

‘Synnøve’s already agreed.’

Sveinung has gone along a couple of times before. The Germans are impressed by their dancing. If it meant money for seed, maybe Sveinung could consider it.

Now and then, Sveinung asks himself why he’s the one who’s sitting here worrying about seed. Arnstein was always the one who was going to inherit the farm, being the oldest son. But after Father died he hasn’t shown any interest in the livestock or the fields. Mother has never said anything about it even though she must see that her eldest boy isn’t doing his

duty. And Sveinung's own dream of becoming a teacher is slipping further and further out of his reach without anyone seeming to care about it.

'Did you remember to give the bottlefed lambs some cod-liver oil in their milk?'

Arnstein picks up a piece of flatbread. Gobbles it down in three quick bites. Crumbs drop onto his shirt.

'I haven't been into the sheep shed yet,' he says.

Sveinung gets up.

'What did you say? You haven't been into the sheep shed?'

'Calm down. I'll go later. It's so light after all – the animals think it's still daytime.'

'Hell's bells – later?' The sheep need food now and curfew's at nine.'

Sveinung takes a sip of water and snaps off a piece of flatbread. Then he pushes his chair under the table and nods to Mother.

'I'll go out and see to them,' he says. 'We have to do the muck-spreading tomorrow, Arnstein. It'd be nice if you could give us a hand.'

## **DARCY**

'Do I look nice in this?' Synnøve asks.

'Smashing!' Sveinung replies.

Synnøve swings around and kisses him on the cheek. She can always rely on Sveinung for a kind word or two. But how does she really look? In the little mirror on the wall, she sees the pale blue dress with white polka dots and a skirt that wraps itself around her waist. She remembers how lovely she thought it was when it was new. Now it is one of the few good dresses she still has, and there won't be any more of them so long as there's rationing. She

only wears it when she's going out dancing. Not that she does that very often any more either.

Sveinung hasn't exactly dressed up. But he is at least wearing a shirt instead of the usual sweater. He's allowed to be here while she's getting ready. They've spent so much time running between the two farms, swimming together in the river, running around in the forest, walking to school together that no one asks any questions about how close they are, even though they're a boy and a girl. Nor has there ever been any question of the sole heiress to Stormoen Farm, daughter of a Swedish noblewoman, marrying a smallholder.

'Do you remember everything we used to dream of before the war?' Synnøve asks as she pulls the belt a notch tighter around her waist.

He squirms slightly in his seat.

'Why do you ask?'

'You were going to do teacher training and I was going to go to Stockholm. And we were going to meet up every now and then to go dancing.'

'But now I have to take over the farm.'

Synnøve smiles gently at Sveinung in the mirror. He always has to be so responsible.

'You certainly never dreamed of doing your brother's job, did you?'

'Maybe things will be different when the war ends.'

'IF the war ends, don't you mean?'

He shakes his head. She opens the jewellery box on her chest of drawers. Takes out the pearls she inherited from her grandmother and lays them inside the V-neck of her dress. Her flaxen hair cascades from the back of her head in waves and looks nice beneath under the little straw hat that she has placed upon her head at a slight tilt. That way she gets some benefit from having slept in those uncomfortable curlers.

‘Perhaps we should seize the opportunities we have in the here and now,’ Synnøve says.

‘That’s what my parents do.’

‘I’d rather not behave like your parents.’

She turns her head sharply towards him and loses hold of the pearls, which slide down her breast. He gets up quickly and helps her fasten the catch on the necklace.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘Don’t worry, I’d rather not either.’

‘I think the choices we make now will matter when the war is over. We have to hold out, even if...’

‘Even if?’

‘... our families are a bit stupid.’

‘Can’t we... be happy for an opportunity to dance, just this evening?’

She holds his gaze in the mirror for a moment, with a sly smile. Does he even know himself how handsome he is? With those broad shoulders and that strong chest. The straight jawline, the little cleft in his square chin. The straight eyebrows that cast a shadow over his eyes and always make him look a little serious, despite his light-blue gaze.

‘Why didn’t you tell me there were new Germans coming?’ he asks, walking a little way out into the room.

‘It came as a surprise to me too. But they’re rather nice. Completely different from the ones that were here before.’

‘Aren’t these ones German soldiers too?’

‘Officers.’

‘Not so different from the ones before then.’

The lipstick Frida lent her lies nice and heavy in her hand. Chanel, it says on the label, like in the magazines they used to read before the war. Synnøve knows her friend got it from a German soldier, but she still asked to borrow it. It's just the right amount of red. She applies it to her lips and dabs a little on her finger. She smiles at herself in the mirror and carefully pats some colour onto each of her apple cheeks.

'Is this the reason you want to flirt with the Germans?'

Sveinung holds up the book that lay on the bedside table. He's wearing that little smile of his that only shows itself in those small dimples. Synnøve has been trying to get him to read Jane Austen for ages. Now she has started reading aloud to him instead. That's always the way with him. He packs himself some snus and tries to look tough, as if he's unaffected by it. But Synnøve knows better.

She's begun re-reading *Pride and Prejudice*. She remembers the first time she read it after Grandmother came to visit and brought the book with her as a gift. That was when she still thought she could be like Elisabeth Bennet, who lived on an estate, went to balls and won her Mr Darcy in the end.

'I have no intention of flirting with the Germans.'

She looks at him despondently but understands where that came from. Sveinung has often had to listen to her talking about how she yearns to meet a handsome man. There isn't much choice here in Overhalla. Only boys who want to get their paws on Stormoen. Who know that the property will go to her and then to whoever marries her. The only one she's ever been remotely interested in is Arnstein. Not that her mother would have allowed it, of course. Better for her to dance with Sveinung while she's waiting to go and live with the family in Sweden.

'Is Arnstein courting Ella?' she asks, as casually as she possibly can.

‘The Sámi girl?’

‘There’s no one else by that name. I met them in the forest a few days ago.’

‘You aren’t thinking of setting your cap at him again?’

‘Of course not.’

‘You remember how it went last time?’

Yes, she does. For a long time, she was convinced that Arnstein was the man for her. She fantasised about their life together. They would take over Stormoen and Lissmoen and run them as a single farm. They would play host to English lords, there for the salmon-fishing, and arrange parties in the best parlour. Arnstein would play, she would dance and now and then they would go to Stockholm and play at being posh. She was so convinced by her own fantasies that it felt perfectly natural for her to go to bed with Arnstein after a party they went to.

Still, it wasn’t long before Synnøve realised that they did not share the same dreams. Arnstein had no desire to run a big farm and was no more interested in going to Stockholm. Consequently Synnøve agreed with both her mother and her girlfriends that she could do better than marry the boy who would inherit the neighbouring farm and who was known in the area as a notorious philanderer. So she called it off. Arnstein was crushed, Synnøve was sad and Sveinung was stuck in the middle. That’s why she can’t admit to either Sveinung or Arnstein that she has often regretted her decision.

Synnøve takes a shiny sea-green scarf out of the wardrobe. Going over to Sveinung, she puts her arms around his neck. The silk is light and soft against his skin. She ties it in a knot. Makes him look at himself in the mirror.

‘I think you should wear this. It really goes with your eyes. Maybe there will be a few handsome soldiers there tonight,’ she says slyly.

‘Bloody hell!’

He pulls away from her.

‘I’m not dressing myself up for any Germans.’

Synnøve laughs her head off. She takes out a shawl Alise wove for her and places it around her shoulders. She catches herself missing the times before the war. When they were still two teenagers who went to parties in the neighbourhood and everyone was happy and no one scowled at anyone else. Or not more than necessary at any rate. How trivial all the gossip had been back then. Who danced with whom and who had bought what in Namsos and who had the best moonshine.

‘Shall I fix your hair?’ she asks, turning towards Sveinung. ‘Your curls are all over the place.’

‘No, no need.’

‘Couldn’t you at least smarten yourself up for me?’

‘You’ll just have to be especially good at dancing instead,’ he says, offering her an arm.

There was that lovely smile again. She pouts at him and kisses him on the cheek. The lipstick leaves a red imprint.

## **POLS DANCE**

The barn at Singstad Farm is decorated for the dance with big bouquets of flowers in tall milk churns on the barn bridge.

Synnøve walks quickly past a group of smoking soldiers on her way in. Sveinung wipes away the sweat with the back of his hand. There are too many people here. Imagine him helping welcome the new German officer to the neighbourhood. To Stormoen even. When all he wants is for the whole lot of them to scram!

Still, it does feel a bit less alien to be here now than it did at the start of the war. Back then, all he could think about was that the Germans had taken his father away from him. He hated them so intensely that he could barely think about anything else. Those grey-blue uniforms seemed to teem all over the place: in the shop, at the post office, along the road. When the first officers moved into Stormoen a few years back, he thought he would throw up, and just the sound of their cars was enough to give him palpitations.

He would never be happy that they were there. But he had got better at pretending to be.

Frida waves at him excitedly. She's wearing her fair hair in a tight bun. Her skin is white against the dark eyelashes and the red mouth. She is undoubtedly beautiful in other people's eyes. But not his. She has always had an artificial, flat air. She reminds him of the paper dolls he and Synnøve played with as children.

'Brought your own dancing partner, did you?'

Frida sneers. Sveinung shakes her hand drily. He's used to her talking down to him as if he's something Synnøve has dragged in with her. Frida has never forgotten that Sveinung once turned her down in fifth grade.

Ever since primary school, Frida and Synnøve have kept a running tally with each other: dresses, grades, boys, who gets most looks at a dance. Neither of them can bear the other to have something they themselves can't have.

Now they've found new prizes to battle over. It can only be a matter of time before Synnøve starts flirting with the Germans too, no matter what she says. Frida has already made a headstart.

'I'll get us something to drink,' Sveinung says and goes towards what looks like a bar.

Arnstein gives him a sharp nod from the stage. They've started playing and are probably pleased to see Sveinung's here. He should never have agreed but even Mother wanted him

to go. She said it wouldn't hurt to be on good terms with the newcomers. The working people from the neighbourhood probably noticed that Sveinung was here too. Him, the brother of the musician the Germans liked so much. How could Mother not realise how people in the district talked about them. It wouldn't stop any time soon.

Sveinung nodded to several people. There are many he hasn't seen before. Soldiers, of course, but also people who must have come from a long way off. The officers are sitting at one of the big tables, toasting each other and making a racket. How easy life must be for them. Coming here to ready-ploughed fields, laden tables. Doing as they pleased and deciding the fates of everything and everyone, as if Namdalen was theirs and theirs alone.

Several people have found their way onto the dancefloor already. Espen stands by one of the walls, playing hard to get. He raises an eyebrow in Sveinung's direction and smiles. Sveinung turns his head away abruptly. Touches his throat with trembling hands. He regrets wearing the silk scarf.

Of course Espen had to be here too. Sveinung never likes places with crowds of people, but it's even worse when Espen's there. He seems to confirm Sveinung's sense that he doesn't belong, that he should have stayed at home. Sveinung becomes acutely aware of all his movements, can never rid himself of the fear that Espen may come over at any moment and smack him, even though they're no longer kids.

'Be yourself,' Mother used to say when he was younger and nervous about going somewhere. He wonders if she understands what she was saying. She should have known how hard he worked *not* to be himself, especially in situations like this. If he could have been himself, he would have been a different person. If he had been himself, he would have walked over to one of Arnstein's pals, the quiet one with dark curls. He could talk to him. Ask him to dance or invite him down to the river to see the nest of newly hatched

oystercatchers. If he'd been himself, he wouldn't have used up all his energy keeping such feelings at bay.

Himself is the last thing Sveinung can be. It's the very worst thing he can be. Here and everywhere. He's heard of people being killed for less.

'Do you want something or are you just going to stand here gawping?'

Laura is just as sharp-tongued as ever. But also just as friendly. Sveinung turns towards her abruptly with a smile. He's missed Laura since she stopped working as a maid at Stormoen and moved here. It was always nice to chat to her when they met in the farmyard or down on the road. What's more, she's the only link he still has to Hans, her younger brother and the closest friend Sveinung has apart from Synnove.

'I see they have shop liquor and the like?'

He nods to the bottle of aquavit that stands on the rough bar between them. She pours a shot for Sveinung and a glass of white wine for Synnøve.

'Have you come to dance?'

'Arnstein thought it would be good entertainment for the new Germans.'

'And you – do you always do what your brother tells you?'

She laughs. Sveinung leans towards her and lowers his voice.

'Speaking of brothers. Have you heard from Hans?'

She shakes her head sharply, gaze flickering.

'I just thought maybe... maybe a letter might have come or something?'

'I know nothing about that.'

She turns sharply towards some other people. He isn't surprised, she never likes him asking. Perhaps it's even risky. He's certain that Laura hears from Hans but doesn't share it with others. They say he's interned in a camp somewhere. He was picked up because of his

dual passport. Jailed by the Germans because he refused to fight for them. Punished because he refused to defend the fatherland of his parents when it attacked the country they had, over the years, made their new fatherland.

‘Aren’t we going to dance?’ Synnøve says when he comes back.

Sveinung doesn’t need to be asked twice. Since he’d rather dance than talk to people, he’s had plenty of training. He knows that a lot of people want to dance with him, but he prefers to stick to Synnøve. She’s the one he dances best with, feels safest with. Before, they used to enter dance competitions together. Before the war came along and ruined all that kind of thing.

Sveinung places his right hand gently but firmly around Synnøve’s slim waist as he leads her steadily with his left hand. They shift their weight lightly between their feet as they spin. Gaining in self-confidence, he increases the tempo, even adding a few lifts. After a while, he completely forgets where he is.

Several people have stopped dancing to watch them. Some clap. Arnstein smiles behind his fiddle. This is the only time Sveinung can cope with all eyes being upon him. No one can stop him when he’s dancing, when he’s taking care of Synnøve.

In the end, though, they have to go outside and get some air.