Edvard Hoem: Midwife on Earth

Translated excerpt by Ingvild Burkey

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CHAPTER ONE

A Rough Crossing

**1**

The first thing Marta Kristine could remember from her childhood was a rough crossing. It happened one October day in 1800, the year she would turn seven.

A crowd of people were heading down to the shore at Gjermundnes in Romsdal, men and womenfolk intermingled. All wore homespun clothes of coarse wool. The married women wore shawls or kerchiefs. The children were dressed in the manner of adults, though here and there one sported a coloured waistcoat, a red knitted cap, a blue neckerchief.

It was autumnal, but not cold. The air was clear, the leaves were turning yellow on the hillsides around the fjord. On the highest mountaintops lay newly fallen snow. Everyone could see that a new winter was on its way. The crofters and servants and their children had taken off from work to bid farewell to Anders Knudsen, his wife Karen, and their little daughter Marta Kristine. It was a big day in the lives of those who were leaving. They were moving to Nesje on the other side of the Romsdalsfjord. Anders Knudsen worked as a shoemaker and a butcher and was hardly a wealthy man, but he was hard-working and thrifty and had a cheerful outlook on life. He had bought the house of a retired farmer which lay right by the shore there, from Captain Nicolay Peter Dreyer for the sum of 150 *riksdaler*.

Marta Kristine, whom they often called just Stina, didn’t seem to be grieving that she was about to leave her birthplace for ever. She walked around with a big smile on her face, taking boys and girls by the hand.

‘Thanks for having me!’ she said, curtsying. ‘Thanks for having me!’

They laughed.

‘Look at the lass,’ they said, ‘she doesn’t mind at all that she is leaving us! Are we never to hear your happy laughter again?’

No, it seemed the busy little body could hardly get on her way quickly enough. She chattered with a ragdoll she carried under her arm, explaining at length how far they were about to journey.

It was ebb tide, a steady wind blew in from the south-west, the boat was rocking from side to side an arm’s length below the jetty. Everything they were bringing with them lay packed in two wooden chests and some burlap sacks that had been hoisted onboard. There were bedclothes and everyday clothes, pots and pans. There was Anders Knudsen’s cobbler’s stool, which had a box below the seat where he kept his tools. The wooden lasts he used to make new shoes were strung together in a bundle. Everything had been lashed down with hawsers around the thwarts and stem. In the middle of the four-oared skiff Anders had erected a mast with a crossbeam at the top and pulleys on both sides.

‘It’s blowing our way,’ he said, ‘we’ll be there in no time!’

His wife climbed down the ladder. She was light-footed despite her forty-five years. Marta Kristine stood on the jetty. Her father jumped into the boat, lifted his daughter down and set her on a thwart. He gripped the oars, placed them in the rowlocks and rowed out. Those left behind on the jetty grew smaller and smaller. Stina shouted and waved, and the people on the dock shouted and waved back, but after a short while she could no longer hear them.

Anders Knudsen hoisted the sail using the pulleys and sat down at the stern with an oar which he stuck through a rope so he could steer with it. Almost at once, the boat picked up speed. It was a sturdy, seaworthy boat with a deep keel, made for fjords where sudden strong gusts were common. Now the wind was much more powerful than he had expected. They flew across the water. His daughter let out a high, trilling laughter when the wind filled the sail. Her mother shouted to her husband:

‘Do you intend to drown us?’

‘Hold fast, old girl,’ he shouted back. ‘What we are travelling to is much better than what we are leaving.’

And then they were at the mercy of the southwester. The waves were not very high, and Anders Knudsen decided to chance it. The direction of the wind made it impossible to head straight across the fjord as he had planned. Instead they flew at great speed along the shore, moving ever deeper into the fjord. His wife clutched the little girl tightly. Anders Knudsen was sixteen years younger than his wife and known as a brave bloke. Every time a billow made seawater splash over the gunwale, Stina let out her trilling laugh.

‘Can’t you make her be quiet?’ the mother shouted.

The father shook his fist at the seabirds circling above them. The boat plunged through the waves. Anders Knudsen had seen plenty of stormy weather in his day. He wanted to try to get to the lee side of Veøy, the island with the old church, so he could lower the sail and get the oars out. He pulled on the tackle to jerk the sail loose, but one of the two pulleys he had used to hoist it had got stuck. If he let go of the tiller, they might capsize. His daughter read it in his face, they were moving faster than he liked. Her laughter stopped abruptly. She clung to her ragdoll and knew nothing more until the boat came aground on the beach of an island deep into the fjord. Their lives were safe, but Karen was not amused.

‘You shouldn’t put me through such ordeals!’

‘Can I help it that the wind is so strong?’

He jumped ashore and stood there holding the boat so they could reach safe ground without getting their feet wet.

‘There! What did I tell you?’ he said to his wife, tying the boat to a tree.

‘Aren’t you going to thank your maker for saving you yet again?’ she asked.

‘You’re still cross, aren’t you?’ he said. ‘Just you wait until we get there, I know how to get you in a good mood again!’

‘That’s what you think!’ his wife said.

‘For my part I wonder where we’ve got to. I think it must be Holmsholmen.’ He gazed up at the pine-clad crags. ‘To think we’ve landed here! Now we just have to wait until the wind dies down, then I’ll row us right across the fjord. No more sailing today!’

‘If only I make it there alive, I won’t be getting into a boat with you again any time soon!’ his wife said.

‘It’s Holmsholmen all right,’ Anders said. ‘I wonder if the stake is still up there?’

‘Are you out of your mind? That’s none of our business!’

‘Well, I have a mind to go up there and see if the stake is still there! Come along, Stina, and I’ll show you a head on a stake!’

‘Have you gone mad?’ his wife shouted. ‘Don’t even think of bringing your daughter up there! It will give her bad dreams!’

‘Oh, I think it will make her love life all the more, when she sees how cruel death is!’

‘Everyone but you shuns such places!’

‘I’m done with all the old superstitions. Let mother hold your ragdoll for now!’

He took his daughter by the hand and walked up the narrow cattle-track that led to the highest plateau on the islet. There they stopped. A short stone’s throw away stood a stake set into a crack in the rock. On top of the stake hung a clean-picked human skull, wreathed with a few wisps of long white hair fluttering in the wind.

Marta Kristine didn’t feel frightened right away. Gradually it dawned on her what she was looking at. Someone had chopped off a woman’s head, and the woman was dead. From where they were standing she could see the fjord and the mountains surrounding them on every side, the clouds to the west, the foamy crests of the waves below.

She heard a howl issuing from the skull on the stake. Colour drained from the landscape, everything turned grey. There was a roaring all around her. In the midst of the tumult she stood, and she wanted to scream but couldn’t make a sound. Her father’s voice rang out like a clap of thunder:

‘Alas, Margrethe Jakobsdotter, unhappy was your end!’

Marta Kristine’s tongue felt dry, but she managed to bring out her question:

‘What had she done?’

‘She gave birth to a child.’

‘But why did they chop her head off?’

‘Because she killed the child.’

‘But why did she kill the child?’

‘Because she had lost her mind, my child.’

‘But why did they set her head on a stake?’

‘So that other girls won’t do as she did when they give birth!’

Her father took her hand, pulling her with him. She turned around, but he hurried her along:

‘Now we have to find mother and the boat!’

The sun was no longer shining. The clouds were closing in. It got colder. Her mother was sitting motionless by the boat. She grasped her daughter’s hand as if she had feared she would never see her again. The wind died down as if by magic, and her father pushed the boat into the water. Marta Kristine returned to her senses. She let out a scream that resounded from the crags of the islet. Her screams subsided into sobbing.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ her father shouted. He was rowing with angry oar strokes.

‘What did I tell you, what did I tell you?’ her mother said.

‘She’s of the same make as you are – she can’t take anything!’

He rowed so furiously that the boat rocked. The girl’s sobs turned into whimpering, and soon Marta Kristine fell asleep with her head in her mother’s lap.

Only when they were approaching the shore at Flovika did she wake up and see the place where they were going to live. For her mother was shouting with joy: ‘What a fine house! What a lovely beach!’

**2**

The house lay right by the shore, and it was more than a crofter’s dwelling, although the land had been converted into a croft. Anders Knudsen was to pay a yearly rent of two *riksdaler* to Captain Dreyer, and he had work duties at Flovik farm during the summer.

They couldn’t get to the beach below the house fast enough. Stina’s father threw a half hitch on a rope so the boat wouldn’t drift away on the tide. He hoisted their luggage ashore. Marta Kristine took her ragdoll and then she and her mother hurried up to the house. They knew from the contract of purchase that it was a farmhouse with a living room, kitchen, pantry and woodshed on the ground floor; the bedrooms were on the first floor. The exterior was clad in vertical pine boards, as was the custom in these parts. Compared to what they were used to, it was like a small castle. They stood waiting for Anders Knudsen who was lugging one of their trunks up to the house, breathing heavily.

He flung the door wide.

‘Imagine, they’ve even greased the hinges!’ he exclaimed. It was light inside, so they could see the whole interior. There was a fireplace with a chimney in the kitchen and a cast-iron wood burner in the living room. What wealth! The ceilings were painted, everything was light and clean.

‘Well, it’s not the meanest home in these parts,’ the father said. ‘If one isn’t comfortable here, where will one ever be comfortable?’

‘We mustn’t forget to thank the Lord,’ Karen said, ‘who arranges everything so wisely!’

‘Yes, and then we have to thank Ola Nesje who arranged the purchase!’ the shoemaker said.

There was a bench there that opened into a bed, a table, a cupboard and a built-in bed. They opened sacks and rummaged through chests and got out the things they had brought with them, some knives and cups, a cooking pot, tin plates, and also some sheepskin blankets which they carried upstairs. Before they turned in for the night, the father fetched water in a wooden tub from the well a bit further up the hill. Marta Kristine dipped a cup into the water and drank it down.

‘Isn’t the water here good?’ her father said.

She nodded and filled her cup again, and then once more.

‘That’s enough now!’ her mother said and took the cup away from her.

‘Good Lord,’ her father said, ‘won’t you even let her drink her fill of water?’

‘She’s quaffing down so much that she’ll wet her bed tonight!’

‘Not this girl,’ the father said, ‘she’s been dry since she was a year old.’

‘Well, I’ll let you decide,’ the mother said, ‘I can hardly manage her anymore.’

‘Why should one manage them, can’t they manage themselves?’ the father asked.

‘Oh, you always have to be cleverer than the fairy folk,’ the mother said, but she couldn’t hide how happy she was with the new house.

‘And so I am,’ the father smiled and snatched at his wife, ‘and so I am!’

‘Now light the fire and don’t be making a fool of yourself,’ the mother said.

She slapped his hand away and started getting their supper ready. The father put some sticks together in the fireplace and lit a fire. The mother hung a pot on the iron hook above the fireplace and got out the bag of flour they had brought with them from Gjermundnes. One had to have a pinch of salt in one’s porridge. Then the pot came to a boil. The mother warmed up the last drop of milk they had brought with them and poured it over the porridge. Then they ate, with few words between them.

‘We’ll be fine here,’ the father said.

‘It’s time we went to bed,’ the mother said.

They went up the stairs to the loft. The father carried a wax candle so they could see a hand before them. He opened the door to the smallest attic room. ‘This will be your room, Stina. We can keep the door open if you like.’

‘I’m not afraid!’ his daughter said.

‘Well then!’ the father said and blew out the light.

But he left the door open.

Marta Kristine lay down under the sheepskin blanket. She could hear her father talking still, in a softer voice now. Her mother mumbled something in answer. Marta Kristine wanted them to think she had fallen asleep. She lay there breathing regularly.

‘Now let’s see if we can be reconciled in this new house,’ her father said.

‘Not now,’ her mother said.

‘Oh, you’re so hard to persuade sometimes,’ he said. His voice was cheerful.

‘Not while the girl can hear,’ the mother murmured.

Then there was a thud, followed by silence. Then a commotion rose from their bed. Suddenly it was clear as day to Marta Kristine what they were up to. The fear she had felt earlier that day seized her again. The bedboards creaked, her mother moaned, then there was silence.

Marta Kristine was alone in the world. She fumbled around for her ragdoll and got hold of it, but she discovered that the doll was dead. Its head was dangling by a thread and didn’t want to be with its body, no matter how hard she tried to reattach it. She lay utterly still as the thought came to her: I’ve killed my ragdoll!

Soon both her parents were asleep. Her father was snoring, her mother breathing gently. Marta Kristine sat up, swung her bare feet onto the floor, walked quietly down the stairs, lifted the latch, opened the door and went out to stand on the doorstep. It was cool outside, but moonlight lay upon the fjord. There was cold dew on the grass, she felt it as she walked around the corner of the house and squatted to pass water. Then she walked towards a copse of trees right by the house, laid the dead doll in a crack behind a stone and covered her with leaves.

CHAPTER FOUR

**HANS, HANS!**

**1**

Then a letter came for her. It was the second time in her life that she had received a letter, and the same person was writing to her now as last time, it was Hans. He wrote that his brother had said he could move into the old folks’ cottage at the farm. Ola had a turn of phrase that he trotted out time and time again:

‘Everything must be put right some day!’

And if anyone asked Ola what he meant by that, he would gaze at them for a long time with a pitying look, or whatever one might call it, as if he felt sorry that people were unable to see for themselves and right away how deep his saying was! He said that everything couldn’t be as it had been before, which as far as that went was obvious. The good old days were over, and a good thing too, for then the good new days might begin.

‘Everything must be put right some day!’ he said, and as for what was right and wrong he had few doubts. Hans could become a lodger on his brother’s farm and live in the old folks’ cottage which stood empty, since times were hard and he had nowhere else to live.

This wasn’t how Marta Kristine had imagined Hans Nesje’s future, for of course she knew what a lodger was. A lodger was someone who lived in a house with another family, or in another house on the same farm, and had their own household, but worked on the farm and received a share of the harvest based on the amount of work they had put in. It was an intermediate state for young and old people who had suffered a misfortune, perhaps a fire, or people who had gone bankrupt because they were unable to live within their means. It might happen that they had once been wealthy people, fine folk with a distinguished pedigree. But most often lodgers belonged to the common people and in many villages their status was lower than that of crofters, who at least had a home and their own roof over their heads.

But Ola’s offer to his brother Hans was not humiliating in any way, considering how difficult times were in the country. The monetary system was unstable. Norway had no bank, since the silver tax adopted by Parliament in 1816 had not yet been collected, and this silver was supposed to guarantee the value of the new Norwegian *speciedaler* issued by the central bank of Norway. In other words, it was impossible to take up a loan, and the nest egg Hans had saved was insufficient to buy a farm. As a lodger Hans would take part in the work on the farm, saving them a hired hand or two, and perhaps he might then be able to buy a farm when times became better.

One thing was decisive, Hans wrote: he didn’t want to move in there by himself. And there was only one woman beneath the sky whom he would consider marrying.

It was as if Hans had quite forgotten that she had a daughter who was now nearly three years old. As she read on it was explained to her, and the explanation made her cry.

Hans wrote that he had enlisted because he wanted to forget the girl who had been in his thoughts since their childhood. But after three years on foreign shores, where many a woman had offered herself to him, he had found no one to rival her. And if she would not disdain his humble request, would she then once again consider whether it might not be the case that *Providence had ordered and Fate decided that she was to be the Joy of His Youth and the Comfort of His Old Age*.

Everything must be put right some day! he added, like his brother, before signing himself *Hans Olsen Næssie* with an elegant little squiggle underneath.

She cried the whole night, for now she knew that she could no longer escape Hans.

What she didn’t know was that it was Ola who had triggered this. He said: ‘It has to be put right some time! Here on the farm there is only one opinion as to who you should be thinking of now, and that is the one you have been thinking of always!’

‘And who would that be?’ said Hans, pretending he didn’t know whom his brother was hinting at.

‘Oh, don’t play the fool, brother!’ Ola said. ‘What I am telling you now was also Father’s opinion. He told me so while he was still clear-headed, that now Hans has to get hold of Stina, he said, for there is no better woman for someone like him! is what Father said. And never did I think I would welcome a crofter’s lass as daughter-in-law on the Ola farm! But if Hans intends to marry at all, then she’s the one he must have. That’s how Father put it, in those very words.’

‘But she has a child from before,’ said Hans.

‘That child could have been yours!’ Ola said. ‘If you’d been alert and paid heed! *Now things must be put right at last*, here on the Ola farm!’

‘So let Ingeborg be my child!’ Hans exclaimed, and then he wrote a letter and rowed out to Veøy island, called out to one of the fellows who were ploughing, gave him the letter and instructed him to deliver it to the party concerned. Then he headed homeward, he didn’t want Marta Kristine to see him before she had thought out her answer to him.

Then Marta Kristine wrote a letter which left the island a couple of days later, stating that she wanted to be *The Joy of His Youth and the Comfort of His Old Age*.

She went to see Stubben at Candlemas, on the fifth of February, and she told him that she would now leave to marry Hans Nesje.

Stubben cried, as she had, when he realised that her time on Veøy had come to an end. The Parson’s Wife happened to walk past while Stubben stood there crying, but she merely smiled sadly and walked on. When Marta Kristine and he were alone again, something happened. Stubben stretched out his hand and let his fingers touch her breast. It lasted only a moment, and she didn’t mind, for she was leaving this place in any case, and just as he withdrew his hand and pretended it hadn’t happened, she saw that Stubben had become an old man.

**2**

Word was sent over to the mainland with one of the farmhands that Hans could come and fetch her now. And Hans came, not that day but the next, and he rowed mightily while he sang so loudly that his voice carried for miles over the fjord. He had stood the test. For a greater test of love than Hans Nesje had faced for so many years, no one else in all of Romsdal district had ever been subjected to, that was the opinion shared by all who knew the obduracy of the woman he had chosen for himself while they were still children.

Marta Kristine hadn’t been to the mainland for more than two years, but the island in the fjord had not been a prison to her, on the contrary it had been a road to the freedom she had longed for so intensely, she who didn’t want to be where she was.

There came Hans, walking towards her, he was no longer singing now, and she saw at once that he had changed. Fear had entered his eyes, and he smelled strongly of tobacco. But she decided that the smell of tobacco was an endearing quality in him, and the fear in his eyes must be the result of what he had seen in the war, but she would take it away.

He just spoke her name, he didn’t draw her to him. She stretched out her hand and gave it to him, and he held her hand for a long time.

‘It took many years,’ he said.

‘But in the end you came to fetch me,’ she said.

Hans let the farmhand carry her travel things, a chest which they loaded onto the Parson’s wheelbarrow, and the Parson himself went with them down to the shore at Nordvika, but it didn’t occur to him that he might carry anything. Then they saw Hans, he slung a bag on his back and then he lifted Ingeborg up and carried her all the way down to the shore and set her gently down in the boat before he helped Marta Kristine climb aboard.

Marta Kristine sat at the stern with Ingeborg snug on her lap as Hans rowed out of Sørvika on Veøy. The fjord was smooth and still. She saw the Parson standing there, saw that he would grieve over her, even though it was he who had helped her find her way.

As they approached the beach at the Ola farm on Nesjeskaget, they saw that one of Ola’s farmhands was standing there with a horse and cart, and then they drove first of all to Flovika, where Marta Kristine and Ingeborg were to live until the wedding. Hans lived at the Ola farm, but that didn’t prevent them from getting together to be by themselves. Her parents were more than happy to welcome Hans on his visits. One day they were together, Marta Kristine unbuttoned his shirt and bared his shoulder so that his wound was visible. He pulled his shirt back on, but now she had seen it.

‘Will you tell me how you got that wound, Hans?’

‘Oh, it was nothing,’ he said.

‘How did it happen?’

‘Nothing much happened to me,’ he said. ‘But I saw many of my mates die, and I’ll never forget it.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ she asked.

‘No, I don’t ever want to talk about it,’ Hans said. And for the second time she glimpsed something resembling fear in his eyes. She thought: ‘Not now, but I will get him to talk about it later.’

It was clear to everyone that Old Ola was declining day by day, and many doubted that he would live to see another summer. But he did, at least part of one. Old Ola died on the fourteenth of July, barely two weeks before Marta Kristine and Hans celebrated their wedding. There were so many people at his funeral that they had hardly seen anything like it. Marta Kristine was there, and everyone noticed that her belly was rounder than before, and they realised that she and Hans had not been able to keep away from each other.

Hans had to wait until after the wedding to get the old folks’ cottage ready. Certain things happened that summer to dampen their joy over the wedding somewhat. Her parents were of the opinion that Ingeborg should remain with them for the time being. Actually there was a good reason for her to live with them if Marta Kristine was going to be an apprentice midwife in Molde, but what about later?

**3**

Soon they would become lodgers at the Ola farm. Hans shared in the farm work too, but every so often he took himself off to Molde. He didn’t have the peace of mind he had had before, but Marta Kristine thought it must be because such a short time had passed since he was in the war.

But her old father noticed more than his daughter did, and once that summer he asked:

‘Are you absolutely certain that he is the one for you?’

‘What on earth are you asking me that for?’

‘He has a fragile mind, Hans does!’

‘Now you stop that, father! If I can’t have Hans, I don’t want anyone else in the whole world!’

There is an entry in the Veøy church register for the eighth Sunday after Trinitatis, which that year fell on the 27th of July: *Bachelor, Non-Commissioned Officer Hans Olsen Neskie and Maiden Marthe Kristine Andersd:r Floviig. Witnesses: Thore Erichsen Neskie and Peder Knudsen Floviig*.

**4**

And then there was feasting for two days, and nothing was ever lacking in the way of food or drink when they celebrated a wedding at the Ola farm. And the bride’s parents, who up until then had barely set foot in the farmyard, now sat indoors with the local notables and drank toasts to the newly-weds with Ola and all his siblings, who simply had to put up with a crofter’s lass moving into the old folks’ cottage with Hans.

On the third day of the wedding feast, the village people were given something to talk about for weeks and months to come. But it wasn’t the food that set the countryfolk talking, it was the dancing.

The music was provided by two fiddlers from the neighbouring village, and these fiddlers took turns playing for three days on end. They began in the morning as soon as the wedding guests had collected themselves, and the fiddling went on until the crack of dawn, when the guests at last tumbled to the floor and had to be carried off to bed.

On the second day of dancing, Ola came and told the bride to come outside with him. A young girl was lying in the storehouse, about to give birth.

Marta Kristine hurried to the storehouse and found the girl lying on a trapdoor with a burlap sack stuffed with straw under her head. She ran to the old folks’ cottage, pulled her wedding dress over her head and put on an old skirt and a shirt. The birth was well under way when she came back out. Five other girls were standing around gawping. She told three of them to get out, the other two were to hold the girl’s knees to either side.

No more than a couple of hours had passed when the lass gave birth to a big and strong baby boy, who let out spine-chilling screams. Marta Kristine caught him as he came out, and her shirt was bloodied when, having waited for the boy to open his eyes, she tied string around the umbilical cord in two places and cut it. She put the placenta in a wooden bucket and asked one of the farmhands to bury the contents. The child was laid at its mother’s breast, and the loudmouth didn’t take long to begin to suckle, and his mother couldn’t care less that she was lying there half naked in the middle of the wedding feast. She only had eyes for her baby. Not until a wagon came for the young mother and took her home could the bride return to her own wedding feast, once again wearing her wedding dress.

What was she thinking as she delivered a child for the very first time? She was thinking that she wasn’t afraid, not even nervous. It was as if the life that had been calling to her so long simply swept her up and away, like a wave.

She walked straight into the arms of Hans, who was dancing alone on the barnfloor, dancing and dancing, and now she knew both who she was and who she would become, she fell into his arms while the pale fiddler started up a waltz, and she danced the wedding waltz with Hans as if they had been waiting all this time only for this, and each time the fiddler suggested that it was enough, Hans shouted that it wasn’t, and so they danced on, and the fiddler played until he passed out and fell off his chair.

The second fiddler was lying asleep, trying to get his strength back before his evening stint, but they woke him up, and though he was stumbling with drowsiness his fiddle was soon on fire, and the bride and the groom kept on dancing. In the meantime Ola had arrived, and he wanted to challenge his brother to a dance. But the guests shouted that it wasn’t fair, for Hans had already been dancing for several hours, he hadn’t left the floor once.

While the bride was out in the barn delivering a baby, Hans had started dancing on his own, seven different dances. He had danced the halling and the springar and the gangar and the reinlender and the pols and the minuet, the latter a step he had learned in the war.

‘Come on, brother!’ Hans shouted, and then he and his brother danced, and half the village danced with them. Two young boys were dispatched to Sekken island by boat to fetch a fiddler who lived there, so the bet wouldn’t have to be called off if the other fiddlers fainted. And the boys stripped off their shirts and sprang into the boat.

**5**

Hans danced with his bride far into the evening, and Ola danced with his wife. But when Sigrid Eriksdotter had had enough and Marta Kristine didn’t want to dance any more either, Ola asked a young woman who was a relative of his from Horsgaard to dance with him, and Hans danced with one of the daughters at North Nesje.

By the time the sun went down, the fiddler from Sekken had arrived. Before midnight he played eight polkas and four waltzes. First the brothers danced alone, they danced a halling and then a springer, and then another halling. There was music in the barn, but the wedding guests had fallen silent.

Now in the late dusk they came out onto the floor, those who hadn’t shown themselves yet. It was their turn now, the shy and the timid, those who had hurt themselves and had been hurt by others, the war cripples from the battle of Matrand who still hadn’t received any war pension, and the work cripples, the childless women and the spurned weaklings. Under cover of the darkness seeping into the barn they came, the ones no one else wanted, and they danced with each other. In the midst of this dance of dried-up maidens and lunatics and halfwits and people who didn’t know what year or day it was, the two brothers from the Ola farm danced.

Then Ola shouted to the farmhands to fetch the cowshed lanterns and hang them up by the open barndoors, but for God’s sake to take care that not a single spark flew out, and all went well, for the lanterns had glass in them since they were of the very finest sort, and then they danced by the light of the lanterns, all the old folks, whether they were men or women, they danced their youth all over again, like a farewell dance or a goodnight dance, and they shouted that they would keep on dancing until dawn. And now crofters and crofters’ wives from the crofts below Nesje and Flovik arrived, heaven only knows where they all came from. They danced in a big circle around the Ola farm brothers, and the keenest of them all was the village shoemaker from Flovikstranda, Anders Knudsen. His wife had left the wedding feast a long time ago with the others who were awakened, or readers, as they were called, and who were of the holy opinion that we shall dance our dance of joy in heaven after God has granted us His grace.

But if the village shoemaker didn’t dance with his wife it was still his turn to dance, and he knew that if people danced holes in their shoes, as the saying went, it could only improve his livelihood. Not that times had improved so much that people could afford to buy new shoes, no, the times were perhaps worse than ever, that summer of 1817.

The shadows flickered and the people danced. And someone fetched a hay-drying pole which was held horizontally at the height of a man above the barnfloor, and on the end of the pole they hung a hat, for now the end of the great boasting match was approaching.

The fiddler started up a halling, and the brothers had to kick the hat off the pole in turn. The barn had grown silent. All the others pulled back a little, forming a circle around the dancing brothers. Far away they could hear a youth howling at the fjord in a voice of despair, as if he had no idea where he was.

Now what had to be decided was who would try the master kick first, and that was what everyone was waiting for. The district sheriff went to fetch a *dalar* and tossed it into the air, and the coin landed heads up, and the sheriff pointed to Ola.

So then Ola danced out onto the floor with his hands crossed over his chest, until he approached those who were holding up the pole. Then he made his kick, and he hit the hat with his foot, just barely, but the hat flew far across the floor from the kick Ola had given it in his forty-fourth year.

**6**

And then he was alone again on the floor, Hans, and a great hush fell upon the barn. The only sound was the fiddle’s whine and song, and everyone knew that the verdict was about to fall. In the glow of the lanterns by the open door stood the bride, who would be turning twenty-four at Christmas, she didn’t take her eyes off Hans, and people looked by turns at her and at the bridegroom. She left the circle and was standing only a few fathoms away when the music approached its climax. Hans did a spinning kick and struck the hat with his shoe, so that the hat flew straight into the bride’s lap where she was standing. Ola walked onto the floor and reached his hand out to his brother. Then he nodded to his wife, and they went out and headed home. Everyone made way for them, and some say this was the night that Ola began to be called The King of Nesje, for admitting that his brother had won over him. Then loud cheering broke out in the barn and the fiddler struck up a waltz.

Marta Kristine rushed out to dance with Hans again, and he took her in his arms and swung her. They were the only ones left on the barnfloor. People began clearing their throats and saying goodnight to the hosts, and a strange calm had descended on the company, since no drinks had been served for several hours. Hans danced with his bride in the twilight that now lay over the farm and the village, and people saw her whisper something to him, something he said yes to. Shortly after that the music stopped, and they left the floor and bade the guests goodnight to every side.

They went to lie down in the old folks’ cottage on the Ola farm, where a bed had been made up for them. It was their wedding night, and they were even more grateful than before to be with each other, and still embracing one another they fell asleep.

And then the wedding on the Ola farm was over, and soon everything that had happened over the three days it lasted was kept alive only by the villagers’ gossip. Day was breaking as the village shoemaker from Flovikstranda stumbled home across the fields, where hay was still drying on the racks. As Anders Knudsen approached his house, he saw and heard his wife sitting on a stone outside, singing a psalm in praise of morning.

[…]

CHAPTER SIX

**7**

Little by little some balance and order entered her little world. Little by little it also seemed the mood was turning somewhat in her favour. She caught glimpses of gratitude in the eyes of some of the women about to give birth when she arrived with her bag. Certain of them had found that Midwife Stina knew a thing or two of which the untrained birth helpers were ignorant. It happened only a couple of times that she managed to turn around a baby who was positioned the wrong way, but on those occasions she asked the women giving birth not to talk about it. Did she ever receive a word of encouragement, did they speak their thoughts aloud? No, not many words were spoken, instead there were warm glances, a grateful smile, like secret reminders of what she had said and done.

She wasn’t a large woman, although she was forceful in everything she set out to do. Her hands were still the narrow hands of a young girl, making it easy for her to manually examine a woman’s condition. But she was too quick to voice her opinion and not good at listening to others. She became insistent when she was sure of something and refused to yield for the sake of domestic peace. This created an invisible distance around her. She had no one but Hans to confide in. Like many other women of that time, she had long, thick brown hair which she braided and wound around her head. It wasn’t that which made her stand out, even in gatherings of upper-class women. There was something singular about her gaze which made people take notice of her. There was a clear, questioning, almost lost look in her eyes when she thought no one was watching her. She was especially alert to everything happening in nature, the migratory birds returning in spring, she noticed where they built their nests, where they were headed. Marta Kristine loved being out in the open, and above all she loved being in a boat. She often rowed alone across Langfjorden, and she didn’t care that people said it brought bad luck when a woman behaved like a man.

But it was still the case that more than half of the women giving birth declined to summon her.

One day she said to Hans:

‘Now I’ve heard it said enough times that I’m not a proper midwife.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘I have to go to Christiania and attend midwife school one winter.’

‘To Christiania!’

‘Yes, to Christiania!’

‘That’s a long way away,’ Hans said, and she could tell that what she was saying affected him deeply.

‘That’s what I have to do, Hans, if I am to gain my right. I have to win over those who say I’m not a proper midwife.’

‘So that’s what you must do now?’

‘Yes, Hans, I must.’

‘I suppose it’s already been decided,’ he said.

‘I’ll gladly listen to what you have to say,’ she said.

She saw him standing there, on the kitchen floor, with his fair hair. Now he opened the door towards Blåhammaren, where spring was in full bloom. At last they had settled down here, and now she wanted to leave yet again.

They stood looking at one another, for they knew they were at a turning point. On the floor sat a boy who had just learned to crawl, he had fair curly hair like his father. A girl aged two and a half was on her way out the door. Through the open window they could hear birds singing in the forest.

Hans cleared his throat and then he made a movement with his hand to say that he didn’t want to speak more about this, since she had already made her mind up.

‘I had better get the potatoes in the ground,’ he said, ‘so we’ll have something to eat this winter.’

‘I’ll come help you,’ she said.

‘You have to stay indoors with the children.’

‘I’ll bring them with me to the field.’

Of course she would. She always had her way.

‘When are you thinking of leaving?’ he asked.

‘Towards the end of September,’ she replied.

‘I expect I’ll have gotten the potatoes out of the ground by then,’ Hans said and went out.

In the evening Ola came to visit the house beneath Blåhammaren. Hans told his brother he wouldn’t be able to get together the money needed for a nine-month stay in Christiania.

‘She’ll have to borrow from me,’ Ola said.

‘We owe a whole lot already,’ Hans said.

‘But when she gets back home, her earnings will increase,’ Ola asserted. ‘She has to go, for her own sake and for the sake of society. Things must be put right here in the village some day.’

‘I’m the one borrowing this time,’ Marta Kristine said. She was in the kitchen, but had heard everything they said.

‘You?’

She was afraid Ola would ask his brother to sign, but he didn’t.

Two days later Ola brought the money. Hans wasn’t in at the time. Ola, who was usually so quick to leave, took his time for once. He sat down in a chair Marta Kristine offered him. He treated himself to a plug of tobacco. Then he laid his big wallet on the table. Then he sighed and said, ‘Now things must be put right here in the village some day.’ Then he counted out the banknotes one by one. It was twenty *speciedalar* all in all.

‘You have to count it to make sure it’s right,’ he told her as he placed the stack of notes on the table.

‘I watched you counting them,’ Marta Kristine said.

‘It’s best to count twice,’ Ola said.

And so she counted them while he looked on.

‘It’s correct,’ she said. ‘Thank you for helping me!’

She reached out her hand. Oddly enough he didn’t take it. He was busy putting his wallet back in his pocket.

‘It’s a loan,’ Ola said.

‘I’ll settle the debt as soon as I’m able,’ she said and withdrew her hand. ‘I suppose you think you have a hold over me now?’

‘No,’ Ola said, ‘I don’t think anyone will ever have a hold over you.’

[…]

CHAPTER ELEVEN

**3**

On Christmas Eve her father brought over one of the two oil lamps that he kept in his crofter’s house. He needed only one now, he said, since his wife was no more. Before he had kept one oil lamp, or *kole*, as they were called, in the corner by the door where he sat working, and another above the kitchen table where they ate supper. Now he could make do with one of them, moving it if he needed to.

Old Anders Knudsen also brought some sad tidings, he told them that Sigrid Eriksdatter, Ola’s wife, had died of pneumonia, only 68 years old. She had been the daughter of a big farmer, and she had married a big farmer, perhaps not primarily for love. Marta Kristine, still somewhat unbalanced by the grief that had befallen her own self, was visited by many strange thoughts. She sat motionless for a while.

‘What will become of Ola now?’ she said at last.

‘Is that what you are thinking of?’ her father asked in surprise.

‘Yes, I happened to think of it,’ said Marta Kristine.

‘Now oughtn’t you rather be thinking about lighting two oil lamps, seeing as it’s Christmas Eve,’ Anders Knudsen said.

She and the children saw each other as if in a new light. But perhaps it wasn’t the light but grief that cleansed their eyes, grief mingled with the Christmas spirit. Their father had been what he was, he had been away much of the time, and even when he was home he had been distant and distracted, but this Christmas it had fully dawned on them that he would never come back to them with his singing and his laughter on days when his agitation left him. The incredible was becoming real to them, it wasn’t a bad dream.

They sat around the supper table singing, and there were many frail children’s voices in this house, while the southeaster howled around the corners, but a couple of male voices too mingled tentatively with the rest. They belonged to Anders Knudsen, who sang boldly with his old man’s voice, and the oldest son Ole, whose voice had already broken. Then they ate, and there were no mutton ribs, which they had often had for Christmas in earlier years, for they had had to let three of their sheep go at the auction, and the two that were left – one belonged to Ingeborg – they had no intention of slaughtering. They had to make do with the cod that Ole had caught with his grandfather two days before. But what profanation was this? Who said cod didn’t make a delicious dish for Christmas? And who had saved the winter apples from the large apple tree that grew across the road? They had apple jelly with milk, and who had a more priceless dish with which to conclude the Christmas meal? Hans had planted an apple tree when they first moved here, a sapling from the Ola farm, which more than twenty years later had grown into a big and beautiful tree, and which this autumn had born fruit in abundance.

Of course there were no presents, as there likely wouldn’t have been even if Hans had still been among them, but they still possessed the most important gift of all, their grandfather said suddenly, who otherwise rarely spoke out of turn when he was with them. The most important gift was the child Jesus, the village shoemaker said, the child who had come to benighted earth to spread the message of peace among all people. Marta Kristine had never heard her father say anything like this before, he wasn’t of the devout sort, but perhaps life had changed him and he felt the urge to bear witness.

‘Perhaps you could speak some more about this, father?’ Marta Kristine said, for she had neglected the word of God after she became a married woman, it wasn’t that she had anything against it, but she had figured that school would instil Christianity into them, that was after all the main purpose of schooling in their day.

But Anders Knudsen didn’t want to talk about such matters, it wasn’t in his nature, he said, perhaps because he didn’t feel worthy. But then he brought out from his rucksack something wrapped in a piece of cloth, it was the old bible that had once belonged to his father, for he was one of the few crofters at that time who knew how to read and write. And he had managed to acquire a bible, something beyond the reach of most common people. And now he wanted to pass it on to his daughter and her children, the bible should accompany his descendants into the future, so from now on the bible should be kept at their house. And thus it came about that Marta Kristine opened the bible and read from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, about the child that came into the world in Bethlehem. And they knew of it, her children, and yet it was strange to hear it spoken of, not in the village dialect used by their school master when he told them about it in his own words, but in the old-fashioned Danish written form, which elevated everything to a more solemn level, they felt.

While she read, little Knut had fallen asleep on his big sister Ingeborg’s lap, and when Marta Kristine finished and put the book away, Ingeborg carried her brother to the small bedroom where he slept with his mother this winter. He would continue to do so for several winters to come.

It was then that Hans, now six and a half years old, who was being overtaken by sleep too but still intended to take part in the meal for quite some time yet, or at least as long as he could still stand on his feet, looked up at his mother and said:

‘Mother, who was Father?’

And then the room fell dead silent. They hadn’t spoken yet of how they remembered him, for their grief was so heavy that it was more than enough simply to cope with life and work from one day to the next.

She had thought to put the question aside, for it was both too late in the evening and too soon since Hans had passed away. She had thought they needed to get some distance from it all first, before they could soften their sorrow with what they could remember. But when she saw all the alert, serious faces surrounding her and realised how powerful was their wish to bring him to life within themselves, she knew she couldn’t put it off.

‘Let’s clear the table first,’ she said, and as soon as she had said it, she understood how important it was to her that they should be able to speak about him. Everyone helped to clear away cups and plates, and they lit the woodstove so they could heat water and do the dishes. When they gathered around the table again they sat as closely together as they could.

‘Hans was the first person I trusted when I came here,’ she said, ‘the first boy who spoke kindly to me, and then there was one thing more. He was the most beautiful of all the boys in school, even though he himself was unaware of it. So that’s how it was.’

‘Surely there was more to it,’ the other Ingeborg said, who otherwise rarely spoke out of turn. ‘He told me once that he was the little brother whom no one had time to listen to, but who got all the help he needed. I wonder what he meant by it?’

‘No one was more carefree than he when we were young,’ Marta Kristine said. ‘The rest of us worried about the smallest things, but Hans saw no shadows anywhere. But in the end, he became the one who was fearful of everything, even when no dangers were visible.’

She had never said as much about this before, neither to the children nor to anyone else, she knew she was dangerously close to a subject that was not to be spoken of.

She heard her father, at the opposite end of the table, clear his throat carefully.

‘He grew up faster than I did, and therefore our ways parted for a time,’ Marta Kristine said. ‘He left the village to look for work, then he went to Setnesmoen, and finally he joined the war. But when he came home at last, he sent me a letter asking me to marry him, because there could never be anyone but us for each other.’

What she didn’t say was that he was different than before when he returned from the war.

‘And then we got married, and as I remember it, it was the most beautiful wedding anyone could imagine. We danced, yes we did, for three nights in a row.’

‘And on the third night I wasn’t home until five in the morning,’ the shoemaker said, he wanted to remember too.

‘Then came all the years when I struggled to become a midwife. Hans was always willing to let me go, first to Molde, then to Christiania.’

No one had anything more to say just then, and she thought that would have to do for tonight, but now it was Andrine, eleven years old, who spoke up:

‘What was it about Father?’

‘What it was about him?’

‘Yes, why was he the way he was! Sometimes he was in such great spirits, singing and laughing, but other times it made no difference what I said to him, he simply wouldn’t answer.’

‘He didn’t have enough money, he had too many children!’ said Kristine, who was only seven. ‘We were too many!’

‘Is it our fault that we’re too many!’ the second Ingeborg said.

‘It was something worse than that,’ Marta Kristine said.

‘What could be worse than money troubles?’ Ole said.

‘It was something that happened in the war,’ Marta Kristine said, ‘and I know we’ve never spoken about this before. Hans didn’t want us to talk about it. But now that he is no more, it must be brought out into the open.’

‘What happened in the war?’

‘He saw his companions get killed, a whole flock of them. And that incident burrowed into his soul. The wound in his shoulder stopped hurting, but the pain in his soul never went away.’

‘What is a soul wound?’

‘It is a bad memory that comes to you, even though you struggle with all your might to forget it. It could be that you don’t want to talk about it, because that only makes it worse. But when it can’t be aired, the memory can grow and become a fearful ghost in your mind, until it dislodges all other memories and all other thoughts, yes, it becomes a monster that follows you wherever you go, and at last it overpowers you so that you can no longer govern your own steps nor be yourself on the path you are walking, and you tumble into darkness.’

She said all this as calmly as she could, while pain screamed within her.

‘Is that what happened to Father?’

‘Yes, that is what happened to Father. And now everyone in this house has to go to bed.’

Yes, they obeyed her, what else could they do. The question had been put forward, and an answer given, but of course they hadn’t got to the bottom of it. They stood up and stumbled into each other, looking for their beds. Kristine and Andrine slept on the pull-out bed in the living room now, Ole and the three oldest sisters in the loft. Hans and Knut shared the bed where their father had lain, in their mother’s room.

The village shoemaker put on his winter coat and hat to go home. It was pitch dark outside, but he knew the way. Marta Kristine asked him if he would like to borrow the cowshed lantern on his way home, but he shook his head

‘My feet know the way,’ said Anders Knudsen, ‘and I don’t have a monster living inside me.’

‘No, luckily you have been spared that.’

‘That monster runs in the family over at the Ola Farm,’ Anders Knudsen said. ‘Many have been talking about it lately. I hope your children will be spared from it.’

‘We don’t know the future. I hope they have inherited your strength.’

‘Yes,’ said Anders Knudsen. ‘I lack many things, but in my soul there is peace.’ Then he took his daughter’s hand and bade her goodnight.