

High Mountains, Deep Valleys

by Cecilia Davidsson

We drive into Grimsdalen after putting seventy Norwegian kronor into a roadside box by the barrier, and as the landscape opens up I hear Nils from the back seat saying something in a gruff voice. He's not spoken a word since we got into the car this morning. I turn around: he has wedged a pillow between his cheek and the window – my pillow, now covered in wet patches of saliva.

“What did you say?”

“I said, where are we going?” says Nils.

“I'm not quite sure, but apparently it's beautiful,” I say.

The narrow road, partially overgrown with grass, follows the river that winds through the valley. Sheep and goats range freely on either side of the road, or even in the middle of the road right ahead of us, while further up the slope are brown and white or black and white cows, with their muzzles to the ground. I tell the children to look. Obviously they've seen sheep and cows before, but not like this, the way it used to be a hundred years ago.

“Go on, have a look, then,” I say, pointing at the jumble of chalets and livestock buildings, some even with grass-covered roofs – and flowers! – but the youngest two of the children have already gone back to

their gaming. I tell them to turn off the volume, only to be told that it can't be done in the middle of a game.

Further ahead a bridge crosses the river and at the end of the bridge is a simple camping ground, where two caravans have parked. A small herd of black sheep and their half-grown lambs surround a toilet block.

"Oh, can't we stop here?" I say, putting my hand on Helge's thigh.

"Sure," he says, turning off and driving right up to the bank of the river.

The bridge is arched and rests on blocks of stone. It's as beautiful as a fairy tale – The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Nils opens the car door and goes directly to the river. Down on his knees, he bends low to the water, and in this position reveals an expanse of flesh between the line of his underpants and his jumper. He scoops ice-cold water into his hand and drinks.

"Damned thirsty, aren't you," I say.

"The language!" says Helge.

Nils has difficulty straightening.

"Go on, fight for it," says Helge.

I go up to Nils and offer him a hand. I know what his father thinks of such an approach; it's the wrong parenting. I ask myself how old the boy has to be before I can help him without this being described as

molycoddling. Quick as a flash, Nils yanks up his trousers. They immediately slide down again.

"Are we staying here?" he says.

"I don't know. For a while, anyway," I say.

He points at the mountains and says he wants to go up. His voice is not especially determined, but it still holds some expression of purpose.

"On your own?" I say.

"Yeah, what about it?" he says, his gaze darting about. I don't know if it's just my imagination, but I feel that lately he has increasing difficulty fixing his eyes on me.

"Nothing," I say, and go back to the car and open the boot to look for a hat.

When I come back Helge is standing with his hand on Nils's shoulder. It is perfectly obvious that Nils doesn't want it there.

"Are you aware of that?" says his father.

"Of course," says Nils.

"It's probably blowing hard up there," I say, offering him the hat. He takes it and puts it in his jacket pocket.

"This is the real thing," I say after that.

"Eh?" says Nils, craning his neck and looking at me as if I was really out of my mind.

"Do you have your mobile?" I ask.

“No coverage,” he says.

“But still,” I say.

He turns around and starts walking towards the bridge, his hands in his jacket pockets. He sets a course for the nearest peak. Behind it are even higher mountains, but they can't be seen from the bottom of the valley. There's a patch of snow on the summit. He hasn't said in so many words that he wants to touch that snow, but I know it's precisely what he has in mind. Summer snow, July snow. I call out behind him that he should keep to one of the paths; there are several of them leading all the way up. There are signs and simple maps available in a wooden box, but he doesn't like that sort of thing. Neatness and order. Of course he doesn't understand a thing about it. But he's not going so far, it's summer, the skies are clear, and throughout – except perhaps while he's in the woods – he'll be able to see the river and the camping ground. Really he should be wearing different shoes, real walking boots that are waterproof.

“Bye!” I call out.

He doesn't turn around to answer, just fleetingly waves his right arm. It looks as if he can't quite decide whether to run or walk. He ends up doing something in-between. I know he's holding back, he'd like to run

for his life as his younger siblings do. On the other side of the woods the bare mountain takes over. I take a deep breath. Yes, the woods are really there, the expansive landscape and the mountains are really there too. The beauty of the valley is there, everything is there, although it looks as unreal as the preternaturally beautiful, archaic landscapes in one of Nils's many role-play games.

I walk onto the bridge and lean over the railing, which, like the corner posts, seems to have been hand-carved. The water ripples beneath. You can see how incredibly pure it is. I cross to the other side and follow one of the paths for about a hundred metres, just to gain a bit of altitude. There's no sign of Nils. You can get quite far in fifteen minutes. The woods are bigger than they seemed from where the car is parked. I photograph the valley, then head back. Down by the river I notice a dry cowpat with a little toadstool sticking out of the middle. I lie on my stomach in the grass and start taking photographs. The children come running. I realise the ground is full of dry cowpats, one or two weedy toadstools sprouting from each of them. The children call for their father; they want to show him the funny cow shit. Helge takes a couple of photos with his own camera, although he doesn't bother lying

down. I tell him that I'd like to make a diversion from our plans and stay the night in Grimsdalen. Helge's eyes fill with anticipation. A measure of spontaneity is a part of his vision of the perfect holiday.

I go to the car and start rigging up one of the gas stoves to make coffee. Helge takes down the camping furniture from the roof box. I get out three plastic glasses and two plastic mugs, a carton of juice, and a bag of buns that I put in a breadbasket because I don't like eating from bags. As I see it, things should look attractive even when you're out camping. All this takes time, because the things are kept in various places: in the freezer bag, in the box of household utensils, in one of the plastic bags that has manifested over the course of the journey, or in the rucksack inside the car.

I think to myself that Nils will be gasping for a coffee break when he comes back.

If he comes back.

It's an idiotic thought. But I just have to let it run through my mind, like a spell. It would be more feasible to imagine that in some unknowable way he has lost his way and we have to start looking for him, and, in the worst case scenario, call for help. His sense of direction is not as good as it might be. But can it really be as bad as that?

I spoon ground coffee into the presso coffee maker, estimating how much to put in. Once the water is boiling I pour it over the coffee and put on the lid and let it brew for four minutes before I press down the filter. Then I quickly transfer the coffee to the thermos. The sun has gone behind clouds now, the temperature is dropping. I abhor lukewarm coffee. I pour juice into the plastic glasses and call for the children.

Nils is a dreamer, not a scout. I don't know if it's something to be concerned about. In any case there's nothing I can do about it. I can't stop him from ambling away from the staked-out paths.

"He's far too lightly dressed," says Helge.

"Yes, yes," I say.

"What do you mean, 'Yes, yes'?"

"I mean I did my best. What did you do?"

"I told him to put on his long johns, but I don't think he did, I think he just pretended to."

"He put his hat in his pocket, I saw that with my own eyes. If he doesn't put it on it's his own fault, actually."

"Yeah, I think he needs to feel cold so he can learn one or two things."

"Like what?"

"Like how you need to think before you act. And listen to your parents."

“No teenagers listen to their parents. If I had listened to mine...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“What do you mean, ‘yeah, yeah’?”

“We’re on holiday.”

“So what?”

“What are you talking about, Mum?”

I shake my head, touch the children’s hands, and in the fleeting moment before they pull them away and grab for the buns, I have time to feel how cold they are. I warm up my own hands around the coffee cup. The coffee is just the right strength. One eye on the children, another on the mountain. He won’t get lost. What actually can happen is that he stumbles on a rock or a root and breaks his foot. Just lies there. Not for very long, because there are people moving about up there, but only on the paths. He can call for help. He doesn’t like making a spectacle of himself, but in the end he’ll have no choice.

The children leave their buns half-eaten and start stalking a lone ewe who has come close to the car. The ewe has orange plastic tags in both its ears. Braying, it withdraws, the children braying back at it, and Helge and I shooing at it, which makes the poor thing belt off as if it’s a matter of life or death.

I go and get my pocket flask from the rucksack, and add a dram to my coffee.

“Isn’t it a bit early in the day for that?” says Helge, and he holds out his cup. I give him a couple of drops. Then I put Nils’s bun back in the bag, so it doesn’t dry out. We have our coffee. Then we help each other take down the tent from the roof box. It’s a tepee with space for seven people and a wood-burning stove, in case you want a wood-burning stove. Helge has already chosen a spot for it, which we clear of pebbles and sheep droppings before we get started. I time it. It takes us seven minutes – a minute longer than yesterday, even though I felt we were quicker. We have not yet got it down to five minutes, which is how long the manufacturer claims it should take to put up the tent.

I crawl into the opening and pass through the sleeping bags and bedrolls and bags that Helge tosses to me. I open the bedrolls and start inflating them. I could do with a double layer, both horizontally and vertically. Every night I’ve woken with a feeling of lying on a narrow plank surrounded by water. I am a dreamer, not a scout. Helge was the one who bought the tent and made sure that we brought a radiator so we wouldn’t have to feel cold at night. I laughed about that radiator. Said it was cheating. I didn’t know what I

was talking about. Now I know better. For instance, I know it's going to be a cold night, because we don't have access to electricity in the valley, but not so cold that we'll freeze to death or anything like that. The important thing is to make sure that no part of your limbs stick out of the sleeping bag.

As I am crawling out of the tent I see a movement at the edge of the trees: two people are descending, neither of them wearing a black jacket. That black, thin jacket. Still, he could hardly have packed his winter jacket. It's mid-July. Further east, towards Oslo, it's as hot as in Sweden, almost thirty degrees.

I have never heard him yell out in real pain, but I can imagine more or less how such a yell would sound. I can hear it inside: a high-pitched, wavering sound, his voice has always been frail. But of course a scream of death anguish is something altogether different.

I go outside and stand on the bridge, photographing more or less the same vistas as before, except with the desert-sand-coloured tent as a new prop. Nils will be very pleased to hear that we are staying the night in the valley, without the availability of electricity or running water. He'll be cold, but he doesn't know that yet. I start walking along the river. After a while I pull up the hood of my jacket and tighten the straps to

shield myself from the wind, which has grown stronger. I check my watch, I check the mountain. For a long while I try not to look at my watch and the mountain. I quicken my pace to keep warm. I meet a herd of cows, probably twenty of them. They lift their heads and look at me. I clap my hands and they move off, up the slope. I wouldn't mind taking care of animals – big animals. I think it would suit me. Being out in nature like this, a lone human being among animals.

When the sun disappears behind the mountains the landscape and everything else changes fundamentally. This is no fun any more, it's only cold. I turn back. I am close to tears. To a great extent this is down to hunger. For a long time the car and the tent are in sight. No Helge, no children. Only once I have crossed the bridge do I see a pair of denim-wearing legs sticking out from behind the car. Someone is sitting there, sheltered from the wind. I hurry my steps. It's Nils, of course.

Unscathed. Nothing has happened, he has just come back from a short wander in the mountains. I decide to hold back on any effusive emotions.

"How did it go?"

"Fine," he says. He has bun crumbs all down his jacket. Freezing, with shaking shoulders. It hurts me to see him so cold.

"I didn't see you."

"Really."

"Are you cold?"

He answers by digging his hands deeper into his jacket pockets. There's a rip in his trouser-leg, it may be an old one.

"Was it nice up there?"

He nods, snorts back the snot in his nose.

"Hungry?"

"So-so. Where are the others?"

"They're looking for you."

"Me?"

He nods, snuffling again. He'll probably catch a cold after this, I think, and I go into the tent to fetch a blanket, which I spread over his shoulders. He leans forward, as if he wants to get away from the blanket. I crawl back into the tent and fetch my sleeping bag. Then I move one of the chairs towards Nils, sit down. I open the zipper of the sleeping bag so that it becomes like a blanket, and spread it over my legs. Immediately it feels warm underneath.

"Oh, that's lovely," I say.

Then:

"Isn't it beautiful here?"

I hope that Helge and the little ones will take their

time, because when have we ever sat like this, my eldest son and I, right under the sky, without mobile telephones, the television, or bowls of things to pop into your mouth?

"Did you make it up to the snow?"

He nods. Nothing else is forthcoming.

"How was it?"

"Different."

He turns his head a little, peers at the ground. Something is lying there, a transparent plastic bag of water. I lean forward and snatch the bag, hold it up. A couple of decilitres inside.

"What is it?"

"It melted before you came."

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