

A sunset over a frozen body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow and long rays of light. The water is partially frozen, with patches of snow and ice. In the background, there is a dark forest and a small building. The overall scene is peaceful and serene.

Beneath the Ice

In search of the Sami

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Hammerfest was nothing more than the stink of dead fish. A long huddle of bleach-white factory sheds, a few aimless streets and the stink of fish. Numberless handlebars of gulls steering low over greyness shrieking Icelandic.

It did not help that I lay face downwards on a pavement or that it was sleeting. It was midsummer morning and I was shivering like some thin, scabby dog. Behind me, the great gleaming crystal of the coastal steamer curved out towards open sea again and boomed twice, long and deep, the last Arctic ports of her itinerary in wait.

I had food poisoning. I was saved by a Danish doctor who dragged me into his surgery and saw to the two ends of me that were leaking. At the same time he took my mind off the discomfort by talking. Danes are almost invariably amiable – the human equivalent of puppies – handicapped only by a language that their Norwegian cousins rudely describe as a throat disease. I wondered why on earth he had come to this jagged fossil dinosaur of a place to work; usually Danes are frightened of hills – after all, if you climb onto a house roof in Jutland you can more or less see the Houses of Parliament.

He had wanted to get away, he said. Well, he'd succeeded there. He'd dreamed of finding the north, the real north. All right, I understood that too. I was there for the same reason.

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But the illnesses were killing him. What illnesses? Whisky and tobacco; everyone was dying of whisky and tobacco.

When I came out again into the raw aquamarine air of Hammerfest I wasn't altogether surprised. A solitary Norwegian, a hangover from the Saturday night that had just become Sunday morning, was lolling against a high fence like a rag doll, singing. I shivered. I wondered if all this wasn't too much for humanity, a few degrees north of sanity, a place that was never meant to be.

But going inland the landscape changed. The grey canine teeth of the mountains softened into dark breasts of hills, and trees started greening their slopes – tall, jade pines that hid little gems of water. I reached Karasjok in the evening, an evening that didn't get dark but only grew bluer.

Lars, who was the only Sami I had ever known, and the passport for my journey, greeted me like a brother. He had the dark almond eyes of a Mongolian hunter; thin, straight, dark hair. A Norwegian who wasn't a Norwegian, who would have been branded a drunk and a work-shy Lapp (spit) in every town between Tromsø and Tønsberg. Forty years ago. Maybe even now.

He and his wife Biret had a dishwasher, an electric carving knife, satellite television, the internet. "Are you surprised?" he laughed at me, and maybe I looked it. "Nomadic Laplanders with all the right western toys!" On the table in the living room I saw his traditional Sami costume, a reindeer horn hunting knife and birch drinking cup – and a mobile phone. All in one heap. That was the Sami world I was to keep attempting to sort out in my head time after time over the next days.

But it was *jonsok*, midsummer night, and there was a celebration to join. The back garden crackled and spat with a bonfire, and friends who had come with curiosity to meet the strange traveller murmured in Sami among the long blue

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shadows. There were fires all across Karasjok, into the hills that reached towards the Finnish border; amber fireflies with midges around them, the clink of glasses, the echoes of *joik*.

Joiking is the way the Sami celebrate their world. At birth every child is given their own *joik*, but the song will grow and change within each individual as he or she stretches towards adolescence and adulthood. When it is sung a last time at their graveside it will be complete, it will form the book of their life, the celebration of their being.

But that night the *joik* told of reindeer, of the ancient world of the Sami, of bears and wolves and the great journeys of the herders across the tundra, right to the edges of Russia:

*Somewhere deep inside me
I hear
a voice calling
and hear the joik of the blood
deep
from life's boundary
to life's boundary.*

*All this is my home -
these fjords, rivers, lakes,
the frost, the sunlight, the storm,
the night and daytime of these moorlands -
joy and sorrow,
sister and brother.
All this is my home
and I carry it in my heart.*

I dreamed that night of being among the bellies of blue whales. They were calling to each other across the oceans of the world and though only a few remained their song was made of

the same sounds and was understood in the west, the north, the south and the west. I woke up in the morning listening to the thatch of birdsong in the birch trees, feeling clean and scoured as a single bone, washed up on a new and strange shore.

“I’m taking you somewhere,” said Lars after breakfast. The morning sky was like a single pane of glass, full of the yellow resin of the pines. The traffic was already loud in the town streets: Germans with their dormobiles, young Norwegians whose cars thudded with heavy metal, trucks on their way to Sweden, Finland and Russia. We took the road that wound down close to the river through avenues of birches whose leaves glistened like silver coins. Lars stopped the car by the church. “The only building in Karasjok that survived 1944,” he said, getting out. “Everything else was burned by the retreating Germans. The Sami went back to the hills, abandoned their settled lives and existed as they always had. That whole winter. Come into the churchyard with me; I want to show you something – the story of the Sami.”

We went to the far end of the graveyard, shrouded by older and darker trees. There was nothing – I saw nothing. The ground was covered in leaves and moss. I looked helplessly at Lars as he stood beside me.

“This ground is full of Sami people – men, women and children. They didn’t mark their graves in the days before Christianity, they didn’t think of it. The people were part of the land, in life as in death.”

We walked on, twenty feet, to the first row of neat white stones.

“What do you notice now? What do you see on the graves?”

I looked. *Arild Johansen, Gunhild Rasmussen, Ottar Brekke...*
I looked at him. “Norwegian names?”

He nodded fiercely. “Yes, the whole lot. Not a Sami name among them. Why? Because Sami was illegal, because Sami

names were illegal. It was the lowest time we ever knew. Our language was stopped in our throats, and if we were to achieve anything in Norway we had to become settled, we had to become mortgaged to a town. Even then we were still second class citizens; dirty, untrustworthy oddities made fun of in the playground and in the parliament in Oslo. Even the church made us look at ourselves with shame and seek repentance for what we were.”

I went forward again along the wavering gravel path. I was walking though time. Again Lars ordered me to stop.

“This is my generation,” he said. “Look very carefully at the names on the stones, the dates. Think about them. Tell me what you see.”

At first I saw nothing, except that there were flowers by the stones. Little simple twists of pink and white blooms that whispered in the blue breeze. It was as if they had blown in on a tide.

“All men,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. That was all that the names told me.

“All *young* men. In their twenties and thirties. And all of them died...by their own hands. They killed themselves because their way of life was gone and they didn’t know what to do. They were told they could be bank managers and pilots and engineers – but they couldn’t be. They went south and got everything that money could buy. They gained the whole world and lost their own souls. Why? Because of this!” He bent down and tore up the moss and heather by his foot with trembling fingers. “Because the land, the reindeer, they were asleep in their blood, they were part of their very heartbeat.” He let the moss be carried by the breeze. “And what next? Will there be another generation of Sami at all or will they vanish? If the language dies and the herding culture is forgotten then what do we become? A costume for tourists? Nothing more

than a book in which our story is written, a book whose ink is slowly fading? When do a people cease to exist? When do they lose the last of their identity?” He smiled. “I must stop this bleakness. Come and I will take you to meet Magga.”

She was the oldest woman in the Karasjok community; an old tortoise who carried the shell of her back painfully but whose eyes slid sideways at the world like new-cut gems. In the early afternoon we sat with our backs to a long curve of the river, a creature low and silted and sleepy with the weight of summer, and rolled ourselves cigarettes as the mosquitoes swivelled and hummed in the still air. England and Sweden were playing football and Magga’s son Jostein and Lars were rooting madly for England. Anyone who could humiliate Sweden was to be applauded. Now and again one of them would turn the dial of a radio that lay splayed in the grass to listen to the score. The silence crackled as a finger rolled the dial to find the huge waves of songs, the sound of clapping, the high-pitched sing-song of a Norwegian commentator. It was a place so far away it no longer mattered to me; it was a journey on foot, then by car, then three days by steamer, before a final drive home. But it was further away even than that...

Magga asked me if I knew how the Sami had survived.

I sat up in the grass and shook my head. She told Lars in a long string of toothless sentences that were interspersed with gestures and a stamped foot, and finally ended with folded arms. The eyes swivelled to see if I had been listening and Lars translated.

“By the early 1970’s the Sami were a broken people. Our language was more or less illegal and could not be taught in school – the whole process of ‘scandivisation’ was all but complete. The Norwegian Government decided to build a dam in the Alta Valley, a place held sacred by the Sami for centuries. It was the last straw that broke the camel’s back – or perhaps

the last branch that broke the reindeer's back, you might say. The Sami, especially the young, came in their native costume and chained themselves to the diggers. They came in their thousands. It still looked a desperate and pathetic struggle. But then the international media got wind of it and they descended with their whole circus on Alta. They asked questions; who were the Sami and why were they being persecuted? Why was this valley being flooded if the people did not want it? The Scandinavians, the great ambassadors for peace and justice everywhere from Cambodia to South Africa, were suddenly discovered with blood on their own hands at their very back door. Even though the dam was built and Alta was lost, a sea change was brought about that has lasted to this day. Linguistic and cultural rights, justice for the reindeer herders, new laws against discrimination....”

Jostein suddenly squealed, his ear buried in the frothing of the radio. “England have scored! England have scored!” Lars and he howled with joy and for a moment, the history of their struggle for self-determination was momentarily forgotten in a long, warm babble of Sami delight. Even Magga’s eyes disappeared in her face under wrinkles as she smiled.

Lars sat up again at last, his hair tousled. “After Alta, the little Lapplander dared to grow up. But was it the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end? Remember what I told you in the graveyard in Karasjok.”

The match ended and the radio lay silent on its back in the grass. Magga said she had something in the house she wanted me to drink. It was clear that I should follow her as she went awkwardly up from the riverbank towards the house. It is strange to walk alongside a human being with whom you cannot communicate at all – silence is loud and odd. Her kitchen smelled of flies and dogs. I was a stranded island in the middle of the uneven floor as she padded round, opening

cupboards and cooking something that smelled sour and burnt. She sat me down at the table in the end and presented me with coffee so thick it looked as if it could fill holes in the farm track. In another bowl in front of me were hot oval lumps of something white that smelled distinctly goaty. Lars and Jostein came in grinning like jackals, hands in their jeans as they stood by the table watching.

“Reindeer cheese,” said Lars. “Be sure and take lots of sugar.”

The cheese balls plopped into the coffee with three swivelfuls of sugar. I blew and drank. It tasted appalling, utterly revolting, and I wondered if I was going to manage to keep it down at all.

“Lovely,” I gulped, “it’s lovely!”, and the three of them rocked on their heels, laughing. Their narrow eyes disappeared in their dark faces as they laughed at me tenderly, like parents at their child.

An hour later Magga fell asleep in her chair and Lars and I slipped away into the still blue glow of the afternoon.

“I have arranged a journey for you, with the only pilot in Karasjok – my brother-in-law! He’ll take you right into the heart of Sami country – two hundred and fifty miles from anywhere.”

He left me on an edge of forest near his brother-in-law’s house where the family was building a cabin. Mikkel hardly greeted me as he staggered past with a heaped hod of bricks, finished digging a channel and threw instructions to his own father watching on the edge of the plot. The old man was covered in mosquitoes; his whole face crawled with them so his features appeared to be part of some lunatic Dali or Picasso portrait, constantly changing and melting and disappearing.

The wood was so still you could have heard a pin drop in Moscow; the mosquitoes sang and whizzed, the midnight air

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was hot and lemon. The very pines seemed to sweat their resin and I stood there fighting the mosquitoes with my arms like one drowning while the old man smiled at me triumphantly, the edges of his mouth twisted and buried by a boiling of mosquitoes. It was said by the Sami that you could always recognise strangers because they were the only ones who ever fought the mosquitoes.

We went down to Mikkel's seaplane in the end. It lay like a white insect in a backwater of the river and Mikkel's two young twin sons bounded ahead of us, falling and yapping. They scrambled like cubs into the back of the plane as we hummed out along the river and rose up at last in a clear curve into the luminous Lappland night to meet the last embers of the sun. It lay in a rose bonfire to the west of the world, out on the rim of the sea, and suddenly I saw Hammerfest too, hunched up in the boxes of its fish sheds and its own stink. Karasjok trailed away behind us, nothing more than a cluster of wooden cabins beside a river.

But now the plane was rippled by sunlight and our faces doused in a midnight light like liquid apples. It touched a thousand thousand cups of lakes in the tundra beneath, turned it into a waterland across which the reindeer battled in silver herds. They ran ahead of us, almost as if they were leading us inexorably into their kingdom. And the plane itself showed against the eastern hillsides like a single midge, its drone the only noise in the vastness of that world of moor and lake and moor; and somehow in that moment this little midge became a metaphor for all that we were and represented amid the vast cathedral of that wilderness.

We came down in a single sweep and breathed out over a piece of water that stretched as far as the eye could see. When we climbed down across the skis and jumped over onto the heathery rocks of the shore I was aware more than anything

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else of the extraordinary noise in my ears. I had never been further from humanity in all my life: Karasjok, Kautokeino, Lakselv and Hammerfest were all beyond the edges of the sky. Fifty miles on every side there was nothing but moor and lake and moor. I had imagined such a place would be composed of utter and complete tranquillity, and to my surprise it was made of nothing but noise.

The trumpeting of whooper and mute swans, the take-offs and landings of ten thousand geese, the bubbling of grebes and phalarope and divers, a polyphony of warblers and linnets and buntings. I stood there, in the middle of a song that had been sung every summer since the creation – unchanged. It was the oldest thing I had encountered in all my life. I looked at Mikkel and his boys, playing together like bears on the wind-swept ground, part of their kingdom still – its inheritors.

**From the writings of Nils-Aslak Valkeapaa and translated via Norwegian by Kenneth Steven*