



The day Hanna's family moved in across the street I knew we'd be engaged by the end of the week and married by the end of the month. I was sitting by my shack's door, defrosting fishing hooks above a burning candle when I first saw her. Blonde hair, a tiny body frame, a slow and wishful walk. She was exactly what she was supposed to be.

The door behind me opened. My mother, a huge and solemn woman, stood behind me. For a moment we both stared at the house across the street, watching my life assemble in front of my eyes, no room for interpretation.

Mother made *lutefisk* from cod I caught next morning. The dish sat on a plate in a gelatine cube and, as I walked across the road with it in my hand, the jelly shook and wobbled.

I knocked on their door.

'I'm Mateo, I live there.' I pointed to the cabin behind me. A tall man with a silver beard who looked like he drank his coffee black and actually read newspapers had opened the door. I raised the plate in my hand. 'Welcome to the neighbourhood.'

‘Gunther.’ The man shook my hand. I followed him inside to a big kitchen that wasn’t tangled in drying fishing nets and muddy rain boots. Instead, it smelled of gingerbread and oak wood. Her mother, Alba, made us tea, peppermint, two spoons of honey. I hated honey; I would never tell, though. Not until we moved out of this house, maybe somewhere south of Skarsvag, I’d probably start drinking sooner or later and spend more time in the pub than in the boat. I’d probably never say anything anyway.

She came downstairs as we were discussing the looming autumn solstice.

‘Hanna, this is Mateo. He lives there,’ Alba said and all three of us pointed through the back kitchen wall in the direction of my house. ‘He brought *lutefisk*.’

Hanna sat down at the table and Alba lifted a tottering piece of fish jelly onto her plate. I noticed that they all had the same calm, drowsy look in their eyes which made my skin prickle, but I didn’t think it’d be a much of a problem in the future.

The parents soon excused themselves, both embracing Hanna in long, profound hugs before leaving. We were left alone in the warm kitchen.

‘Aren't you going to miss the city?’ I asked.

‘I’m looking forward to the peace and quiet.’

‘Nothing ever happens here. Ever.’

It wasn’t really a laugh, but something came out of her and it woke up her eyes. Everything was set in motion. I wondered how it was going to be living with a woman who wasn’t my mother.

Later, Hanna walked me to the door and watched me step into my boots.

‘I’m off to the market tomorrow. I could buy you something if you wanted.’

‘I don’t need anything, thank you.’ She smiled a kind smile while helping me with my coat’s upper button. Hanna had a nice face to look at, her skin so pale my fingers itched to brush over it. As it would turn out, she was warm, not cold porcelain like I had expected.

‘See you around, Hanna.’

The door closed behind me and I walked over to my own. I had left the *lutefisk* plate. She’d have to bring it back. She’d offer to knit me a new pair of socks. I’d bring fresh flounders as a thank you. We had fallen into an age-old cycle. We were walking in love.

‘Good girl?’ Mother was sitting at our tiny square kitchen table. Newspapers spread across, and on top of them, her black book of paintings and notes on wild herbs and seeds. Tonight, her watercolours traced the outlines of a sunset, the best harvest time for an elder tree blossom.

‘Think she might be the one.’

She didn’t look up from her book. I watched her big hands hold the delicate brush, spreading a shade of orange that would make your heart ache if you saw it in the sky. I didn’t say anything, I never did. I fell backwards in my bed, kicked off my boots and drew the curtain separating our tiny room.

The pale light of the sun finally pushed through the clouds as I rowed my boat alongside a high cliff stretching into the sea. The water's surface serene like a mirror, the hypnotic cadence of splashes and clonks as I lowered the oars into water again and again. I was passing the Ogre's Rim when I suddenly picked up a song-like chanting. Not used to anything but an occasional seagull, I froze, the oars fixed in the air, the boat sliding along by itself. Finally, I realized the only possible origin of the song and looked up.

I was rather surprised to see my soon-to-be bride and parents-in-law dressed in long white dresses stood on the edge of the cliff, eyes closed, and holding hands. The chanting stopped. I stared; not really sure how I was supposed to greet them under these circumstances. Before I could open my mouth, the parents each put a hand on Hanna's back and pushed their daughter off the cliff. The splash of her hitting the water was a louder version of mother dropping carp into marinade.

Nobody realizes how heavy human bodies are until they must pull someone unconscious out of the water. My Hanna was slim like an eel, but by the time I slumped her on my boat's floor, I was panting.

I kneeled next to her and pressed my fingers under her chin. Nothing. When the thing I've just lifted out of the water doesn't breathe, I usually throw it back, but I didn't think it was the right move this time. I looked up to the edge of the cliff and spotted Gunther and Alba, staring down at us.

'Not sure I under-'

I was interrupted by the not-so-lifeless Hanna. Her eyes were wide and crazy, her body convulsing as she drew a single gasping, wheezing breath, and fell back

unconscious. I decided to skip the part of establishing the aliveness of my catch, and carry on with the next thing I do with all things I bring from the sea: take her to my mother.

Mother was bent over an onion pit, her linen sleeves rolled up, fingers digging into the wet soil. Hanna was slouched over my shoulder. I could feel sweat running down my back.

‘Hey, Ma.’ I hadn’t called her that in the last twenty years, but mother’s face was solid as ever when she turned around.

‘Why she like that?’ mother nodded at Hanna while wiping her hands on her white apron.

‘She fell. From the Ogre’s Rim. Her parents pushed her, and she fell.’

I was getting more and more tired as I hopped to keep Hanna on my shoulder. Mother stood with her hands on her hips.

‘Nice family. Bring her in.’

Mother pulled our dining table into the middle of the room and laid a white sheet on the rugged wood. I watched her tie Hanna to the table with big ropes, assemble clay pots, a knife, a little spirit bottle of aquavit and her black herb book. She only ever cleaned fish, cooked fish, dug the garden and painted painful sunsets. She didn’t know how to do this. I stood petrified.

‘Go to your shed, bring the big spear,’ mother said as she lit a candle by my girl’s head and Hanna’s eyes opened, entirely black. My knees suddenly felt as wobbly and jelly as mother’s *lutefisk*.

‘Why do you need the big spear?’ The trembling of my hands rang in my voice.

‘It’s not for me,’ mother replied while landing a single drop of wax between Hanna’s eyes. ‘You’ll need it when they come for her.’

I looked through the window to the big house across the road with the warm oak kitchen and sticky vile honey. I left when mother started chanting and Hanna started screaming.

I walked around mother’s garden; the pale autumn sun in my eyes, the village the kind of quiet you get in graveyards. It took me a while to get the key in the lock, the bundle jiggling in my palm as I tried to steady my hand. Little streaks of light wedged their way between the wall boards of the fishing shed. I viewed the spears lined against the wall, the sharp metal heads gleaming. I picked the one closest to me and rushed out.

Stomping back to the house I thought of Alba proud of her daughter, I thought of Gunther hugging Hanna. I stopped. I could hear the splash of her hitting the water, the crack of her spine as she convulsed. When I came out of the shack the second time, I was holding the two biggest spears in each hand.

‘What are you doing to me?! Let me go!’ Hanna’s scream inside the room made my stomach twist as I opened the door and walked in.

‘Your mother seemed like a nice lady. Why did she put a demon inside you?’ It was the longest I’d heard my mother talk in years.

‘What? Let me go!’

‘It’s okay. I’ll get it out. Not much harder than skinning carp.’

The room was filled with smoke from the smouldering pine twigs. My eyes started to water as I watched Hanna twist on the table. Mother held her palms above the girl’s face, quietly chanting.

‘What did they do to her?’ I hadn’t ever felt my body shake so hard. Not even when father left and mother stopped talking and started painting. I watched Hanna’s spine arc above the table, the ropes digging into her skin around her ankles and wrists. Her jaw seemed sealed shut now, screams trapped inside of her, eyeballs turning beneath the closed eyelids.

‘I’ve seen it before, people getting bored of their life, messing with forces they don’t understand. The spirits don’t like that,’ mother said her eyes closed, her fingers spread in the air, almost like she was trying to draw something out. Hanna’s black eyes rolled open just as her mouth fell ajar, her face frozen in a voiceless scream. I noticed how visible the blue traces of veins were across her face, her pale skin so very close to ripping.

Mother grabbed the little bottle of aquavit and poured the liquid into Hanna’s open mouth and clapped her hands together in a single loud slap. The girl stopped twisting and jerking, her mouth and eyes closed as she fell back onto the table for the last time. I watched the woman whom I had got used to calling my mother walk to

the sink. She took soap in her seemingly clean palms, turning the white oval around and around.

‘Energy is like soil. It gives and it takes,’ she said, staring out the window. Water poured on her hands. The liquid falling back into the sink was strangely black and sticky.

She turned around. Her eyes slid to the two massive spears in my hands and then landed on my face. Mother stood in front of me. She raised her hand and cupped my cheek. I wasn’t breathing or at least I hadn't been for a very long time.

‘Air. Let’s get you some air,’ she said and walked out of the room.

She faced the house across the road. I stood beside her.

‘Give me one of those.’ She stretched out her hand. I gave her the spear, her fingers wrapped around the trunk of it, knuckles turning white.

As we stood in the pale autumn afternoon sun, the smell of salty air and soil around, between and within us, waiting for the white-dress-chanting-honey-eaters to appear once more, I had the sudden urge to ask Ma about her sunsets. And then. Listen, listen, listen.