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# **The Berlin Poplars**

by

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*'Come quickly,' she whispered. 'Do come quickly...'*

*She stood just behind the boathouse door her hands working deep in the pockets of her apron - what if someone was with him, it had happened before. Who would guess that a stroll down to the shore was anything more than that - they might imagine he wanted company. So if someone else was with him and discovered her there, she'd explain it away by saying she'd come to fetch cool fjord water to cover the fresh herrings. She'd brought a bucket with that very excuse in mind.*

*The heat inside the boathouse was static, stripes of sunlight struck in through the gaps between the planks, and there were short green tufts of grass between the stones where the sun ran its course. More than anything, she wanted to undress now and wade out into the fjord, its waters still touched with winter, feel the coarse sand beneath her soles, and the tangled kelp caressing her legs and thighs, she'd have liked to forget him for a time, forget him and feel an even more intense delight when she remembered him again.*

*'Come on... Please...'*

*The boathouse door stood ajar so she could see what was happening. The six-oared boat lay outside, hauled up obliquely on the shore. The bow was in the water, small waves lapped at the tarred prow. Oystercatchers chased each other across the water's surface,*

*black and white dots intersected with bright red lines, giddy with the sun and the sudden heat. Everyone talked about the heat, about the way these warm springs had come with peace. Two years of peace in the country, and suddenly the heat had returned. The fields were green with shooting corn and seed potatoes, the trees and fruit bushes were in full bud, and even the trees the Germans had brought were growing like mad. The spring the Germans had come and occupied the country was so cold that ice had filled the innermost arms of the fjord until well into May.*

*She still savoured the feeling of peace and wondered how long it would be before she'd accept it as natural, as one was supposed to. But perhaps her delight also sprang from something else, from him. He, whom she'd met in that summer of peace. Well, not exactly met... She'd always known who he was of course, she'd even made polite conversation to him on various occasions, he was in and out of all of the farms, like most of their neighbours. Then suddenly, one summer evening at Snarli as they sat out near the farm after a day's peat cutting, damp and tired from the heat and the work, he'd come sauntering over the fields from Neshov, and she knew right away he was coming for her. Her very body sensed it, that every inch of her was under his scrutiny, her throat, the damp curls against her forehead, the arms propping her up in the grass, the legs that she knew emerged sleek and brown from her shoes, pointing straight towards him. Someone fetched a jug of beer; the beer made her laugh, he laughed too, trying to share his laughter with the others mostly, but his gaze always returned to her in the end, making her beautiful, and when she felt the hem of her dress slip imperceptibly over her knees to where the hills of her thighs began, she let it slip a bit more, and a bit more, and parted her legs a fraction, as her laughter increased, and she felt such a throbbing ache settle in the small of her back that she almost had to cry out.*

*She walked home and he was standing in the copse waiting, she touched his skin with the palms of her hands and met his gaze, and she knew that from then on everything would be different. Not just peacetime and the coming of adulthood during the war years, but that the world was new, they were standing here creating it, the two of them together, the trees and the ground were new, the fjord below, the summer sky above with its swooping swallows, as he bowed his neck in the absolute certainty that she would meet his lips.*

*The grotesqueness of the thing hadn't crossed her mind for a moment.*

*He was coming! Alone, thank heavens.*

*She gasped and felt herself begin to quiver, the skin of her legs goose-pimpling in the static heat, her mouth dry. He swung his arms, his brow shone clear and brown as he stared down at his clogs, planning his steps along the stone-paved, uneven path. Beneath the coarse working clothes he was hers, beneath the smell of hard work lay her scents, she wanted to lick his eyes until they had room only for her, even though she knew they did already. She belonged at Neshov now, she'd remain there, he'd arranged things so that she'd stay there forever. And occasionally they got away and came down here, or to the hay barn or went into the forest, away from the thin bedroom walls that had so many ears.*

*His clogs crunched over sun-dried seaweed. He halted outside the boathouse.*

*'Anna?' he called quietly at the dark crack in the door.*

*'I'm here,' she whispered and gave the door a little push.*

## **PART 1**

When the phone rang at half past ten on a Sunday evening, he knew what it was about, of course. He picked up the TV control and turned down the volume, it was a news report about al-Qaida.

'Hello, Margido Neshov speaking.'

And he thought: I hope it's some old pensioner who's died in their bed and not a road traffic accident.

It turned out to be neither, but a young boy who'd hanged himself. His father, Lars Kotum, was on the phone. Margido knew where the Kotums' large farm was on the Byneset headland.

In the background there was the sound of loud wails, piercing, primitive. Sounds he was so familiar with: a mother's cries. He asked the father if he'd been in touch with the police and the doctor. No, he'd just phoned Margido right away, he knew who Margido was, and the business he was in.

'I think you'll have to phone the police and the doctor, too. Or would you rather I did it?'

'He hasn't just hanged himself... normally. It's more that he's... strangled himself. It's terrible. Ring, please. And come. Just come.'

He drove the Citroën rather than the hearse. The police sergeant could get an ambulance from St. Olav's.

He phoned from his mobile with the car's heater full on the windscreen, he had to shout to be heard above the noise of the fan, it was the third Sunday in Advent and there was a heavy frost outside. He got hold of both the police sergeant and the doctor, Sunday evenings were always quiet. But on this cold, quiet night one farmyard would soon be humming with cars, the people in the neighbouring farms would press their faces to the windows and wonder what was going on. They would see an ambulance, the police car, the doctor's car and a white Citroën CX station wagon that some of them might recognise. They would see lights in the farm's windows much later than usual, but they wouldn't risk ringing so late, instead they would lie awake far into the night, and talk quietly in the dark about what could have happened there and to whom, and feel a secret, shameful pleasure that it hadn't been them.

The father met him at the door. The police sergeant and the doctor had already arrived, they'd had a shorter distance to travel. They sat in the kitchen, coffee cups in front of them, with the mother, open-mouthed, her gaze desolate and dry-eyed. Margido introduced himself to her, even though he was aware that she knew him. But they'd never shaken hands before.

'Imagine you having to come here. You. For him,' she said. The voice was flat, and a bit hoarse.

Electric Advent candles stood on the windowsill facing the farmyard. The police sergeant got up and led Margido to the bedroom. The doctor went out on to the steps when her mobile rang. A yellow paper star with a bulb inside it hung in a small window giving on to the corridor, the electric light shone out through the holes in the paper, which was light yellow in the middle of the star turning to deep orange at the points. The father remained in the kitchen. He began to stare out of the window, making no attempt to relate to the boy's

mother, who just sat there, suddenly apathetic, with her hands in her lap, her feet on the floor, breathing, the cups on the table in front of her, the time of day, the bills on the shelf, the cows in their stalls, her husband at the window, the weather and the frost, her Christmas baking, the days that would come, entirely of their own accord. She sat there, simply amazed by the fact that she was still breathing, that her lungs were working automatically. She didn't know what sorrow was yet, but sat there genuinely surprised that the clock was still ticking.

Margido just observed it all. What would he know about losing a son, he who didn't even know what it was like to have one? Besides, he couldn't permit himself to feel, his job was to register how the bereaved manifested their feelings, so that he could get them to face all the practical details. He tried to express the sympathy and sorrow he concealed behind this facade of professionalism by always doing exactly what the bereaved wanted and expected of him.

He wasn't prepared for the sight, even though the boy's father had said it wasn't an ordinary hanging. The father had obviously imagined a rope from a beam, an up-ended chair on the floor beneath, a corpse turning gently on its own axis, or suspended completely motionless. The classic scenario, the one everyone had seen in films, in all its details, with the exception of the urine that usually ran down the trouser legs and formed a small pool on the floor. But this wasn't the scene now, the boy wasn't hanging high and unencumbered. He was kneeling forward on his bed, naked apart from a pair of wine-red boxer shorts. The rope was tied to the bedpost and reached obliquely to his neck. His face was pale blue, his eyes wide open, his tongue dry and swollen between the lips. The sergeant had closed the door behind them and now he said: 'He could have changed his mind right up to the end.'

Margido nodded, without shifting his gaze from the corpse.

'How long have you been in the business?' the sergeant asked.

'Nearly thirty years.'

'Have you ever seen anything like it?'

'Yes.'

'Have you seen anything worse?'

'Perhaps a girl from a door once. She wasn't far enough off the ground, she'd raised her knees to her chest.'

'Christ. That's some determination.'

'They're determined all right. Can't see any other way out. They're probably too young to see any other way out, poor devils.'

He was lying to the sergeant, he'd never seen that precise variant of suicide before, but he had to exude a certain cynical calm, he worked best like that, when he could operate in peace and be regarded as professional expertise and nothing more. In fact, people often expected a higher degree of professional detachment from him than, for example, from a policeman. They probably thought that as he came into daily contact with death, he wasn't affected by it. On several occasions he'd helped police and ambulance personnel pick up body parts from roads after car accidents, and they'd been offered crisis counselling afterwards, but not him.

He studied the boy. Although the sight shocked him, he also felt a macabre sense of something impressive about a youth who simply leant forward on his bed, resting his weight on his knees and thighs, letting the rope squeeze his arteries and nerve centres, and waiting for the darkness. And when that darkness began to come, first as red spots in front of his eyes, he didn't put his hands down on the mattress in front of him to take the strain off his neck. No. He'd managed not to. He'd made up his mind.

'I've read about a kind of sex game,' whispered the sergeant shifting his weight uneasily.

Margido glanced quickly at him, and then back at the corpse.

'I don't know what you mean,' he said.

'Something about almost throttling yourself, before you...'

'He's got his pants on.'

'Yes. You're right, of course. It was only an idea. Well, the whole thing's quite clear. No suspicion of anything... criminal. He left a note, too. Only a few words, an apology. The parents were at a postnuptial party given by a couple of newly weds. The boy knew he had several hours. He should have been there too. He was their youngest child. They've got two girls, one is studying some mumbo-jumbo in Trondheim, luckily the older one is at agricultural college. But this one here... Yngve, was still at home, didn't really know what he wanted to do. I'd often see him cycling down to the estuary at Gaulosen with a telescope slung over his shoulder, going bird-watching, a hell of a lot of birds stop off there to rest, you know. But it must have been a bit of a trial for his dad to have a bird-watcher for a son, what with all the things that need doing on a farm, even though it wasn't Yngve who'd be taking over. But to hang yourself, on your knees! Bugger me, that's hardly the sort of thing a normal person would go round doing...'

Margido fetched the receptacle for special waste from his car. The ambulance hadn't arrived yet. The doctor was sitting in the kitchen with the boy's parents. He heard their voices as he passed the open door on his way back. Sentences with few words and long gaps between them. The doctor entered the bedroom shortly after him, and closed the door behind her.

'We must cut him loose,' said the sergeant. The doctor had managed to borrow a pair of household scissors with orange plastic handles which she held out to the sergeant. He snipped. The body fell to the duvet. Margido untied the stump of rope from the bedpost.

'The ambulance will be here any minute,' said the sergeant. 'You'll fix the rest tomorrow? At the hospital?'

'Of course,' answered Margido.

'Well, I certainly can't do any more for this patient,' said the doctor.

Margido winced at the lack of feeling in the doctor's words. She was a woman after all, even though she was a doctor. And yet she talked as if she found adolescents dead on their beds every day. He was relieved when she went back to the kitchen.

He heard the ambulance out in the farmyard; he went into the hall, caught the driver's eye from the front door and nodded. Margido wanted the body to be on the ambulance stretcher before the mother or father came. It was better that way. It was more like an accident, something neither of them could be responsible for.

'I'd like to have been able to tidy him up. It's awful to send him off like this, with the rope still round his neck,' said Margido quietly.

'Can't do that with suicide,' the sergeant said. 'Even though it's a clear-cut case.'

The ambulance crew managed to manoeuvre the stretcher into place and cover it with a black body bag. They were a couple of young men only a few years older than the boy on the bed. They pulled on disposable gloves and got hold of the boy under the arms and around the ankles, counted softly to three, and got him over on to the plastic in one quick lift, before folding the plastic tightly around him. The vacant mattress wasn't a pretty sight.

'I've got the container,' Margido said. 'Can I at least remove the sheet? So his parents won't have to look at it?'

'Yes, go on,' said the sergeant.

He also managed to fold up the duvet and lay it over the large wet patch on the mattress before the boy's mother arrived. The mattress would be thrown out anyway, they always were, but there would be more emotion and anxiety for him to deal with the more the bereaved saw. Small things were often what brought the tragedy home to close relatives and confronted them with the realities, the hysteria. It might be anything from a half finished cup of tea on a bedside table, a grubby teddy bear on the floor, or a thermos and sandwich tin handed back after an accident at work.

'What have you done to him!' his mother screamed. 'Packed him up in plastic? But he won't be able... he won't be able to breathe! I want to see him!'

'Not now,' said the sergeant. 'But tomorrow, once Margido has...'

'No, I want to see him now!'

'Let me tidy him up first,' said Margido.

The boy's mother hurled herself at the stretcher and began to tear at the body bag. It was now her husband should have come. But he didn't. The ambulance driver had to take her by the shoulders and restrain her.

'Take it easy now, we'll just...'

'HE CAN'T BREATHE! YNGVE! My little boy...'

At last her husband came. He took charge of the sobbing woman and stared fixedly at the stretcher's shiny black load that contained his only son. It was as if all the energy in the room was directed at the sight, the grotesque fact that the bedroom's former occupant lay swathed here like this, larger and more dominant than he'd ever been in life.

'But why...' he began. 'I thought we'd be able to see him before he went. I didn't realise... I thought Margido would...'

'There'll have to be a post mortem,' said the sergeant looking down at the floor. 'It's standard procedure with suicide.'

'But why? There isn't any doubt that he did it himself, is there!'

The boy's father sounded hoarse and strained from the effort of controlling himself, while the mother hung helpless in his arms and wept silently with closed eyes.

'It's not that I've any doubts about that,' said the sergeant, clearing his throat and shifting his weight to the other foot.

'Can't I refuse? Refuse to let our son be cut up?'

The mother started, but didn't open her eyes, the tears just went on trickling down her cheeks.

The police sergeant looked straight at the boy's father and said: 'All right, then. We won't insist on a post mortem. That'll be all right, Lars. But you won't be able to see him any more tonight. We must let the ambulance take him away. But once Margido has seen to him...'

The father nodded slowly.

'Thanks. Thanks very much. They'll have to take him away now, Turid. Come along.'