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Echoes from the Dead

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Extract

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ÖLAND, SEPTEMBER 1972

The wall was built of big, rounded stones covered in greyish-white lichen, and it was the same height as the boy. He could only see over it if he stood on tiptoe in his sandals. Everything was dim and misty on the other side. The boy could have been standing at the end of the world, but he knew it was just the opposite – the world began on the other side of the wall. The big wide world, the world outside his grandparents' garden. The thought of exploring that world had tempted the boy all summer long.

Twice he tried to climb over the wall. Both times he lost his grip on the rough stones and fell backwards, into the damp grass.

The boy didn't give up, and the third time he succeeded.

He took a deep breath and heaved himself up, held on tight to the cold stones, and managed to get on top of the wall.

It was a victory for him – he was almost six years old, and for the first time in his life he was on his way over a wall. He sat there on the top for a little while, like a king on his throne.

The world on the other side was huge, with no

boundaries, but it was also grey and blurred. The fog that had drifted in over the island that afternoon prevented the boy from seeing much of what lay outside the garden, but at the bottom of the wall he could see the yellowish-brown grass of a small meadow. Further away he could just make out low, gnarled juniper bushes and moss-covered stones sticking up out of the earth. The ground was just as flat as in the garden behind him, but everything looked much wilder on the other side; strange, enticing.

The boy put his right foot on a big stone that was half-buried in the ground, and climbed down into the meadow on the other side of the wall. He was outside the garden all on his own for the first time ever, and nobody knew where he was. His mother had gone off somewhere today, left the island. His grandfather had gone down to the shore a little while ago, and when the boy had put on his sandals and crept out of the house, his grandmother had been fast asleep.

He could do whatever he wanted. He was having an adventure.

He let go of the stones in the wall and took a step out into the wild grass. It was sparse, easy to get through. He took a few more steps, and the world in front of him slowly became a little clearer. He could see the juniper bushes taking shape beyond the grass, and walked towards them.

The ground was soft and any sound was muted; his footsteps were nothing more than a faint rustling in the grass. Even when he tried jumping with both feet together, or stamping his feet really hard, all that could be heard was a slight thud, and when he lifted his feet the grass sprang up and all trace of his footsteps quickly disappeared.

He covered several metres like this: Hop, thud. Hop, thud.

When the boy left the meadow and reached the tall juniper bushes, he stopped jumping with both feet together. He breathed out, inhaled the cool air, and looked around.

While he had been hopping across the grass, the fog that had been drifting ahead of him had crept silently around and was now behind him as well. The stone wall on the other side of the meadow had become indistinct, and the dark-brown cottage had completely disappeared.

For a moment the boy considered turning around, walking back across the meadow and climbing over the wall again. He had no watch, and precise times meant nothing to him, but the sky above his head was dark grey now, and the air around him had grown much colder. He knew the day was drawing to a close and the night would soon come.

He'd just go a little bit further over the soft ground. He knew where he was, after all; the cottage where his grandmother lay sleeping was behind him, even if he couldn't see it any more. He carried on walking towards the hazy wall of fog which could be seen but not touched, and which kept moving just a little bit further away from him all the time, in a magical way, as if it were playing with him.

The boy stopped. He was holding his breath.

Everything was silent and nothing was moving, but suddenly the boy had the feeling that he wasn't alone.

Had he heard a noise in the fog?

He turned around. Now he could no longer see the wall or the meadow; he could see only grass and juniper bushes behind him. The bushes were all around him, motionless, and he knew they weren't alive – not alive in

the way that he was – but he still couldn't help thinking about how big they were. They were black, silent figures surrounding him, perhaps moving closer to him when he wasn't looking.

He turned around again, and saw more juniper bushes. Juniper bushes and fog.

He no longer knew in which direction the cottage lay, but fear and loneliness made him keep moving forwards. He clenched his fists and ran across the grass; he wanted to find the stone wall and the garden behind it, but all he could see was grass and bushes. In the end he couldn't even see that much; the world was blurred by his tears.

The boy stopped, took a deep breath, and the tears stopped flowing. He could see more juniper bushes in the fog, but one of them had two thick trunks – and suddenly the boy realized it was moving.

It was a person.

A man.

He came forward out of the grey fog and stopped just a few short steps away. The man was tall and broad-shouldered; he was dressed in dark clothes, and he had seen the boy. He stood there in the grass, heavy boots on his feet, looking down at him. His black cap was pulled down his forehead and he looked old, but not as old as the boy's grandfather.

The boy stood still. He didn't know the man, and you had to be careful of strangers, his mummy had said. But at least he wasn't alone in the fog with the juniper bushes any more. He could always turn around and run if the man wasn't nice.

'Hello there,' said the man in a deep voice. He was breathing heavily, as if he'd just walked a long way in the fog, or as if he'd been running fast.

The boy didn't reply.

The man turned his head quickly and looked around. Then he looked at the boy again, without smiling, and asked quietly:

'Are you on your own?'

The boy nodded silently.

'Are you lost?'

'I think so,' said the boy.

'It's all right . . . I can find my way anywhere out here on the alvar.' The man took a step closer. 'What's your name?'

'Jens,' said the boy.

'Jens what?'

'Jens Davidsson.'

'Good,' said the man. 'My name's . . .' He hesitated, then added, 'My name's Nils.'

'Nils what?' asked Jens.

It was a bit like a game. The man gave a short laugh.

'My name is Nils Kant,' he said, taking another step forward.

Jens stood still, but he'd stopped looking around. There was nothing but grass and stones and bushes in the fog. And this strange man, Nils Kant, who had begun to smile at him as if they were already friends.

The fog closed in around them; not a sound was to be heard. Not even birdsong.

'It's all right,' said Nils Kant, reaching out his hand.

They were standing quite close to each other by now.

Jens thought that Nils Kant had the biggest hands he'd ever seen, and he realized it was too late to run away.

1

When her father, Gerlof, rang one Monday evening in October, for the first time in almost a year, he made Julia think of bones, washed up on to a stony shore.

Bones, white as mother-of-pearl, polished by the waves, almost luminous among the grey pebbles at the water's edge.

Fragments of bone.

Julia didn't know if they were actually there on the shore, but she had waited to see them for over twenty years.

Earlier that same day, Julia had had a long conversation with the social security office, and it had gone just as badly as everything else this autumn, this year.

As usual, she had put off getting in touch with them for as long as possible in order to avoid hearing their sighs, and when she finally rang up she was answered by a robotic machine asking for her personal ID number. When she had keyed it in, she was put through to the next step in the telephone network labyrinth, which was exactly the same as being put through to total emptiness. She had to stand there in the kitchen, looking out of the window and listening to a faint rushing noise on

the other end of the line, an almost inaudible rushing like the sound of distant running water.

If Julia held her breath and pressed the receiver against her ear, she could sometimes hear spirit voices echoing in the distance. Sometimes they sounded muted, whispering, sometimes they were shrill and despairing. She was trapped in the ghostly world of the telephone network, trapped among those pleading voices she sometimes heard from the kitchen fan when she was smoking. They echoed and mumbled through the building's ventilation system – she could hardly ever make out a single word, but she would still listen with great concentration. Just once she'd heard a woman's voice say with absolute clarity: 'It really is time now.'

She stood there by the kitchen window, listening to the rushing noise and looking out on to the street. It was cold and windy outside. Autumn-yellow birch leaves tore themselves away from the rain-soaked surface of the road and tried to escape from the wind. Along the edge of the pavement lay a dark-grey sludge of leaves, crushed to a pulp by car tyres, which would never leave the ground again.

She wondered if anybody she knew would pass by out there. Jens might come strolling around the corner at the end of the terrace, wearing a suit and tie like a real lawyer, carrying his briefcase, his hair newly cut. Striding out, his gaze confident. He would see her at the window, stop in surprise on the pavement, then raise his arm, waving and smiling at her . . .

The rushing noise suddenly disappeared and a stressed-out voice filled her ear: 'Social security; Inga.'

This wasn't the new person who was supposed to be dealing with Julia's case; her name was Magdalena. Or was it Madeleine? They'd never met.

She took a deep breath.

'My name is Julia Davidsson, and I wanted to ask if you could—'

'What's your personal ID number?'

'It's . . . I've already entered the number on the telephone keypad.'

'It hasn't come up on my screen. Can you give me the number again?'

Julia repeated the number, and there was silence at the other end of the line. She could hardly even hear the rushing noise any more. Had they cut her off on purpose?

'Julia Davidsson?' said the voice, as if she hadn't heard Julia introduce herself. 'How can I help?'

'I wanted to extend it.'

'Extend what?'

'My sick leave.'

'Where do you work?'

'At the hospital, Östersjukhuset, the orthopaedic department,' said Julia. 'I'm a nurse.'

Was she still a nurse? She'd had so much time off in recent years that she probably wasn't even missed in orthopaedics any more. And she certainly didn't miss the patients, constantly moaning about their ridiculous little problems when they didn't have a clue about real unhappiness.

'Have you got a note from your doctor?' asked the voice.

'Yes.'

'Have you seen your doctor today?'

'No, last Wednesday. My psychiatrist.'

'And why didn't you ring earlier?'

'Well, I haven't been feeling very well since then . . .' said Julia, thinking: nor before then, either. A constant ache of longing in her breast.

'You should have phoned us the same day . . .'

Julia heard a distinct breath, perhaps even a sigh.

'Right, this is what I'm going to have to do,' said the voice, 'I'm going to have to go into the computer and make an exception for you. On this occasion.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Julia.

'One moment . . .'

Julia stayed where she was by the window, looking out on to the street. Nothing was moving.

But then someone came walking along the pavement from the busier road that cut across; it was a man. Julia could feel ice-cold fingers clutching at her stomach, before she realized that this man was too old, he was bald and in his fifties, and dressed in paint-spattered dungarees.

'Hello?'

She saw the man stop at a building on the opposite side of the street, key in a security code and open the door. He went in.

Not Jens. Just an ordinary, middle-aged man.

'Hello? Julia?'

It was the voice again.

'Yes? I'm still here.'

'Right, I've made a note on the computer to say that your doctor's note is on the way to us.'

'Good. I . . .' Julia fell silent.

She looked out on to the street again.

'Was there anything else?'

'I think . . .' Julia gripped the receiver. 'I think it's going to be cold tomorrow.'

'Right,' said the voice, as if everything was perfectly normal. 'Have you changed your account details, or are they the same as before?'

Julia didn't reply. She was trying to find something ordinary and normal to say.

'I talk to my son sometimes,' she said in the end.

There was a brief silence, then the voice could be heard again: 'As I said, I've made a note . . .'

Julia hung up quickly.

She remained standing in the kitchen, staring out of the window and thinking that the leaves out on the street were forming a pattern, a message she wouldn't be able to understand however long she gazed at it, and she longed desperately for Jens to come home from school.

No, it would have to be from work. Jens would have left school many years ago.

What did you become in the end, Jens? A firefighter? A lawyer? A teacher?

Later that day she was sitting on her bed in front of the television in the narrow living room of her one-bedroom flat, watching an educational programme about adders. She changed channels and watched a cookery programme in which a man and a woman were frying meat. When that finished she went back into the kitchen to see if the wine glasses in the cupboards needed polishing. Oh yes – if you held them up to the kitchen light you could see tiny white particles of dust on the surface, so she took the glasses out one by one and polished them. Julia had twenty-four wine glasses, and used them all in rotation. She drank two glasses of red wine each evening, sometimes three.

That evening, when she was lying on her bed beside the TV, wearing the only clean blouse left in her wardrobe, the telephone in the kitchen began to ring.

Julia blinked when it first rang, but didn't move. No, she wasn't going to obey it. She wasn't obliged to answer.

The telephone rang again. She decided she wasn't

at home, she was out doing something important.

She could see out of the window without raising her head, even if all she could see were the rooftops along the street, the unlit street lamps, and the tops of the trees stretching above them. The sun had gone down beyond the city, and the sky was slowly growing darker.

The telephone rang for the third time.

It was dusk. The twilight hour.

The telephone rang for the fourth time.

Julia didn't get up to answer it.

It rang one last time, then there was silence. Outside, the street lamps were starting to flicker, beginning to spread their glow over the tarmac.

It had been quite a good day.

No. There weren't any good days, actually. But some days passed more quickly than others.

Julia was always alone.

Another child might have helped. Michael had wanted them to try for a brother or sister to Jens, but Julia had said no. She had never felt sure enough, and in the end Michael had given up, of course.

Often when Julia didn't answer the telephone she got a recorded message as a reward, and when it had stopped ringing this evening, she got up from the bed and picked up the receiver, but all she could hear was the rushing noise.

She put the phone down and opened the cupboard above the refrigerator. The bottle of the day was standing there, and as usual the bottle of the day was a bottle of red wine.

To be perfectly accurate, it was the second bottle of red wine of the day, because at lunchtime she'd finished off a bottle she'd started the previous evening.

The cork came out with a soft popping sound as she opened the wine. She poured a glass and knocked it back quickly. She poured a fresh glass.

The warmth of the wine spread through her body, and now she could turn and look out through the kitchen window. It had grown dark out there, the street lamps illuminating only a few round patches of tarmac. Nothing was moving in the glow of the lamps. But what was hiding in the shadows? It was impossible to see.

Julia turned away from the window and emptied her second glass. She was calmer now. She had been feeling tense since the conversation with the benefits office, but now she was calm. She deserved a third glass of wine, but she could drink that more slowly, in front of the TV. She might put on some music soon, Satie perhaps, take a tablet and get to sleep before midnight.

Later, the telephone rang again.

On the third ring she sat up in bed, her head bowed. On the fifth she got up, and by the seventh she was finally standing in the kitchen.

Before the telephone rang for the ninth time, she picked up the receiver. She whispered: 'Julia Davidsson.'

The reply was not a rushing noise, but a quiet, clear voice: 'Julia?'

And she knew who it was.

'Gerlof?' she said quietly.

She no longer called him Dad.

'Yes . . . it's me.'

There was silence once more, and she had to press the receiver closer to her ear in order to hear.

'I think . . . I know a bit more about how it happened.'

'What?' Julia stared at the wall. 'How what happened?'

'Well, how it all . . . with Jens.'

Julia stared.

'Is he dead?'

It was like walking around with a numbered ticket in your hand. One day your number was called, and then you were allowed to go up and collect the information. And Julia thought of white fragments of bone, washed up on the shore down in Stenvik, despite the fact that Jens had been afraid of the water.

'Julia, he must be—'

'But have they found him?' she interrupted him.

'No, but . . .'

She blinked.

'Then why are you ringing?'

'Nobody's found him. But I've—'

'In that case, don't ring me!' she screamed, and slammed the phone down.

She closed her eyes and stayed where she was, beside the telephone.

A numbered ticket, a place in the queue. But this wasn't the right day; Julia didn't want this to be the day when Jens was found.

She sat down at the kitchen table, turning her gaze to the darkness outside the window, thinking nothing, then looked at the telephone again. She got up, walked over to it and waited, but it remained silent.

I'm doing this for you, Jens.

Julia picked up the receiver, looked at the scrap of paper which had been stuck to the white kitchen tile above the bread bin for several years, and keyed in the number.

Her father answered after the first ring.

'Gerlof Davidsson.'

'It's me,' she said.

'Julia. Yes.'

Silence. Julia gathered her courage.

'I shouldn't have slammed the phone down.'

'Oh, it's . . .'

'It doesn't help.'

'No, well,' said her father. 'It's just one of those things.'

'What's the weather like on Öland?'

'Cold and grey,' said Gerlof. 'I haven't been out today.'

There was silence once more and Julia took a deep breath.

'Why did you ring?' she said. 'Something must have happened.'

He hesitated before replying.

'Yes . . . a few things have happened here,' he said, then added, 'but I don't know anything. No more than before.'

No more than I do, thought Julia. I'm sorry, Jens.

'I thought there was something new.'

'But I've been doing some thinking,' said Gerlof. 'And I think there are things that can be done.'

'Done? What for?'

'So that we can move on,' said Gerlof, then he quickly went on: 'Can you come over here?'

'When?'

'Soon. I think it would be a good idea.'

'I can't just take off,' she said. But it wasn't that impossible – she was signed off work long-term. She went on: 'You have to tell me . . . tell me what it's about. Can't you tell me that?'

Her father was silent.

'Do you remember what he was wearing that day?' he asked eventually.

That day.

'Yes.' She'd helped Jens to get dressed herself that morning, and afterwards she'd realized he was dressed for summer, despite the fact that it was autumn. 'He was wearing yellow shorts and a red cotton top,' she said.

'With the Phantom on it. It had been his cousin's, it was one of those transfers you could do yourself, with the iron, made of thin plastic . . .'

'Do you remember what kind of shoes he had on?' asked Gerlof.

'Sandals,' said Julia. 'Brown leather sandals with black rubber soles. One of the straps across the toe of the right one had come loose, and several straps on the left one were about to come loose too . . . They always did that at the end of the summer, but I'd stitched it back on . . .'

'With white thread?'

'Yes,' said Julia quickly. Then she thought about it. 'Yes, I think it was white. Why?'

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Gerlof replied:

'An old sandal is lying here on my desk. It's been mended with white thread. It looks as if it would fit a five-year-old . . . I'm sitting here looking at it now.'

Julia swayed and leaned against the worktop.

Gerlof said something else, but she broke the connection and there was silence once again.

The numbered ticket – this was the number she had been given, and soon her name would be called.

She was calm now. After ten minutes she lifted her hand from the receiver rest and keyed in Gerlof's number. He answered after the first ring, as if he'd been waiting for her.

'Where did you find it?' she asked. 'Where? Gerlof?'

'It's complicated,' said Gerlof. 'You know how I . . . you know it's not so easy for me to get about, Julia. It's just getting more and more difficult. And that's why I'd really like you to come here.'

'I don't know . . .' Julia closed her eyes, hearing only

the rushing noise on the telephone. 'I don't know if I can.' She could see herself on the shore, see herself walking around among the pebbles, carefully collecting all the tiny parts of the skeleton she could find, pressing them close to her breast. 'Maybe.'

'What do you remember?' asked Gerlof.

'What do you mean?'

'About that day? Do you remember anything in particular?' he asked. 'I'd really like you to think about it.'

'I remember that Jens disappeared . . . He . . .'

'I'm not thinking of Jens at the moment,' said Gerlof. 'What else do you remember?'

'What do you mean? I don't understand . . .'

'Do you remember the fog lying over Stenvik?'

Julia didn't speak.

'Yes,' she said eventually. 'The fog . . .'

'Think about it,' said Gerlof. 'Try to remember the fog.'

The fog . . . The fog was a part of every memory of Öland.

Julia remembered the fog. Thick fog in northern Öland wasn't usual, but sometimes in the autumn it drifted in from the sound. Cold and damp.

But what had happened in the fog that day?

What happened, Jens?

ÖLAND, JULY 1936

The man who is to spread so much sorrow and fear throughout Öland later in life is a ten-year-old boy in the middle of the 1930s. He owns a stony shore and a large expanse of water.

The boy is called Nils Kant; he is sunburnt and is dressed in shorts in the summer heat, and he is sitting on a big round stone in the sunshine, down below the

houses and the boathouses in Stenvik. He is thinking: *All this is mine.*

And it's true, because Nils's family owns the shore. They own large tracts of land in northern Öland; the Kant family has owned this land for centuries, and ever since his father died three years ago, Nils has felt that it is his responsibility to take care of it. Nils doesn't miss his father, he remembers him only as a tall, silent, strict man who could be violent sometimes, and Nils thinks it's a good thing that only his mother, Vera, is waiting for him in the wooden house above the shore.

He doesn't need anyone else. He doesn't need friends. He knows that there are children of all ages living in the villages along the coast, and older boys where he lives who are already working in the quarry – but this particular stretch of shore belongs only to him. The millers in the mill up above and the fishermen who use the boathouses up on the ridge are no threat.

Nils gets ready to jump down from the stone; he's going to have another swim, one last swim before he goes home.

'Nils!' shouts a high, boyish voice.

Nils doesn't turn his head, but he can hear the gravel and the pebbles on the slope up above the shore loosening and trickling down, then rapid footsteps approaching.

'Nils! I got toffees from Mum too! Lots of toffees!'

It's his brother. Axel, three years younger than Nils and full of life. He's carrying a knotted grey cloth in his hand.

'Look!'

Axel hurries over and stands beside the big stone, looking excitedly up at Nils, and he undoes the bundle and spreads the contents out on the piece of cloth.

There's a little pocket knife in there, and toffees, dark, shiny butter toffees.

Nils counts eight toffees. He only got five from his mother before he came out, but he's eaten them all by now, and his heart races in a sudden spurt of rage.

Axel picks up one of his toffees, looks at it, shoves it in his mouth and gazes out over the sparkling water. He chews slowly and with satisfaction, as if not only the toffees belong to him but also the shore and the water and the sky up above them.

Nils looks away.

'I'm going for a swim,' he says, facing towards the water. He jumps down and pulls off his shorts and places them on the stone.

He turns his back on Axel and begins to walk out into the waves, balancing his feet on the stones, shiny with algae. Little tendrils of brown seaweed get stuck between his toes.

The water has been warmed by the sun and foams out to the sides as Nils throws himself in a dozen or so steps from land. This summer he has learned to swim underwater. He takes a deep breath, dives beneath the surface, wriggles his way down towards the stony seabed, turns and comes hurtling up into the sunshine again.

Axel is standing on the shoreline.

Nils glides around in the water, splashing it all around him, turning somersaults, the bubbles sparkling about his head. He swims a few metres further out, so far that he can no longer touch the bottom with his feet.

Out here there's a big boulder, a block of stone lying just beneath the surface like a slumbering sea monster. Nils clambers up on to its back, stands with his feet just below the surface of the water, then dives in. He can't

touch the bottom here. He floats, treading water, and sees Axel still standing by the water's edge.

'Can't you swim yet?' he yells.

He knows Axel can't.

Axel doesn't reply, but he drops his eyes, his expression darkening with both shame and rage beneath his fringe. He pulls off his shorts and places them on the stone beside the toffees.

Nils swims calmly around the boulder, first on his stomach, then on his back, just to show how easy it is when you can do it. A kick with his legs, and he's back on top of the boulder again.

'I'll help you!' he calls to Axel, and for a moment he considers actually doing it, being a big brother and teaching Axel to swim today. But it would take too long.

He just waves.

'Come on!'

Axel takes a wobbly step into the water, feeling his way across the pebbles with his feet, his arms waving about as if he were balancing on the edge of an abyss. Nils watches his little brother's unsteady progress from the shore in silence.

After four paces Axel is standing there with the water up above his thighs, looking at Nils, his face rigid.

'Are you brave enough?'

A joke, he's just having a little joke with his brother.

Axel shakes his head. Nils quickly dives off the boulder and swims towards the shore.

'It's quite safe,' he says. 'You can touch the bottom almost all the way out.'

Axel reaches for him, leaning forward. Nils moves backwards, and his little brother takes an involuntary step forward.

'Good,' says Nils. The water is up to their waists now. 'One more step.'

Axel does as he says, takes one more step, then looks up at Nils with a nervous smile. Nils smiles back and nods, and Axel takes another step.

Nils leans over, falling slowly backwards with outstretched arms, just to show how soft the water is.

'Everybody can swim, Axel,' he says. 'I taught myself.'

He kicks his legs and swims slowly out towards the boulder. Axel follows him, keeping his feet on the bottom. The water is up to his chest.

Nils jumps up on to the boulder again.

'Three more steps!' he says.

Although that isn't quite true; it's more like seven or eight. But Axel takes one step, two steps, three steps, has to stretch his neck upwards to keep his mouth above the surface, and there are still three metres to go before he reaches the boulder.

'You have to breathe,' says Nils.

Axel takes a short, panting breath. Nils sits down on the boulder and holds his hands out calmly to Axel.

And his little brother throws himself forward. But it's as if he quickly regrets it, because he takes a big breath and his mouth and throat are filled with cold water; he's flailing around with his arms and staring at Nils. The boulder is just out of reach.

Nils watches Axel struggling in the water for a second or two, then quickly leans over and pulls his brother up on to the safety of the boulder.

Axel holds on tight, coughing and taking short, jerky breaths. Nils gets to his feet beside him and says what has been in his mind the whole time:

'The shore is mine.'

Then he throws himself off the boulder, diving straight as

an arrow, and comes up several metres away, swimming with long, sure strokes until his hands touch the pebbles by the shore and his joke is complete. Now he can enjoy it. He shakes his head to make his ears pop and goes over to the stone where Axel unwrapped his bundle.

The little shorts Axel took off are there too. Nils picks them up, imagines he can see a flea crawling along a seam, and throws them away on the shore.

Then he bends over the bundle. The butter toffees are lying there in a pile, shining in the sun, and Nils picks one up and places it slowly in his mouth.

He hears an infuriated roar across the water from the boulder but takes no notice. He chews carefully, swallows, picks up another toffee.

The sound of splashing reaches him from out there. Nils looks up; his little brother has finally thrown himself into the water from the boulder.

Nils is already beginning to dry off in the sun, and overcomes his first impulse, which is to go out to Axel. He picks up a third toffee from the cloth on the stone instead.

The splashing continues, and Nils watches. Axel can't touch the bottom with his feet, of course, and he's desperately trying to get back on to the boulder. But his hands keep slipping off.

Nils chews on the toffee. You have to get some speed up to get on to the boulder.

Axel has no speed, and turns to make his way back to the shore. He's flapping his arms wildly, the water foaming all around him, but he isn't moving forward. He's looking at Nils with wide, terrified eyes.

Nils looks back at him, swallows the toffee and picks up another one.

The splashing quickly grows fainter. His brother yells

something, but Nils can't hear what it is. Then the waves close over Axel's head.

Now Nils takes a step towards the water.

Axel's head pops up, but not as far out of the water as before. All Nils can actually see is wet hair. Then he sinks beneath the surface again. Air bubbles come up, but a little wave sweeps them away.

Nils is in a hurry now; he jumps into the water. His legs kick up foam and he's fighting with his arms, his eyes fixed on the boulder. But there's no sign of Axel.

Nils makes his way quickly to the boulder, and when he's almost there he dives, but he's not very good at keeping his eyes open underwater. He closes his eyes, feeling his way in the cold darkness, touches nothing with his hands and comes up into the sunlight again. He grabs the boulder with his hands, coughs and pulls himself up.

Nothing but water all around him, wherever he looks. The sunlight sparkling on the waves hides everything that exists beneath the surface.

Axel is gone.

Nils waits and waits in the wind, but nothing happens and, in the end, when he starts to feel cold, he dives in and swims slowly back to the shore. There's nothing else he can do. He gets out of the water, breathes out, and leans on the big stone.

Nils stands there in the sun for a long time. He's waiting for the sound of splashing, a familiar shout from Axel, but he hears nothing.

Everything is quiet. It's hard to grasp.

There are four toffees left on Axel's cloth, and Nils looks at them.

He thinks about the questions that will be waiting for him, from his mother and others, and thinks about what he's going to say. Then he thinks about when his father

died and how gloomy everything had been during the long-drawn-out funeral up in Marnäs church. Everybody had been dressed in black, singing hymns about death.

Nils tries a sob. That sounds good. He'll go up to his mother and sob and tell her Axel is still down on the shore. Axel wanted to stay, but Nils wanted to go home. And when everybody starts looking for Axel, he can think about the sad organ music at his father's funeral and cry along with his mother.

Nils will go up to the house soon; he knows what he's going to say and what he's not going to say when he gets there.

But first of all he finishes off Axel's toffees.