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Opening Extract from...

The Black Path

Written by Asa Larsson

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An early spring evening, Torneträsk. The ice was thick, more than a metre. All along the lake, some seventy kilometres long, lay arks, small cabins on runners, four square metres in size. At this time of year the inhabitants of Kiruna made their pilgrimage up to Torneträsk. They came up on snowmobiles, towing the arks behind them.

Inside the ark there was a hole in the floor. You drilled a hole through the thick ice below. A plastic pipe linked the hole in the ice to the hole in the floor, and that prevented the freezing wind from coming up into the ark. And then you sat inside fishing through the hole.

Leif Pudas was sitting in his ark in just his pants, fishing. It was 8.30 in the evening. He had cracked open a few beers, it was Saturday night after all. The Calor gas stove was hissing and whistling. It was lovely and warm, more than 25°C. And he had caught some fish too. Fifteen mountain char, only small, but better than nothing. And he had saved a few sprats for his sister's cat.

When it was time for a pee it felt like a kind of liberation: he was much too hot, it would be good to get outside and cool down a bit. He pulled on his boots and clambered out into the cold and dark in his pants.

As soon as he opened the door, the wind seized hold of it.

During the day it had been sunny and calm, with no wind. But in the mountains the weather changes constantly. Now the storm was

tugging and snapping at the door like a rabid dog. One moment there was hardly any wind at all, it was as if it were lying there growling and gathering its strength, then it was pulling at the door for all it was worth. Would the hinges hold? Pudas took hold of the door with both hands and closed it behind him. Maybe he should have put some clothes on. Oh what the hell, it only took a minute to have a pee.

The gusts of wind carried loose snow with them. Not soft, fine fresh snow, but sharp diamond slivers of compacted snow. It whirled across the ground like a white cat o' nine tails, flaying his skin with a slow, evil rhythm.

Pudas ran around the ark to shelter from the wind and got ready to pee. He might be out of the wind, but it was cold so far up north. His scrotum contracted. But at least he managed to pee. He half expected it to freeze on its way through the air. To transform into a yellow arc of ice.

Just as he finished, he heard a kind of bellowing through the wind, and all of a sudden the ark was at his back. It almost knocked him over, and the next instant it was gone.

It took a little while for him to understand. The storm had taken the ark. He could see the window, the square of warm light in the darkness, travelling away from him.

He ran a little way, but now its mooring had come loose, the ark was gathering speed. He had no chance of catching up with it, it was hurtling away on its runners.

First of all he thought only about the ark. He had built it himself out of plywood, then insulated it and covered it with aluminium. Tomorrow morning when he found it, it would be firewood. All he could do was hope it did not cause any damage. That could lead to difficulties.

All of a sudden there came a powerful squall. It nearly knocked him to the ground. Then he realized he was in danger. And he had

all that beer inside him, it was as if his blood was just beneath the surface of the skin. If he did not manage to get inside somewhere very soon, he would freeze to death.

He looked around. It had to be at least a kilometre up to Abisko tourist station: he would never make it, it was a question of minutes now. Where was the closest ark? The whirling snow and the storm meant he couldn't see the lights of any other arks.

Think, he said to himself. You do not take one single bloody step until you have used your head. Which direction are you facing now?

He used his head for three seconds, felt his hands starting to stiffen, and tucked them under his arms. He took four steps from where he was standing and managed to walk straight into the snow-mobile. The key was in the disappearing ark, but he had a little toolbox under the seat, and he got it out.

Then he prayed to someone up there that he was going the right way, and set off in the direction of his closest neighbouring ark. It was no more than twenty metres, but he wanted to weep with every step. He was so afraid of missing it. And if he did, he was a dead man.

He searched for Persson's fibreglass ark. The wet snow covered his eyes; he tried to peer through, but it was as if a slush kept forming over his eyes and he had to wipe it away. It was impossible to see anything, darkness and snow.

He thought about his sister. And he thought about his ex-partner, about the fact that things had been good between them in many ways.

He had nearly walked straight into Persson's ark before he saw it. Nobody home, the windows dark. He took the hammer out of his toolbox, had to use his left hand; the right one was useless, pain shooting through it after holding the cold steel of the toolbox handle. He fumbled his way through the darkness to the small Plexiglas window and smashed it.

The fear made him strong, and he heaved his hundred kilos in

through the window. Swore as he scraped his stomach on the sharp metal frame. But what did that matter? Death had never been so close before, breathing down his neck.

Once he was inside, he had to get some heat going. Even if he was protected from the wind, it was still bitterly cold inside the ark.

He rummaged in the drawers and found some matches. How can you hold something so small when the cold has made your hands completely useless? He pushed his fingers into his mouth to warm them until they were working well enough to allow him to light the lamp and the stove. His entire body just wanted to shiver and shake, never in his life had he felt this cold. Frozen to his bones.

“Bloody hell it’s cold, fuck me it’s cold,” he said to himself over and over again. He spoke out loud; it somehow kept the panic at bay, as if he were keeping himself company.

The wind howled through the window like a malevolent god; he took a big cushion that was leaning against the wall and managed to wedge it fast between the curtain pole and the wall.

He looked around and found a red padded jacket, probably one of Mrs Persson’s. He also found a drawer full of underwear, pulled on two pairs of long johns, one pair for his legs and the other for his head.

The warmth came slowly, he held his arms and legs out towards the stove, pain shooting through his body; it was agonizing. He had no feeling at all in one cheek and ear, which was not a good sign.

There was a heap of blankets on the bunk bed. They were ice cold, of course, but he could wrap himself in them anyway, they would provide some sort of insulation.

I’ve survived, he said to himself. What does it matter if I lose an ear?

He pulled a blanket off the bed. It was covered in big flowers in different shades of blue, a relic of the ’70s.

And underneath it lay a woman. Her eyes were open and had

frozen to ice, so they were completely white, like frosted glass. Something that looked like porridge, or maybe it was vomit, on her chin and hands. She was wearing sports clothes. There was a red mark on her top.

He did not scream. He did not even feel surprised. It was as if his emotions had been completely erased.

“What the fuck,” was all he said.

And the feeling that washed over him was like the feeling you get when your new puppy pees in the house for the hundredth time. Exhaustion at how tiresome everything is.

He resisted the impulse to simply put the blanket back and forget about her.

Then he sat down to think. What on earth should he do now? He had to get to the tourist station, of course. He was not too keen on going up there in the dark. But he had no choice, did he? And he didn't much like the idea of sitting here thawing out with her.

But he needed to sit here for a little while longer. Until he was not so damned cold.

It was like a kind of companionship between them. She kept him company as he sat there for an hour, tortured by the pain in various parts of his body as the warmth brought the feeling back. He held his hands out to the stove.

He didn't say a word. And neither did she.

Inspector Anna-Maria Mella and her colleague Sven-Erik Stålnacke reached the scene at quarter to midnight on Saturday. The police had borrowed two snowmobiles from Abisko tourist station. One of them had a sledge. One of the mountain guides had offered to help out, and he drove them both down. Storms and darkness.

Pudas, who had found the body, was sitting in the tourist station and had already been questioned by the squad car unit who had been first on the scene.

When Pudas arrived at the tourist station, the reception desk was closed. It had taken a while before the staff in the bar took him seriously. It was Saturday night after all, and they were more than used to unconventional dress at the tourist station; people would take off their snowmobile overalls and sit there drinking beer in their underwear and all sorts. But Pudas had come stumbling in dressed in a ladies' padded jacket that reached just below his navel, with a pair of long johns wound round his head like a turban.

It was not until he burst into tears that they realized something serious had happened. They had listened, then treated him somewhat warily while they contacted the police.

He had found a dead woman, he said. He had repeated several times that it was not his wife. They had still thought it was probably a matter of a man who had killed his wife. Nobody had wanted to look him in the eye. He had been sitting there all alone and weeping, disturbing no-one, when the police arrived.

It had proved impossible to seal off the area around the ark; the wind simply snatched the police tape away. Instead they had tied the black and yellow tape around the ark, wrapping it up like a parcel. The tape was flapping angrily in the wind. The technicians had arrived, and were working on the small surface area in the beam of the spotlights and the muted Calor gas light afforded by the ark itself.

There was not room for more than two people inside the ark. While the technicians were working, Mella and Stålnacke stood outside and tried to keep moving.

It was more or less impossible to hear each other through the storm and their thick hats. Even Stålnacke was wearing a hat with ear flaps; he did not normally wear anything on his head, even in the middle of winter. They yelled at each other and moved about like Michelin men in their snowmobile overalls.

“Look,” Mella shouted. “This is ridiculous.”

She spread out her arms, standing like a sail against the wind. She was a small woman and did not weigh a great deal. Besides which, the snow had melted during the day, then frozen again in the evening and turned shiny and icy, so when she positioned herself like that the wind had taken her and she began to glide slowly away.

Stålnacke laughed and pretended to hurry over to catch her before she slid off to the far side of the lake.

The technicians emerged from the ark.

“She wasn’t murdered here, at any rate,” one of them bawled at Mella. “Looks like she was stabbed. But as I said, not here. You can take the body. We’ll carry on here in the morning when we can see what we’re doing.”

“And when we’re not freezing our balls off,” yelled his colleague, who was not dressed nearly warmly enough.

The technicians climbed onto the sledge and were driven off to the tourist station.

Mella and Stålnacke went into the ark.

It was cold and cramped.

“But at least we’re out of that bloody wind,” Stålnacke said as he closed the door. “That’s better, we can talk normally.”

The small folding table attached to the wall was covered in a wood-patterned material. Four white plastic chairs were stacked on top of one another. There was a small hotplate and a place to wash the dishes. A red and white checked café curtain and a vase of artificial flowers were lying on the floor beneath the Plexiglas window. A big cushion fixed in front of the window provided a reasonable amount of protection against the wind, which was desperate to get in.

Stålnacke opened the wardrobe. The equipment needed for distilling alcohol was inside. He closed the door.

“We didn’t see that,” was all he said.

Mella looked at the woman on the bed.

“One seventy-five?” she asked.

Stålnacke nodded, snapping small icicles from his moustache.

Mella took the tape recorder out of her pocket. She fought with it for a while, because the batteries had got cold and it did not want to work.

“Oh, come on,” she said, holding it close to the stove, which was doing its best to warm the inside of the ark despite the broken window and the many gaps in the door.

When she got it going, she put the description in first.

“Female, blonde bob, in her forties . . . She’s attractive, isn’t she?”

Stålnacke mumbled something.

“Well, I think she’s attractive anyway. About one metre seventy-five, slim build, large breasts. No rings on her fingers. Eye colour difficult to establish in the present circumstances, maybe the pathologist . . . Light-coloured tracksuit top, looks windproof, stains on it

which are probably blood, but we'll find out soon enough, matching tracksuit bottoms, running shoes."

Mella leaned over the woman.

"And she's wearing make-up, lipstick, eye shadow and mascara," she continued into the tape recorder. "Wouldn't that be a bit odd, when you're going out to exercise? And why hasn't she got a hat?"

"It's been a lovely day, really warm, and yesterday was the same," said Stålnacke. "As long as you don't get that wind . . ."

"It's winter! You're the only person who never wears a hat. Her clothes don't look cheap, and neither does she. She's kind of elegant."

Mella switched off the tape recorder.

"We'll start knocking on doors tonight. The tourist station and the eastern side of Abisko. And we'll ask the shop owners if it's anybody they know. You'd think somebody would have reported her missing."

"I've got the feeling there's something familiar about her," Stålnacke said.

"Maybe she lives in Kiruna, then. Think about it. Maybe you've seen her somewhere? Dentist? Behind the counter in a shop? In the bank?"

Stålnacke shook his head.

"Leave it," he said. "It'll come to me if it wants to."

"We need to go round the other arks as well," Mella said.

"I know. And in this bloody storm."

"Still."

"Right."

They looked at each other for a while.

Stålnacke seemed tired, Mella thought. Tired and depressed. Murdered women always had that effect on him. The women lay there dead in their kitchens, their husbands in floods of tears in the bedroom, and you just had to be grateful if there were no small children who had seen it all happen.

It never really affected her that much, unless it involved children of course. Children and animals, you never got used to that. But a murder like this one. Not that it made her happy. Or that she thought it was a good thing, nothing like that. But a murder like this . . . it gave you something to get your teeth into, somehow. She needed that.

She smiled inwardly at Stålnacke's big, wet moustache. It looked like roadkill. Recently it had been more or less growing wild. She wondered how lonely he really was. His daughter lived in Luleå with her family. They probably rarely saw each other.

And then about eighteen months ago that cat of his had disappeared. Mella had tried to persuade him to get another one, but Stålnacke refused. "They're nothing but trouble," he said. "They're such a tie." She knew exactly what that meant. He wanted to protect himself from the anguish. God knows he had worried about Manne and pondered over what might have happened to him, until in the end he had given up hope and eventually stopped talking about him.

It was such a shame, thought Mella. Stålnacke was a good man. He would make a fine husband for someone. And a good master for any animal. He and Mella got on well, but it would never occur to them to spend their spare time together. It was not just that he was much older than her. They simply did not have that much in common. If they met by chance in town or in a shop when they were not working, it was always difficult to make conversation. But at work they would chat away and get on really well.

Stålnacke looked at Mella. She really was a little woman, no more than one metre fifty. She almost disappeared inside her big snow-mobile overalls. Her long blonde hair was flattened by the hat. Not that she cared. She wasn't one for make-up and that sort of thing. Probably didn't have the time either. Four kids and a husband who didn't seem to do much around the house. That aside, there was

nothing wrong with Robert, things seemed to be good between him and Mella; he was just lazy.

Although how much had he actually done at home himself in the years he and Hjordis had been married? He didn't remember, but he did remember not being used to cooking when he was first living on his own.

"O.K.," Mella said. "What if you and I fight our way through the snowstorm and go round the arks, while the others take the village and the tourist station?"

Stålnacke grinned.

"Might as well, Saturday night's ruined anyway."

It wasn't really ruined. What would he have been doing otherwise? Watching T.V. and maybe taking a sauna with his neighbour. Always the same old routine.

"True," Mella said, zipping up her overalls.

Although she didn't actually feel like that. This was not a ruined Saturday night. A knight can't just stay at home nestling in the bosom of his family, he would go mad. He needs to get out there and draw his sword. To come home, tired and sated with adventures, to the family who have no doubt left their empty pizza boxes and fizzy drinks bottles in a heap on the living room table, but it did not matter. This was life at its best. Knocking on doors out on the ice in the darkness.

"Hope she didn't have kids," Mella said before they went off into the storm.

Stålnacke did not reply. He was a little ashamed. He hadn't even thought about children. He had only hoped there wasn't a cat shut in an apartment somewhere, waiting for its mistress.