

## **The Harp**

By Claus Holm

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I was only ten years old when my world was changed forever. That was the first time I saw something that made me question the world we live in, safe and normal as it might be – and think about what lay beneath the surface of the normality I had always known.

The summer I turned ten, my parents took me on an extended trip through Sweden, where our family comes from. My mom had looked forward to seeing their old country, and visiting all of the family she had left behind when they had moved abroad after getting married. The Swedish countryside was unlike anything I, growing up in a big city, had ever seen before – huge fields of grain, waving in the wind, cute little red houses scattered on the hills and most of all the smell of the fresh air. It seemed cooler, cleaner and almost alive – as if it filled your lungs from the inside and cleaned them of all the dirt and smog we all breathed every day at home.

Our first port of call was my mom's sister, living in Stockholm, and the next day drove southeast, heading for my grandma's house in a small village in Smaaland. When I was a little boy, my mom had told me many of the stories she had heard growing up, and I almost expected gnomes and trolls to wait at the driveway to my Grandma's house. Of course, this was not the case – and Grandma was the same as ever when she met us in the driveway. She was maybe a little chubbier and a little more grey-haired – but otherwise the same as I had seen the last time she had visited us. She hugged my mom and me fiercely, and finally my dad, although their hug was more awkward. Dad's eyes shifted as he hugged her, and even at my young age I was aware that my dad was acting a little weird. He had put the trip off for many years, talking about the expenses of airplane tickets and

hotels in Sweden. I don't know if my mom believed him in her heart or not – but I saw right through it. My dad didn't want to be here, although I could not for the life of me understand why.

As my dad and I carried the suitcases into the house, my mom and Grandma spoke in Swedish. I knew a bit of it, but not enough to keep up in the conversation beyond my mom telling about the trip from Stockholm. At home, we only spoke English.

My dad went back out to the porch to smoke a cigarette, and I went with him. He sat in an old rocker, looking up at the forested hills. He smiled at me as I came out.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“No, I'm OK.”

He drew on the cigarette, and pointed to an opening in the trees to the left of the house.

“You know, back when I met your mother, I'd sometimes come by that path at night to see her, when your grandma was asleep. I'd stand there at the edge of the trees, and look up at the window, right there”, he pointed again, “and sometimes, she'd wake up, come to the window and crawl out.”

“Didn't Grandma know you were her boyfriend?”

Dad paused a moment. “Oh, she knew. She just didn't like it much at first, I think. But eventually she got used to it. Then, we got married, and we wanted to move away from here, far away.”

“Why?” I looked at the hills and the forest that seemed endless to me, “I think it's really cool here.

Why'd you want to go away?”

My dad drew deeply on the cigarette and smiled a strange, tired smile.

“You're probably too young to understand that now, but sometimes...sometimes a place like this will never let you forget. You will always be the same. You can never start again or be what you

want to – only what you have always been. Your mom and I wanted to get away from that, and away from the str....”

He stopped, and shook his head.

“Away from what?”

“Nothing. Just...away from it all. Why don’t you go ask your Grandma if she needs help with fixing dinner?”

I got up from the bench I had been sitting on. When I headed into the kitchen, I saw my dad put out his cigarette and heard him sigh deeply, while his eyes seemed to hang on the opening in the trees.

That night, after dinner and when I was about to go to bed in the little bedroom that Grandma had made up for me, I was drawn to the window and stared at the forest landscape in the evening light. In Sweden in June, night comes slowly and with an odd moonshine that makes everything almost look like it’s an illustration to a fairy tale book. The light was hazy and silvery, and small pieces of mist seemed to drift between the trees. When I opened my window and smelled the cool night air, I could hear faint music – I figured it probably came from some other farm in the area having a party. There was a knock on my door, and Grandma came in.

“Are you all settled?” Grandma spoke English with me, but her accent was fairly thick.

“Yeah. It’s great. I love the view.”

“I knew you would. The forest at night is a wonderful place, but you should still be wary of it. The forest has moods, you know.”

“Moods?” I thought for a moment that Grandma’s English was failing her.

“Yes, moods. It can be happy, or sad – or angry. Sometimes, like now, I think it is happy – when you see the moon shining on the trees like that, you feel that it makes you happy. But sometimes, you can feel the forest almost being mad at you, especially if you are out walking in it. Sometimes

branches will hit you, even though they weren't there a moment ago, or you can get lost on a path you have known for years and walked many times. That's how you know it is angry with you...and then you had better think of what you can do to make it better."

Her words made my spine tingle a bit – it sounded both exiting and a little scary.

"What do you do to make it better?"

"Well, I usually do a little gardening. Show nature that I care. Or I leave a drink out for..."

Then, she used a word I had never heard before:

"...*Näcken*."

I looked at her in surprise. "*Who* do you leave a drink for?"

Grandma smiled. It was as if she had been waiting for that question.

"*Näcken*. I suppose you would call him Neck or Nix. We also call him Fossegrim. He's the spirit of the river...the stream, as we say here."

"You really think the river has a spirit?" I was a bit surprised. When I was a kid, she had told me stories, just as my mother had, about the gnomes, trolls and goblins of the Swedish fairytales. But that was long ago. I was ten now, and thought that perhaps she was mistaking me for a child.

"That's just fairytales, right?"

Grandma looked at me with a strange, knowing smile on her face.

"Is it? Fairytales have a habit of coming true when you least expect them. If you don't keep an open mind and an open heart, you might miss a lot of what goes on in the world."

She stroked my hair. "Now, if you will get to bed, I'll tell you the story about *Näcken*, and who he is, if you're interested."

It had been a while since I had been told bedtime stories – my parents were often out late, and I went to bed by myself – so I nodded and took off my pants, slipped under the covers and looked at Grandma as she sat down on a chair next to the bed.

“Näcken lives in the stream, most of the time. He is the one that makes it run faster or slower, he is the one that sometimes floods parts of the banks so they can get more fertile and grow lush...and of course, he is also the one who, without wanting to do so, has hurt a lot of families around the river.”

“Why is that?”

“He plays music, you see. Some times a violin, some times a harp. He sits on the bank of the stream, sometimes on a large rock, playing his music for the other people of the forest...the dryads, the gnomes, the huldrer. They have their own parties and their own fun, but he is the best musician of them all and they know it, so sometimes they come to him and listen. Sometimes, they’ll dance around his rock, singing along to the music, but most times they won’t come near him, and he will just sit there, alone...playing the music for himself.”

For a moment I thought of the music I had heard when I opened the window. It had come from quite a long way away, and I didn’t know if there were any houses that way. Could it have been Näcken playing? Of course not, I immediately told myself – that was just a fairytale, and the music was probably someone playing his stereo with his windows open.

“Sometimes, Näckens music is heard by people. Normal people, like you and me. Because it sounds so beautiful, most people who hear it will want to get closer to the music, find out where it comes from...so they’ll walk into the forest towards the sound. Then, if the music doesn’t stop, maybe they will come to the stream and see Näcken sitting there, playing his harp or his violin. When they then rush towards him to listen to the music, some people are so entranced by the beauty of the music that they walk straight into the stream – and drown.”

“So...is he a bad person? Does he want people to drown?”

“No, of course he doesn’t. He just...won’t notice you until it is too late. He will be too busy playing. If he had it his way, people would just listen, and afterwards stay and talk to him. He is very lonely, and he wants someone to talk to very badly. Sometimes, Näcken falls in love with a

woman who hears him play, and sometimes he leaves his stream. But he is never really happy elsewhere, and he always seems to come home to the stream again. Sometimes, people say, a child or a woman will find him and hear his music, and stay with him, keeping him company...but after they die, he's back to being alone..”

Grandma nodded, and pushed the covers down around my shoulders.

“So, if you walk by the stream, and hear music, be careful. Watch your step.”

She got up, and turned out the light, and as she did, I asked the last question:

“Have *you*...ever heard it?”

Grandma stopped in the door, a dark silhouette against the light in the corridor. She seemed to consider a moment.

“Yes”, she said, “I have heard it. I heard his harp, a long time ago. Good night, now.”

The door closed behind her, and I lay there, in the dark, filled with a strange mix of excitement and curiosity.

The next morning, while playing with my Grandma's dog Alfred, I thought again about the path my dad had pointed out to me. I had always figured my mom and dad had lived in the same village growing up, but the village was the opposite direction of the path my dad had pointed out, I had looked from the window in my mom's old room (where my mom and dad had spent last night), but I could not see a house in that direction. Either he must have walked all the way through the forest, or the house had been torn down in the mean time.

I was absently picking up the stick that I was throwing so Alfred could fetch it, when I heard voices from the dining room window.

It was my mom and Grandma speaking, and they were speaking in Swedish, but I could tell my mom was a bit upset. I could understand a few bits and pieces, something about “not sleeping” and

“maybe leave, before something happens”. Then, I got a whole sentence, as my Grandma responded: “Why do you think it’s so bad for him?”

Alfred barked, and my mom’s face appeared in the window. She smiled at me, but it was kind of a worried smile. I could tell she wasn’t happy.

I looked up at the window. “Mom, where’s dad?”

“He went to the village”, she said, and pointed to the driveway. The car was gone. “He had some things to do. He’ll be back later.”

I nodded and threw the stick again. Alfred chased it. My mom stepped back from the window, and I forgot about her, Grandma and dad for a while.

When Alfred and I got tired of playing on the lawn, I got some cookies and milk from the kitchen and we sat on the grass eating them. Alfred greedily gobbled up the cookies I gave him, making little happy sounds. As I turned my head after finishing my last cookie, I looked over at the porch. My mom was sitting in the rocking chair, sleeping peacefully. She had probably come out to watch me play, but she had dozed off and now sat with her head tilted slightly and a peaceful look on her face.

I turned my head back to Alfred, and scratched him between his ears when my *own* ears suddenly caught a few notes on the wind.

Dreamily, distantly, I heard the unmistakable sound of the strings of a harp.

I almost gasped, and my eyes quickly looked around for Grandma. She was nowhere to be seen.

I got up, and the music seemed to get a little weaker when I took a step towards the house. I took a few steps towards the forest, and it increased slightly in volume.

Slowly, I walked towards the edge of the forest. Alfred walked with me, staring up at me with eyes full of curiosity. My own eyes probably had the same expression, but for an entirely different reason.

Reaching the edge of the forest, I noticed that I was standing right on the opening of the path my dad had indicated had walked when he had paid his nightly visits to my mom. I took a few more steps, and the forest seemed to close around me. The leaves seemed to form a green, lush cover that covered the house from view, and with every step, the sound of the harp grew a little closer.

I walked on, pushing the branches and leaves aside with my hands, but soon I didn't even need to do that. It was as if the old overgrown path cleared itself in front of me, as if the trees pulled back their branches and the fallen leaves flew away, revealing the brown, lush soil beneath. It was clear that this path had been here for a long time.

As I walked deeper and deeper into the forest, I could hear other sounds besides the music. Birds singing, animals rustling in the bushes...but soon I also thought I could hear other things. Strange things.

At first, it was the faint ringing of a small silver bell, and then it sounded like someone laughing and whispering so low that you can only hear the voice but not the words. I began to feel watched, as if the gnomes were looking out of their tiny underground huts and seeing me walk by, as if the huldre (whom my mom had told me about when I was a kid, beautiful girls who would dance in the forest and lure men to come into their treehouses so they could enchant him) were dancing and giggling at me just out of sight behind the bushes and trees.

The music itself, though, was still playing, and it was as if my steps were pulled towards it. I walked faster and faster. The music was like every song I had ever liked, like the kind of a melody you hear once and like at once but never hear again. Every single note of it made me want to smile, made my feet want to dance, and most of all it made me wish to see the person playing, although I suppose I knew who or at least *what* he would be. Näcken, Fossegrim, Neck or Nix – whatever his name was, I was going to see him.

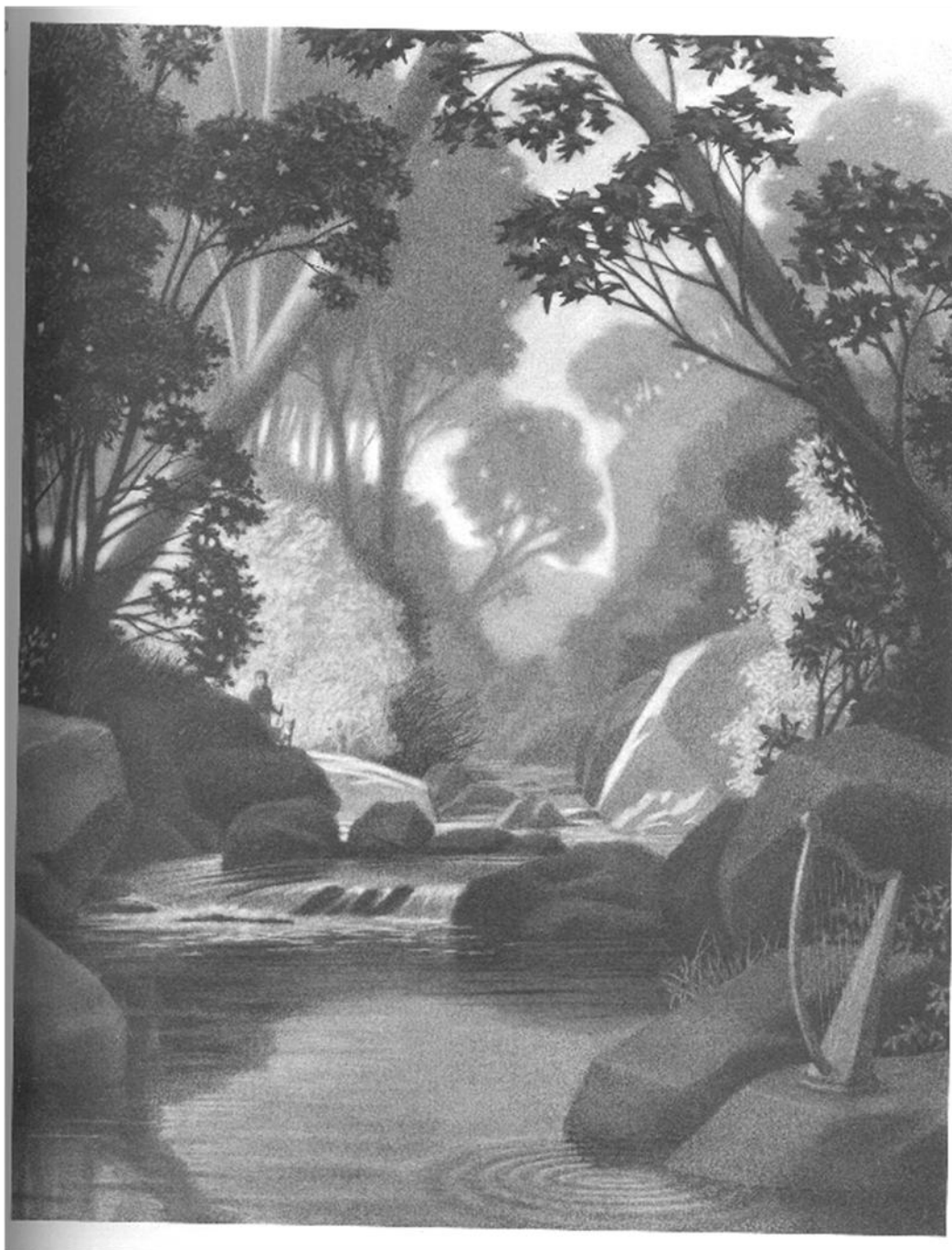


Finally, after what seemed like hours, the forest opened up before me, and became a clearing. I could hear the sound of running water close by, and looking up, I saw a stream running down the side of the hill. It ran in a series of small waterfalls through the clearing, making a delightful splashing sound.

On the opposite bank from where Alfred and I stood, a large stone sat at the edge of the water. On top of it, I saw a glimpse of something flesh colored, as the music abruptly stopped. Something hit the water with a loud splash, and all I could see was circles spreading on the stream. On top of the rock, where whoever it was had sat and played, stood a golden harp. It was glinting in the afternoon sunlight.

“So it’s true”, I thought, “It’s really true!”

## THE HARP



*So it's true he thought, it's really true.*

Slowly, I made my way across the rocks, so I could get a little closer to the harp. I couldn't, however, find a way to cross the stream outright. It was too deep to walk across, and I was a bad swimmer. My mom had always said that there was no reason to learn how to swim when you lived in a big city.

I stood on the opposite bank, staring at the harp, the totally unreal – and yet *absolutely* real piece of fairytale that was before me.

It wasn't made of gold, I could see now, but wood with gold edges. Carvings and decorations covered the sides of it, so intricate it made it almost unbearably beautiful.

I stood for a long time, just looking and thinking. It was as if the entire forest was thinking with me, for all other sounds had ceased – making the stream all I could hear.

What should I do? What COULD I do? Even if I could make it across the stream and get to the harp – could I just take it? It obviously belonged to someone – someone very special – and I couldn't just steal his instrument away. On the other hand, who would believe me if I came back, told mom and dad what I had seen, took them here – and the harp was gone?

Finally, I breathed a deep breath of the sweet smelling air by the river, and said, to myself as much as to whoever was listening.

“It was beautiful, and no matter what, I'll know it's true.”

I turned around with a last gaze at the harp, and walked back to the path, Alfred at my heels. The forest let me in willingly enough, but on the road back I heard no whispering, no laughter or silver bells.

When I got back, my dad had returned. I saw the car in the driveway, and ran up the lawn to the house.

Both my parents were in the kitchen with Grandma, and when I came in, it was as if the conversation they had was interrupted. Without missing a beat, however, my dad gave me a hug and asked how my day had been.

“Mom says she fell asleep and you were gone when she woke up. Did you go into the forest?”

“Yeah, I took Alfred. It’s really nice in there.”

My Grandma and my mom exchanged a look that I did not quite understand.

I smelled the food cooking and could feel how hungry I was – and when Grandma put the big pot of stew on the table, we all ate. As Grandma filled my plate for the second time, I said:

“I really like the forest. And I think the forest likes me too. But I’m not sure I want to go deeper into it again.”

There were no more looks between my parents that night, and the rest of the days we stayed in Grandma’s house my father was remarkably more at ease.

I never told my parents about the harp, or whoever was playing it that day by the river. I never made any implications that the forest had held anything but trees, bushes and birds for me that day.

Looking back on it, many years later, though – I know who was there at the stream that day. And one day, I might go back to find the stream, to see if the harp is still there. Maybe even play it.

Musical talent runs in my family.