



Long have I existed.
I remember when all the trees on the avenue were tender
saplings and the ships on the horizon had masts and sails.

I have heard the terrified screams of newborns and relieved sighs
of the dying.

I have seen joy and sorrow, wealth and poverty, blooming and
withering.

Every year the first sunbeams of spring return and fill me with hope.

But now I can feel the last of my hope draining away.

I have waited.

Waited.

And waited.

The living have forgotten about me.

The dead think only of themselves.

Long has it been since I was somebody's pride and joy.

Surely the time will soon come when I am destroyed for ever.

But not just yet.

I have one final chance.

And I am taking it now.





THE GATEKEEPER'S COTTAGE

1ST DECEMBER 1975

They travelled to the seaside on the first of December. Flora had written it on the kitchen calendar in red biro, which looked both Christmassy and angry:

To Helmersbruk!!!

No sane person goes to the seaside in the middle of winter. The whole point of a seaside holiday is to swim in the sea, play in the sand and tan your legs. But Mum didn't care. She was utterly convinced that a month by the sea was exactly what they needed, she and Flora.

Instead of a parasol and swimming costumes, they packed their warmest jumpers, woolly tights and boots. Flora had to bring all her school books as well. Her teacher had given her a long list of tasks to complete before Christmas. Flora had already done a lot of them before they left. She found that schoolwork didn't

take long when she had peace and quiet, and no one throwing breadcrumbs in her hair or calling her Filthy Flora.

Mum had packed her orange typewriter. She was going to write her next book while Flora was doing her schoolwork. In the evenings they would make a fire in the open hearth, eat sausage sandwiches and play cards, Mum said.

The whole part about the sandwiches and fireplace sounded cosy enough, but Flora wasn't convinced. Mum got big ideas sometimes, and now that Dad wasn't around any more to rein in her wild plans, Flora had no choice but to go along with them. She was pleased about missing some school, but did they really have to go so far away?

When they got off the bus Flora was even more dubious.

What sort of place was Helmersbruk anyway? Everything was dark and gloomy. When the bus drove away they couldn't see a single other person anywhere, even though they seemed to be in the middle of a small town of some sort.

'Everyone is probably at home eating dinner,' Mum speculated. 'Come on, let's go.'

'Is it far?' Flora groaned.

Her rucksack weighed a tonne and she was holding a big plastic bag full of bedsheets in one hand and a travel bag of clothes in the other.

'No, not at all,' said Mum but it was clear from her voice that she had no idea.

As soon as they started walking they became swallowed up in a close, dense fog. It was getting dark and the lights of the street lamps looked like monstrous fireflies hovering above them. Then, to make matters worse, a drizzling rain began to fall.

They walked and walked. Flora's legs grew weak and the handles of the heavy bags cut into her hands and formed creases in

her palms. She had to bite her lip to stop herself from asking 'Are we there yet?' the whole time like a little kid.

The street lights coloured the road orange and everything else was black. From time to time Flora thought she could see a solitary light on the right-hand side of the road. Maybe there were houses there? But none of them were their destination.

'I need a rest,' Flora whined and dropped the bags.

The thump they made on the ground echoed slightly and Flora realized that they were standing on a bridge. There was a railing on both sides and she could hear water rushing somewhere far below. How high was this bridge?

Flora left the bags where they were and went to peer over the railing.

All she could see was darkness, no water. Could she be standing above a vast chasm?

She rushed to catch up with Mum.

'It can't be far now,' Mum said, but she wasn't convincing either of them.

After the bridge the street lights became fewer and further apart, and in the darkness between the lights they couldn't even see their own feet. But Flora could tell that they were getting close to the sea anyway, because the wind was strong and smelt salty and rotten.

Suddenly Mum came to a halt and shouted:

'Look, Passad Road! We must be close.'

The name of the road was written on a sign mounted on a very high brick wall, beyond which they saw a house. It was a very old little house, made of the same bricks as the wall, as though they were part of the same residence.

'Is this where we're going to live?' Flora said.

'I think so.'

'How do we even get in?'

'There's a gate in the wall over there. Come on, I'm freezing!'

Mum grabbed the handle of the little gate. First she pulled, then she pushed. The gate refused to open.

'Oh, what in the name of?...' Mum sighed.

'Shall I try?'

'Be my guest, but I think it must have rusted shut or something.'

Mum stepped to one side and Flora pressed the handle.

The gate swung open with a gentle squeak. It almost sounded like it said, 'Ha ha.'

Mum burst out laughing.

'How did you do that?'

'I just pulled it. It wasn't even stiff. Come on.'

They walked through the gate and around the side of the house, where they found some steps leading up to the front door.

'I guess we'd better knock?' said Mum.

'Go on then!'

Flora hadn't meant to snap, but she couldn't help it.

What had Mum got them into? It was dark and cold and horrible and this house was... well, how to describe it? Very lonely. There was something melancholy about it. Were they really going to stay here for a whole month? In a sad little house surrounded by vast, dense darkness?

But then the door opened and a warm light spilt out on to the steps. In the doorway stood a man in late middle age. He looked a little stern but not in the least unpleasant.

'Ah yes. There, you see,' he said with a thoughtful expression.

It struck Flora as a rather odd thing to say. 'Welcome' or 'How was your journey?' would have been traditional. But instead, the

man waved them in and watched them curiously as they lugged their bags up the stairs.

He was short for a grown man, even shorter than Flora, who was only twelve years old. He had round cheeks, fair downy hair that stuck out in all directions, and pale blue eyes. He looked like a mix between a rather grumpy gnome and an overgrown child.

‘Good afternoon!’ Mum shouted embarrassingly loudly.

The house was warm and filled with the strong but pleasant smell of an open fireplace. The house looked miserable from the outside, but inside it was cosy.

Flora dropped her bags on the hallway floor and let out a sigh.

‘It’s raining, I see,’ mumbled the man, looking at their wet cheeks. ‘We can only hope it doesn’t get icy and slippery.’

Mum took off her glove and held out her hand.

‘Nice to meet you. I’m Linn Winter and this is Flora.’

‘Good. I’m Fridolf. I live next door.’

Flora pulled off her shoes and stepped into the little living room. Two armchairs stood in front of a crackling fire. She supposed that was where they would sit and eat their sausage sandwiches. A door was open on to a kitchen with lemon-yellow cabinets and a staircase in the hallway led to an upper floor.

‘Oh, this is just lovely,’ said Mum.

Fridolf nodded seriously.

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘I’ve always liked the Gatekeeper’s Cottage.’

‘Gatekeeper’s Cottage?’

‘Aye. Not that there’s any need for a gatekeeper these days. Me, I live over in the Washhouse.’

‘Why do you live in a washhouse?’ asked Flora.

‘It’s not used for laundry any more; I’ve made it into a home. The Gatekeeper’s Cottage is too big. The Washhouse does me just fine.’

Flora had always thought a washhouse was the sort of laundry room that blocks of flats might have in the basement. But it made more sense that a washhouse would be a building in its own right.

‘Are there lots of buildings here?’ she asked.

‘Aye. There’s the garage and the stables. A few cottages, the orangery, and then the manor house, of course.’

Flora was taken aback.

A manor house!

Mum hadn’t said anything about that!

Flora had always loved old houses. She dreamt that one day she might live in a grand old mansion instead of a boring urban flat. She would probably have to win the lottery or something.

The Gatekeeper’s Cottage must be old as well, but it wasn’t exactly luxurious. Flora hoped the manor house would be huge and beautiful. She would have gladly run off to take a look straight away, but it was too dark out.

‘Does anyone live in the manor?’ she asked.

Fridolf shook his head.

‘No. No one’s lived in the von Hiems manor for nigh on fifty years.’

Fridolf and Mum disappeared into the kitchen. Mum was babbling on in a loud voice and Fridolf muttered something about water pipes and valves. Flora didn’t think he seemed especially pleased to see them. Why rent out a house if you don’t want guests? But on the other hand, Flora found it irritating when people wore big fake grins on their faces all the time. She would prefer a grumpy but kindly little old man any day.

She went up the stairs to the first floor. She found herself on a small landing with three doors, opened the nearest one and walked into a bedroom with flowery wallpaper. In the corner

was an old-fashioned bed with a coiling metal headboard and small bedside table. Next to the window was a desk and chair, and next to the door was a large, white-painted wardrobe with mirrored doors.

The whole idea of Helmersbruk and a month by the sea was starting to grow on her. Flora had always wanted wallpaper like this. The white lace curtains were pretty as well. They looked old.

It was a proper *Anne of Green Gables* room, Flora thought as she laid her red rucksack down on the crocheted bedspread. She put her hat, long scarf and jacket on the chair.

She walked over to the window and peeked out in the hope of catching sight of that manor house, but despite practically pressing her nose up against the glass, all she could see was darkness and her own reflection.

Down in the hallway, Fridolf was on his way out.

'Now I'll leave you to it. Knock if you need anything. I'm always home.'

'Thank you very much,' said Mum.

Fridolf looked up at Flora standing at the top of the stairs.

Suddenly he appeared shocked. His big blue eyes stared at Flora from under their bushy eyebrows.

'How strange...' he muttered quietly, but before Flora could ask what was so strange about her, he turned to Mum instead.

'Well then. I'm sure you'll be happy here. Many good people have lived in this house. The goodness clings to the walls. Can't you tell?'

Then he looked back at Flora again.

'Yes,' said Flora, because she really could.

She did get a good feeling about the Gatekeeper's Cottage. Maybe that was why she had already cheered up a little.

The door shut with a bang behind Fridolf. Mum giggled.
'Well, he wasn't exactly a bundle of laughs, but he seems nice enough.'

'I like him.'

'Me too. So what do you think, Flick? About the house and everything?'

'It's nice.'

'Are you sure? You think we'll be all right here?'

Mum looked a little anxious. Hardly the time to be anxious now, when it was too late to change their minds.

But Flora decided to be positive and patted Mum on the arm.

'It's going to be great!'

They tried to make themselves at home straight away. They made the beds, Mum set up her typewriter on a table in the living room and Flora lined up her school books on the desk in the room with the flowery wallpaper. She put *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Canterville Ghost* on the bedside table. There were lots of old clothes inside the wardrobe and only one empty shelf. But that was OK because Flora's clothes didn't take up much space.

'Come downstairs and let's eat,' Mum called from the kitchen.

Flora turned off the lamp in the bedroom and was just about to go downstairs when she happened to glance out the window.

Strangely enough, it was a little lighter out there now, even though it was later in the evening. Maybe the fog had dispersed and was letting the moon shine through?

Just then she saw something white flash outside the window!

And she heard a rustling sound like a whisper.

'It's her!'

The white thing disappeared too quickly for Flora to see what it was, but for a few horrible moments she thought she had seen a pale face peering in at her and whispering.

But the room was on the first floor, so surely no one could be peeking in up there?

Flora lingered in the doorway, dead still.

Did she dare go over to the window and look?

She swallowed several times.

No, she refused to be a wimp. How was she going to live in an old house for a whole month if she got scared witless every time she saw or heard something unexpected?

She walked over to the window and looked outside.

She could just about make out some tree branches in the near distance. But she couldn't see anything white.

I must have imagined it, thought Flora. Maybe it was my own reflection? And the sound she had thought was a whisper was probably just a branch blowing against the side of the house in the wind...

'Are you coming?' Mum called.

The smell of sausages wafted up, and Flora went downstairs.

