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A VILLAGE ON EARTH

A man was found in the streets of Stockholm, disturbing everybody with his howling. So he was taken to the police. Since he did not know his name, or carry any identification papers, he was taken to the hospital. And days passed in complete lack of words. Then a nurse had the idea to try to find the man's nationality by means of bread. One day he was treated to Swiss bread and the next to *pain riche* etc until one day he was given a special Estonian bread, spiced with cumin seed and as one seed was crushed between his teeth he smiled and the Estonian word for "grandmother" was there, and he saw her and himself as a child walking beside her collecting caraway plants for the winter's baking. As if that single seed contained the meaning of the world - and his mother tongue. His memory seed and his compass.

As newborn, we all think we are the center of the world. We, who were born in a village of a few hundred people, have an extended family there - the whole village becomes the center of the world. If we later continue to regard the village as situated in the middle, we are either village fools or writers.

Some five years ago I got a hold of the latest idea in physics, which claimed that each spot in universe is its center that there is no such thing as *outskirts* that everything is in the middle in relation to everything else. Unfortunately, this notion arrived too late to fully comfort the village fool in me.

In the early thirties there was a drive to eliminate all dialects in Sweden. Every school teacher, all over the country, received an order to weed out every word, expression or pronunciation that was not correct Standard Swedish. The southern provinces were not so easily disciplined - the people of Skåne would never change their guttural r's. Värmland and Dalarna had some famous authors who had written in dialect, which gave an exotic flavor to those provinces - like the wooden Dalecarlia horse, which remains the special symbol of Sweden even though it is made in Japan nowadays ...

But for the northern half of Sweden - or at least the villages that are buried in snow and forests - when the authorities ridiculed our mother tongue it simply made us look utterly silly. It did not strengthen our knowledge of Standard Swedish, it made us think that we almost did not belong to Sweden.

At the same time it was all our own fault.

According to our concept of life, unborn children choose their parents. They just lurk in the trees, lying in wait for unsuspecting couples and lure them into all that silly love-making that eventually will give us existence in the flesh. That way we can never blame our parents for having borne us into an unfit environment - or having borne us at all. We have willed it ourselves and share with them the responsibility for our existence and for our village - and if it was ridiculous, we had to share the shame.

When I was a teenager, we got a radio at home, and the voice of real Sweden was there. It never spoke about us - we were non-existent- until one evening Federico Garcia Lorca entered our kitchen and embraced us by knowing so much about us. Garcia Lorca knew about the anger of women, about the unyielding rules of religious convention, he knew about the longing for love he knew how utterly crazy we were and he did not make fun of us!

At the very moment when I thought I would have to deny the area of my birth, to wipe it from my memory in order to become a grown-up and a citizen of Sweden.

At that very moment Garcia Lorca restored my background as a village of the world. Before I heard Garcia Lorca's mother in *Blood Wedding* I had heard a woman at home utter the same words: "We want to know everything about that which causes the deepest grief."

The very name of my home village is my caraway seed *Missenträsk* from a flower of the Calla family, called *Missne* and *träsk* wich means lake or marsh. Situated one thousand and two kilometers north of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, and some hundred kilometers from the coast of the Baltic Sea. The coastal area is rather fertile, good for farming in spite of our short summers.

The mountains bordering on Norway are wild and beautiful and harsh - *fjällen*, we call our Nordic alps. The marshy land between coast and *fjäl* has waters and forests and hills but neither the enormous grandeur of the high mountains nor the fat richness of the coastal area.

The Sami, originally a nomadic people were the sole inhabitants of the northern part of Sweden with their herds of reindeer summertime up in *fjällen* in late autumn moving down through the marshy regions and even as far as to the coastal woods - staying there during the winter and then back upland the following spring.

As the coastal farms were divided between the two eldest sons until they could be divided no more the younger brothers and sisters had two options: they could either remain as servants in the coastal areas or they could move up river and ditch out a patch of land as *nybyggare*. How to translate *nybyggare*- "settler," "pioneer," "trapper," "crofter?" Perhaps "crofter" is the best - it has a sound of spade and peat bog and recalcitrant roots about it!

Every spring and autumn the crofters encountered the original inhabitants and their herds. (The Sami were also called Lapps - a more derogatory term). And their reindeer thrived on the same fodder as the little white cows of the

settlers. And the fish in rivers and lakes and ptarmigans and fowl pleased all humans, irrespective of race and religion, so the Sami said: "damned peasant Swedes! You are intruders here! This is our land!"

And the crofters responded with reeking oaths: "damned Lapp-calves! You heathens! You speak a language that is utterly ridiculous! You use drums and sorcery! Your souls are able to leave your body and return at leisure! You know secrets of nature that are forbidden for humans to know! You should not be allowed to live! At least not here!" And they took off on skis for days on end to seek each other out and tell each other that all that space and air were not big enough for the two of them. Sometimes they dealt each other bruises and scars and even killing blows. Sometimes they traded potatoes for reindeer meat.

But remember them unborn! Imagine an angry crofter's daughter coming across an angry reindeer herder. And how they had intended to do each other in! And how all of a sudden their righteous wrath turned into the wrath of love, until they fell into pregnancy and marriage - so that you might hear motherly complaints of this nature: "Couldst thou not have lured a decent fellow of my race into fatherhood, thou little bastard that art an angel? It's all thy fault that I should love the enemy!"

After generations of intermarriage, we still fling nicknames about like boomerangs: "Lapp" and "peasant Swede" and the like. Only when Stockholmers lump us all together as "Lapp-calves" or "Lapp-devils" are we united in our indignation. How come they see no difference ...

Now there were other resources in our region, "dormant riches", which our statesmen planned to awaken, paraphrasing Columbus: "Norrland is our India - the colony of Sweden. Norrland shall make all our nation wealthy - once we have learned how to exploit it." Gold silver iron ore waterfalls and endless

forests ...

There were areas of Europe so stripped of their forests that people could not even find wood to frame their window panes.

Thrifty men along the coast of Norrland heard about the needs of the European continent and thought of the endless forests upland and of their cousins with their hopeless dreams of becoming real farmers on ground that did not wish to be cultivated. The marshy areas had the upper hand - each crofter was on probation.

The only grain that ripened was barley - which does not rise: paper-thin bread is all that can be baked from it.

The wealthy relatives on the coast could only shudder when, on rare visits upland, they noticed how their faith became more mystical than Lutheran and the more pagan, the more pious.

As if the adventure of sustaining existence was an existential drama. The crofters did not need to go to church in order to celebrate the Son of Man in the unleavened bread their daily bread contained that miracle. The Almighty himself was referred to as *He who Gives Growth*, and *growth* was like *grace* - an irrational wonder under skies that could be as fearsome as the white of a godly Eye-ball.

The division between dark and light in the Norrlandic year gives us a divided - even dubious - character in the eyes of people born farther south "How slow and reticent he is - that Lapp-calf!" and "He talks like a waterfall!" - the same individual described in two different seasons.

Imagine what constant summer light will do to the human mind. Piercing, revealing him to the core of his being. There is no hiding place, not for the smallest of lies. Who can endure total clarity, the absence of every illusion? That's why domestic animals - apart from their usefulness - have been adopted as man's guardians and disguise.

Teasing between a crofter and his wife might run something like this:

The man says: "Man and horse - that's a man!"

The woman would retort: "He does not yield as much milk, our old horse, as you might think when you hear him whinny and neigh ..."

The husband of a woman who was ill might plead with *him who gives growth*: "see to it that she may reach green grass again!" You must have seen the earth frozen in the month of May - the hay loft empty and the cattle unable to stand on their feet - to fully understand the meaning of *reaching green grass*.

On his wife's recovery, the husband would praise her in such terms as: "Oh, my mam she is a beauty, *she runs like in her sixth*", which means: she runs like a horse in his sixth year. When dying, she was compared to a cow - and in good health, she was likened to a horse!

And yet I would say that the crofter's wife was not a subdued creature in her relationship with her husband. In our dialect, woman (*kvinna*) is pronounced *qweijn* - the same word as the English *Queen*.

Constant attention to sustenance filled the crofter's life, so that news was received through the air without the help of telephone or radio - just *abiding* - to these people money was but a joke.

The words *rich* and *poor* did exist, but were used in a special way. As an old woman said: "Being rich must be wonderful! Fancy never having to be mean towards the little ones, but to have such plenty that you can let them eat as much as they want every day!"

If there was not enough, the parent would not complain "we are so poor", but instead shout at the eldest "your eyes are as big as mine - find your own feed"!

Was the youngster frightened by such language?

Some, of course, found it too harsh and withdrew up into the trees to wait

for milder times and voices ... but those who were set on it, those who loved existence beyond all reason and shame found their own food and looked upon their parents as their equals and as enigmas.

A family with fourteen children would be lucky if seven survived childhood. One of the many expressions for dying was *to return the loan to nature*: The physical body was considered clothing, borrowed from earth and waters.

The expression *poor* was used only about beggars and when you were deeply embarrassed for some other reason: such as breaking a ski, being frowned on by your secret love or something else that could not be measured in terms of money. How to make such people understand the monetary value of things? Of course they had acquired some commodities through bartering: trading butter for cotton yarn or barrels of tar for a certain number of window panes but *cash crops* were an unknown matter - not to mention banks.

Remember our thrifty relatives near the coast, near the Baltic, who had heard of the European need for Norrlandic timber? Its best characteristic was its fine-fibred texture thanks to the fact that the trees had grown so slowly, yea into an ideal material for window frames. The Dutch cherished Laplandic pinewood as jacaranda!

And those forlorn crofter-cousins going native upland - how to make them understand that there are things like civilization in the world and import and export and saving time? How to get them to fell timber during the winter and get the logs down to the rivers with the aid of horses and then, during the thaw of April and May, float the logs down the rivers and to the coast where sawmills lay in wait to make planks and boards from the mighty pine trees, and sailing ships lay in the harbor ready to transport them to the continent of Europe?

How to get man and horse to stake their efforts on such a venture? By sending beads to them? Someone born under the northern lights is hardly impressed by trinkets. But there were other temptations: horsebells, oats for the horse, a silk shawl for your beloved, wallpaper, sugar, coffee, wheat and rye and an iron stove with a baking oven - buns and loaves were fabulous treats! and American pork - glistening fat and tender - like kisses "and you can get a loan from the bank and buy all this in advance, if you fell some trees for the sawmill company."

I will go back to sixty years ago, to my childhood, when the whole village was assembled on a January morning, along the ridge some fifty men and twentyfive horses and sledges outfitted with everything needed for a period of three to four months.

The snow bluish white, with a rosy tinge, the horses each with a tinkling bell.

A long thread of dawn - the sun would not rise above the horizon for more than a couple of hours - but morning and eve had the most beautiful mother-of-pearl colors.

Nobody had told the men about the national importance of this enterprise - but the horses seemed to know. They hovered as about to set out on some royal crusade: the horses set the tone - there were neither jokes nor tears between husbands and wives, the looks exchanged were like those of an awesome wedding - and at a given signal, the biggest horse would start to run, and all the others after him, in a long caravan down the slope and farther away into the unknown wilderness the spurting snow, the black horses, the reddening dawn and the air tinkling - the solemnness of it all would make up for weeks of toil and agony when the tree would shake all the snow from its crown and try to bury the man who assaulted its life with an axe to its root. The cold that might get burning hot. The darkness, the stench in the cabin at night, the dreary food - the American pork was not like kisses for very long!

The manners that tended to become uncouth because of the distance from women and children.

Back home, a matriachal rule developed: just cattle and kids and *qweijns* and weaving looms and watching the steps of the rare peddler or pastor and "that woman", who did not cover her hair, and warning all the daughters and keeping everything in order - they clung to rules and clock-time and calendar and the commandments, since the old marks and signs did not give guidance as before.

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A tenth winter of that sort a woman staggering under the duties of a forest-worker's matron entering the cow-shed, rope in hand her neck stiff with one decision walking on tip-toe so as not to disturb the cattle lying in a row chewing cuds.

She opened the door to the hay-barn, when a moaning low made her drop the rope - the sound did not rise from an animal but from ultimate compassion. The woman had to look back and saw the oldest cow standing with tears streaming down her face.

A domestic animal tied with a rope for seven months out of the year but still knowing that a rope can be used for a tighter purpose?

The cow held the woman in the grasp of her eyes "until she made me so weak, the darned beast, that I did not have the strength to pick the rope up from the floor ..."

The woman closed, years later.

I can remember her during the village Sunday prayers in the most pious of the hymns - her voice leaving the tune and flaring up like the shrieks of a crane.

At Eastertime, on the last snow, the men would return in a blazing sun, skinny horses and men welcomed as heroes. The village rang with laughter, as the women washed their husbands clean of lice and the Lamb was prepared and eaten and redeemed everybody from the winter's shortages and shortcomings. If they were lucky, they had earned enough to pay the interest on the bank loan and the rising taxes to the Crown.

If not, they could always hope for next winter, when another son would be big enough to help his father fell timber for the saw mill company and Europe.

In less than a century, those part-time forest-workers had paid for the invention of mechanical tools that made saws and axes outdated.

Unfortunately it made the relation between man and horse outdated as well, since the horse itself had had to cease together with the rest of the village - its cattle and its people. The lumber produced by fifty men and twenty-five horses in one hundred days in the early thirties requires only one man in a forest harvester today and the time of one hundred hours.

The saw mills prefer to invest the income from forest products in other parts of Sweden and the world.

The authorities follow suit by developing an infrastructure down south and referring to the north as *de-peopling areas*. Hundreds of villages in Norrland have been depopulated, de-horsed, de-named the patches of barley corn and potatoes have been replanted with *Contorta*, a fast-growing Canadian pine, good for pulp. My own village, Missenträsk, is still there, although we have lost our school, our store and the railway. Most of the villagers are old. Their children work in factories down south - their grandchildren speak different dialects from their grandparents.

This development is obviously not only a Swedish phenomenon - it is the result of the technological revolution. We can see the same desertion of the countryside in nations like Italy, Kenya or any Latin American country. Sometimes this trend is described as "the young fleeing the countryside" or, from the opposite perspective, "having access to cheap migrant labor" sometimes it has the blunt label "forced-draft-urbanization".

I am unable to forget the injustice inflicted upon the small-holders in the name of modernization.

On the other hand - it is possible that city living is what mankind prefers, at this stage of history?

That most people prefer the jungle of the megacities to the jungle of the forest?

That the unborn today lurk in skyscrapers and force their parents to give them an urban life? That the beat of the city exerts a more immediate attraction than the pulse of the wilderness? *That speed itself is, to the city-dweller, the same center of the world that our refugee experienced in his caraway seed*

...

There is one dilemma: Man's dependence on herbs and trees for his very breathing.

As a writer I am often asked why I don't go in for politics if justice be so important, or why I don't work full time in some environmental movement if I think that the forests of the earth are such a neglected issue. To write about a village on the threshold of expiring - isn't that accepting a futile challenge?

Yes indeed.

Talking about beauty, sorrow, justice and the like is a mere pretext for something that has gotten to us. Most writers think of nothing except

that which we cannot deny or avoid or run away from.

I met her, an old girl, more than a hundred years old in the old-age home of the district: a heap of brittle bones, her skull as translucent as a blue-bell ecstatic eyes fixed on the door opening, rehearsing over and over the moment of her life:

"there he stood on the threshold
and a stitch in my heart as I saw him
then he started walking
across the floor
and each of his steps
was to throb
in all of me"

There were some other old women around who wanted to inform the visitor of the facts. One of them said: "You might think that the man stepped up to her and asked her to dance with him? Nothing of the sort! He asked the girl sitting next to her. That's what happened and nothing else." Another woman continued: "She has had ten children, all right! There are some who never learn!"

And a third one knew that "She is telling lies faster than a horse can run! Don't listen to her!"

But our senior girl did not listen, her eyes fixed in splendid expectation: "and there he stood ... and a stitch in my heart ..."

That's my village - on the threshold of my writing, forever walking towards me.