

FOX

food falls from the sky

SIX TO BEGIN, this summer's litter from a pair of fox too smart for the traps. Five kits tawny, the spit of their father; one, the runt of the litter, the coal brown coat of its mother. Unless you know what the change in seasons brings – the summer moult, the prized winter coat that grows thick and glossy in its place – these pelts are worthless.

The vixen roams. Dog fox sleeps in the sun near the opening of the den. Below him, kits bound amongst the rocks. The largest leaps upon its brother's back. A third, woken from its nap, flicks its tail and joins the game, the three tousling and nipping, a wriggling knot of fur that tumbles down the snow slope, limbs and tails akimbo. A yip from the kit pinned beneath. An odd sound. Not a cat's cry. Not the yelp of a dog. A sound akin to a bird, to the cry of kittiwake gulls who make their summer home in lofty heights above the den, the swirl of air a heaven of wings.

The runt of the litter knows this: food falls from the sky.

Its mother holds no expectation for the runt beyond its time in the den, even her larger kits' first winter alone holds the prospect of a summons with death. Why let it follow, this underweight youngling whose colour and form mirrors her own? She smells

the runt at her flank, senses its effort to keep pace. She wishes it gone. They angle sharp up the slope to trawl the base of bird cliffs.

On gravel amongst the moss beds, a bird egg has smashed, mother and kit lapping at a yolk already gelling in the Arctic sun. The vixen sights a second egg cushioned amongst tufts of pink campion, intact, though the egg has plummeted an impossible distance. The mother shunts the kit aside and takes the egg whole in her mouth with the tenderness she uses to pull her newborns to her teats. She tracks swiftly across the slope to cache the egg in a crevice within an outcrop of rock. This tract of land is a larder, a memory map in readiness for harder times.

Not only eggs, entire birds plunge from the sky. Broken-winged birds, sick birds, birds weak from hunger, kittiwakes, fulmars, even dovebies whose tiny bones add crunch to a platter of warm flesh, here for the picking along the breadth of slopes.

The breast of a kittiwake quivers even as the vixen splits it apart. The kit sits, forelimbs straight, as her mother sets a paw upon the bird and tugs at entrails. The kit salivates, limbs trembling in wait. The vixen tears meat from the breast. She halts, takes a step back. The runt pushes her muzzle into the bird's cavity; she rubs her snout over guts and fascia strung out on the ground, the savoury stench as exhilarating as the first entrails sliding down her throat, as warm and comforting as mother's milk.

FOX

a tattoo of scars

EGGS GROW SCARCE, outweighed by plump balls of down. Kittiwake and guillemot chicks tumble to the ground. The fox kits, bigger now, patrol the base of the mountain. They gorge on soft oily meat; they lick and pull at globules of fat lacing flesh to skin. Suddenly they grow wary of a sibling closing in. They gobble in haste, cramming skin and fluff into a bulging gullet before a contender makes a claim. They turn away to retch.

The kits lick their paws. They clean their muzzles of grease. They no longer sleep solely in the den but cross to a ledge or craggy lookout where they sit alone to survey their territory, peering out at ice sliding on the ocean. They crunch on a feather to pass the time of day. They nap then hunt then eat then cache whatever food remains. In slumber, their long tawny brush tails encircle snout and ears. See the eye flick open, the disk of amber. A sound? A scent? Even in sleep, they are alert to the slightest hint of movement.

The runt, the singular chocolate brown kit of the litter, roams farther, higher. Though food at the base of the slopes comes easy, too often she is the target of her siblings. The kits' play has grown fierce, territorial, a bearing of teeth, bites that puncture, a knot of bodies cascading to a brawl. Though they rarely make a sound,

they snarl over territory, tear each other for the right to food, their teeth razor sharp.

The runt's back is matted with wounds, her neck a tattoo of scars. She is nearing her full height, agile and bold beyond her size. She climbs higher than her siblings and parents, looks down upon her family stalking the slopes. She squeezes through rocks that have shattered and split from freeze and thaw. Her body is so light she looks to fly, paws barely brushing ground. Daintily she pads along ledges too narrow and perilous for a larger fox. She climbs higher, clears the breadth of a chasm without hesitation or thought for how she will return.

She hears the agitated cry of guillemots along the mountain's narrow ledges. She knows the call of kittiwakes whose nests of seaweed, moss and twigs of Arctic willow are mortared with guano to stud these mountain slopes. Birds that sense a fox is near.

They rise tall, shuffle to the fore edge of their nests to shield their young. Along the guillemots' crammed ledge, the entire enclave grows raucous and panicked at the young runt's presence. Yet the ledge is too high for even an agile fox to reach. This small fox relies on attitude. A game of bluff.

Birds in the air shriek and swoop to divert attention from their young but the fox will not be deterred. She sees chicks on the ledges tremble, bereft of their parent. Birds flap, neighbours are knocked and jostled until one is shunted off balance and forced to take flight. The very air feels ruffled. Chicks cheep beseechingly. Their bodies reach out. The runt halts, her tongue slipping free, pink and wet. She salivates. Watches. A tussle. A tumble. She springs. The snatch. A gratifying crack of bone before the guillemot chick has even reached the ground. She holds the chick fast in her jaw. Feels the beating heart. She looks around for more.

Tromsø, early August

ON THE MORNING *Maiblomsten* sails, Anders cannot put to rest the workings of his decision which he now finds mystifying. Agreeing to take the woman has already come back to haunt him. The torrent of ridicule from fellow trappers. A turning of backs as if by naming a woman a trapper he has sullied their domain. Henry Rudi the one man to stand apart. A week ago, when he joined Rudi at his corner table, Anders quietly voiced his doubts. One week ago there was time, still, to rid himself of Wanny Woldstad, to pick a different partner.

What kind of man do you need? Rudi had asked.

Anders reeled off his customary list of wants. Someone steady and reliable. An even temperament. A man who could do the work and keep himself alive. What it came down to was a man with fortitude and nous. *She will never have that kind of strength or resilience. Or the common sense.*

Can she shoot? Rudi replied.

Now, this his final Tromsø morning, Anders has risen early, no more than a wink of sleep, to park himself on a bench at the dock – the need to clear his thoughts, the morning sun slow to lift above the hills, a slick of engine oil on the waterline around the

timber pier, about him the ever-present whiff of rotting fish and fetid seal. Anders had asked the question of Henry Rudi: *What do you look for in a working partner?*

Much the same features, Rudi said, *though I'm yet to find them within a single man. A good dog,* he said, *now they come close.* The conversation turned to the best and worst sledging dogs they'd known: Greenland pure breeds deaf to every command other than to mush, dogs who run all day and expect no greater reward than a hunk of frozen seal meat and a scratch behind the ears; versus Anders's two young Alsatian mutts, brother dogs he bred up north last season, oversized puppies bigger on brawn than brains.

He and Rudi finished their beers and took their caps from the hook. Rudi off to Greenland's north-east, Anders once more back to Svalbard. A firm handshake to bid each other a safe and prosperous hunting season. Then Rudi stopped him on the footpath. *It often takes a close call,* he said to Anders, *before you can know your partner. Or yourself. A dash of humility is a quality that never goes astray. Nothing you don't already know.*

Advice that offered no clarity at all.

Anders studies his boots. Perhaps it falls to lack of choice. God knows he searched for someone better, finding fault, true enough, with men who sought him out. Perhaps it is this maddening urge to be gone, to rid himself of townsfolk and town living, get himself the fastest passage north. He scratches his head, looks to the hills. As likely it was sheer bloody-mindedness, the need to have the final say. It would not be the first time he has arced up against the strident voice of naysayers, giving as good as he got to those whose very cynicism against a woman trapper Anders himself privately harbours. He wants to think he's come a way since his younger days, his refusal to be harried back then too frequently landing him in trouble. Yet here he sits, older and so-called wiser, gazing at his boots, gulls squawking a mean kind of laughter at

his lunacy. *Too late now, Sæterdal.* Half their gear gone ahead on a vessel that had space in its hold, the remainder stowed aboard *Maiblomsten*, awaiting final sign-off from the Customs men.

A different thought ticks through his head. The choice to take a woman: perhaps it falls to witchery. Face it. Somewhere in that strange encounter, following her across a field on a sultry summer's night, a man's rifle slung from that small shoulder – never mind the ale you'd drunk – you were dazzled by the prospect of a self-made woman, filled with bodily glow at where she might be leading you, what was on offer, more in your fancy than what she could do with a rifle. He will not admit to anyone the same tightening in his groin at the first sight of a polar fox padding past the hut, surveying the home territory. Out first thing to scatter titbits of seal meat amongst the rocks, hoping the small creature will pick his place for its den.

A prideful woman, Wanny Woldstad. Every bit as shrewd. *No, Sæterdal, she wanted none of you, except as a means to an end. It was she who chose you.*



Steaming out between the islands on *Maiblomsten*, Wanny feels Anders Sæterdal watching. He is not alone. All five trappers aboard are sizing her up, they and their sledging dogs. Sæterdal's two Alsations cast her the stink eye; but for her Mira, all are male dogs, whining and barking, pulling at the chains of their deck boxes. Wanny stops herself from kneeling to comfort Mira, curled tight and panting in the corner of her box; a dog who, in her seven years, has never known the sea. Opposite the rear deck towers trapper Schønning Hanssen, his great boots set apart with his knees crooked to ride the sea as if it were a horse, on his way to Hornsund's southern shore. The Italian Alberto Fumagalli, a young man with no more experience than her, is being taken along as Hanssen's

partner to learn the trappers' life. The men laugh and joke with Fumagalli, his limited Norwegian no barrier to conversation; rather, a shortcoming that seems to bolster their jovial camaraderie. The trappers share tales with the Italian, offer him advice. Even the bosun has found him a length of rope to practise his knots. None, other than the captain, award Wanny such attention. These men are a brotherhood, fixed and firm.

Wanny listens to their talk, wanting to learn. *Spitsbergen* in one utterance, *Svalbard* the next, names loosely traded aboard the ship when speaking of the archipelago's largest island or the collection of islands. No wonder the Italian looks confused.

Wanny steps out from behind the wheelhouse to breathe in cold air, suddenly overheated in her woollen underwear and woollen trousers and sturdy new boots. Only her old leather coat feels soft and familiar. Her skin grows clammy with the motion. Nothing, not seasickness, not even Anders Sæterdal, can stop her now. She has leased her taxi to cover the loan, packed away her uniform and cap, folded up that neatly pressed version of self. She fretted over Skipper Svendsen's dim assessment of her gear and purchased a smart new trapper's hat from Andresens, the leather neatly stitched, the fur lining soft against her face. Fur mittens, the skipper urged, paw-like things as clumsy as boxing gloves. Sturdy new weather-proof boots. A pair of clogs for inside the hut – insulation from the frozen floor. Wanny balked at the outlay, finally shamed into telling him she hadn't the means for more. *Reckless*, Wanny. Reckless and headstrong. She fixes her gaze homeward, commands her stomach to settle, the coast of northern Norway blurring into sea. Imagines that small girl in her father's fishing boat, willing him to motor her across the horizon, innocent to the twists and turns of life.

If Othar could see her now. If he could know the door he opened when he first handed her a rifle. Wannu closes her eyes. She winces at the bittersweet image of her husband unable to conceal his pride at her first championship. She blinks to the sight of Sæterdal scowling in her direction. It should have been Othar, not Anders Sæterdal, here by her side.

The ship's rigging whistles in the rising wind. Mira whimpers. Her dog turns anxious circles in her box. The ship lifts and falls. A shudder runs down its spine. No other trapper but herself and the Italian reach for the railing to keep their balance. Wannu turns to the sea, trains her eyes upon the horizon.

The open ocean, the land gone, is where Anders's Arctic year begins, running the gauntlet across the Barents Sea before the next weather front rolls in. Before him at the railing, the bronze-skinned Italian wears a pallor that bears the old familiar clamminess. Anders points him to the downwind side to retch. He sees the woman close her eyes and wince. She turns to grip the railing. No friends or family to see her off. Nought she gives away. Her expression of remorse serves to confirm his monumental error of judgement, his dread of being shackled. A year spent keeping a woman alive. A loan to be paid in twelve months' time, and he lumbered with the lion's share of work. Quick to learn, she has assured him. Can shoot the heart from a bear, he had skited like a fool to Henry Rudi.

Anders talks down his fears, tries to fathom hers. Is it the magnitude of the undertaking? Was he the same, his first season of trapping? He has scant recollection for feelings. He is not a man to pander to emotion. Ask him to name the features of a place, to list the markers of the land, pinpoint where on his memory map Hornsund's bears and foxes met their maker, he will pore over a map for hours.

Fangstmann Overvintrer 1932–33, the police registration lists the woman, applying the masculine form. *Fangskvinne* is a female hunter. Svalbard's first. Anders closes his eyes to sea spray and an image of women circling the pavement outside Mack Ølhallen, a net raised momentarily to let a single fish dart through.