

IT WAS THE WORST DAY OF THEIR LIVES - A NORWEGIAN FAIRY TALE

Whoooooosh! Whoooooosh! An invisible hand scooped Sheena up from the death defying slope where she lay prostrate, her glasses spattered with mud, her dignity wounded and her patience sorely tried. Whoooooosh! The next instant she was picking her way through sodden meadows, trying hard to avoid the deep, unfriendly puddles caused by the torrential, unrelenting rainfall.

"Oh, there you are!" Her husband Alastair had already made it further up the clearing. "How on earth did we get here? I thought you'd fallen....."

"No idea, it's really weird!" Sheena shook her head bemused and a thousand tiny rainbow droplets dripped down from her tousled dark curls, plopping on to her sturdy walking boots.

Glancing around the clearing with its collection of teetering barns and worldly-wise homesteads they spied a large wooden outbuilding whose high-set windows bedecked with multi-striped curtains reminded Sheena of the Women's Institute huts she had seen back home in Scotland. Her mouth watered briefly at the thought of tucking into those amazing home-made jam and cream scones with that familiar heady strawberry aroma. She could certainly do with a cuppa and a bite to eat now!

"Hi there! Need a place to shelter?" A sprightly octogenarian fellow with a rudely healthy complexion and upright stature beckoned them into his daughter's wedding hut. "Hello, I'm Per". He shook their hands vigorously. "I'm eighty four years old, a native of this hamlet". He clearly stemmed from a generation of hardy country dwellers who possessed a natural understanding of the laws of life and nature, clad as he was in khaki cargo pants, bottle green jumper, a paisley neckerchief placed neatly round his neck secured by a carved wooden toggle.

"What's that scary thing over there?" Alastair's curiosity had got the better of him.

"There on the wall you mean? Ah yes, that's our old Scottish highland bull Odon. Strong character he was too, a war-monger, just like his name's sake!" Per pointed to the dun-brown-chalk-white hide fastened across the rear wall. They stroked the pelt, marvelling at the bristly texture of the hairs which prickled their palms as they caressed it.

"Beware the god of war!" Per's thundering voice startled them, inducing deep fear in their very core. The whole demeanour of this previously affable villager transformed in the flick of a bull's tongue. His eyes narrowed to slinky slits, his lips were pursed and taut and he seemed to be leering at them in the manner of an alien freshly descended to earth

from celestial heights. Both Sheena and Alastair were equally nonplussed by this strange turn of events and hastily decided to beat a retreat.

"Weird guy, don't you think? Gave me the creeps!" Alastair shuddered, as he zipped his anorak right up to his nose and seizing Sheena's arm pulled her back down the path in haste.

"I don't much fancy climbing back down those lethal stone steps. The whole thing's as slippery as a dirt-car track in a thunderstorm" protested Sheena. Her face was pale and anxious and she shivered apprehensively at the thought of the downward climb. "This place feels like it's been abandoned to the whims of local spirits. Goodness knows what could befall us!" she remarked.

"Just leave off with all your new-age gobbledygook, will you!" Alastair was exasperated by his wife's fanciful observations. "The sooner we start the sooner we'll get back to the car."

No sooner had they accomplished the first leg of the hazardous descent than Fate took an even more uninvited turn. The skies scowled down at them malevolently and the rain lashed mercilessly down on their shaking bodies.

"Look, there's a rough shelter over there. Let's keep dry inside it until this storm passes", shouted Alastair. Sheena needed no encouragement - she was already scrambling up the slope, clawing at the squelching mud to gain a secure foothold.

Once inside they found a pile of old sacks from which they fashioned a makeshift couch. Huddled exhausted together their eyes became droopy and they drifted into uneasy slumber.

Whooooosh! Whooooosh! An uncannily penetrating sound emanating from the roof space overhead jolted them back to reality. They became aware of an uninvited, angry presence accompanied by an inexplicably putrid stench This was the stuff of horror movies. It was the worst day of their lives! In mad panic they decided on flight rather than fight but their limbs were glued to the spot. They had been struck deaf, dumb and blind. Then, just as they contemplated the terrifying prospect of an imminent death, there it came again - Whooooosh! Whooooosh!. The evil spirit was gone and they were back in their bodies, cautiously wiggling toes and fingers. As though a raging lion were on their tail they bolted down the steps, twisting, turning and finally toppling headlong into the path of a local walking his dog. At first they failed to recognise him, gesticulating wildly up at the haunted shelter, their eyes filled with terror.

"Aha, so you dared to enter Odon's inner sanctum, did you, and brought his vengeance upon yourselves?!" There was an alien ring to the man's

words, but as they scrutinised his gnarled face more closely the features morphed incredibly into those of Per. A moment later he had vanished. With indecent haste the spooked couple bounded down the track and flung themselves into their car. Phew, Alastair turned the ignition key and the vehicle shot out onto the road by the fjord. Whooooosh! Whooooosh! An invisible hand descended from the heavens and scooped up the car and its passengers. For a few seconds a message formed from blobs of leaking oil was visible on the roadway. ODON IS AVENGED it read - and then, like the car, it was gone!

Margaret Royle