Chapter One

When I told the dean at the college about the old log house that I had rented, he stared at me with astonishment. "You rented *that* house?"

"It's two centuries old," I boasted, pleased to have found my dream home. "A genuine Norwegian log cabin from the early 1800s, so close to the fjord that seagulls perch on the roof."

He shook his head at me, the strange American. He had recommended that I, a newly hired teacher, move into an apartment building near the college where several of the other teachers lived.

But I had not come all the way to Norway to live in a suburban box. Echoing the exuberant letter which I had written to my parents, I listed the glories of my new home: "First thing every morning, I look out my bedroom window to see what the weather and the sea are doing. Across the fjord is a magnificent range of mountains. I can wander my eye from peak to peak. Twice, I've spotted an eagle that soars over the village. And—"

"That house is haunted."

"Haunted?"

"You won't last to the end of September in that house. You'd better put a cot in your office. Or find a girlfriend in town." And then the dean hurried off, late for a meeting.

I stood alone in the corridor, slightly uneasy at first, then skeptical, and finally, a newcomer brimming with enthusiasm for my adopted country, undaunted by whatever challenges lay before me.

During the first weeks of the semester, I had little time to worry about ghosts. I was too busy teaching courses in business English, and settling into a very un-American house. The old coastal dwelling had recently been renovated with insulation and clapboard siding on the outer walls, and electricity inside. But the furnishings, like those of Ibsen's office in the museum in Oslo, were artifacts from an earlier epoch.

I had not only to clean, but comprehend, the collection of medieval cooking utensils which I found in the log-walled kitchen. Strange wooden tools filled the drawers, along with iron knives more suited to skinning a moose than to dicing carrots. The silverware was so tarnished, it was surely booty brought home by a Viking from a plundered Irish monastery. The earthen bowls were sufficiently huge to serve porridge to Thor himself. True, the stove was a modern Elektra with three hot plates and an oven, but the pot which I found for making popcorn was so massive that turned upside-down, it could have served as a church bell on Sundays.

The log-walled living room was furnished with a spinning wheel that ran smoothly when I worked the treadle with my foot. A yoke with two hooks for carrying pails of water hung from a peg. On the floor below the yoke stood a wooden bucket. (I later found the second wooden bucket in the tool shed.) A wide bench along one log wall converted into a pull-out trundle bed. Two sturdy rocking chairs stood in a corner. I placed one of them in front of the fireplace. When I thought about the cold winter nights which lay ahead, I looked forward to putting my feet up on the hearth while I read the polar sagas of Nansen.

The third room downstairs—the house was a long rectangle, like a large shoe box—was my log-walled bedroom, with a window facing the fjord. The bed stood snug in a corner with its foot just an inch from the back half of the chimney. The bed's headboard and footboard were adorned with ornate scrollwork. The wood was dark with age. Generations had loved and birthed and died in that bed.

I discovered how truly ancient it was when, on my first night in the house, as I lay down on the hard thin mattress . . . the antique bed abruptly collapsed, dumping me in a heap on the floor. I spent the night outside in the yard, comfortably bundled in my sleeping bag on a bed of moss while a salty mist from the fjord swept over me. The following afternoon, I drove into town to buy a bottle of furniture glue.

Below the bedroom window I placed an old wooden table that would serve as a desk, and thus I created a combination bedroom-office with a view of the fjord, the mountain range, and the sky. I thumb-tacked pictures of my mother and father to a smooth rounded log on one side the window, hung an Ansel Adams calendar, with pictures of mountains in California, from a log on the other side of the window, then placed a half-dozen pens and markers of various colors in a neat row on my new Norwegian desk.

As I filled the drawers of a bureau with newly purchased wool socks and wool underwear, I felt that I was no longer a Norwegian-American from Florida, but now an American-Norwegian living in the village of Hopen, above the Arctic Circle in northern Norway.

I felt that I had truly embarked on a fresh start in life.

A farmer who lived in the village sold me a wagonload of birch trunks. Here in the far north, none of the white trunks was more than four inches wide. Though the house had modern electric heating panels, fastened—one in each room—to the bottommost log, I wanted to use both the iron stove and stone fireplace through the long Nordic winter. I found a bow saw in the wood shed, and an axe; I bought a new blade for the first, and sharpened the second. Each day after classes, I drove home along a winding road that skirted the fjord, then made a pot of fresh coffee, stepped outside to the fifty birch trunks leaning against each other in the shape of a teepee, and

laid a white trunk across the sawbuck. While I worked the bow saw (building up a beefy biceps), I savored the smell of freshly sawn birch.

Between logs, I gazed at the late afternoon sun sparkling on the fjord far to the west. I knew, since I lived eighty kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, that in late November, the sun would disappear. It would be gone during the Arctic night until some time in January. As a Floridian, I was a bit worried about a long siege of frigid darkness. But as I set a foot-long section of birch on the chopping block, then split it with the axe into lengths of kindling, I felt confident that I would be ready for the dark storms of winter.

And there was the outhouse to attend to. Though the modernized bathroom inside the house was furnished with a sink and hot shower, the owner had decided, for ecological reasons, not to run a sewage pipe into a septic tank so near to the sea. Instead, my landlord kept the old outhouse which had brought comfort to generations of hardy fishermen. Well, the seat was solid enough, but the vertical planks in the walls had dried and shrunken and warped, so that either stripes of sunshine shone inside, or gusts of damp drizzle blew through.

Nevertheless, the ancient building up the rocky hill from my house had its charm, so I fixed nothing more than a broken hinge on the door.

I *did*, however, replace the roll of toilet paper which I found inside. The old roll, sodden and sagging and speckled with mold, appeared to have been most recently used by someone who had sat there one last time in the homeland before emigrating by steamship to America.

So I had little time to worry about ghosts. I was too busy studying the conjugations of Norwegian verbs. Too busy trying to get my immigration papers in order with the police in Bodø. And busy as well learning a batch of new road signs so I could pass the exam for a Norwegian driver's license.

When I had a few free hours on a sunny Saturday afternoon, I would go for a walk with my camera. A small river flowed beside the village; it broadened at its mouth into a harbor, passed beneath the coastal highway bridge and poured into the fjord. Following a sandy road that ran parallel to the olive-black river, I walked upstream to see where road and river would lead me.

I watched fishermen who cast their lures for the elusive salmon. I took a picture of two jubilant boys from Hopen who carried home a salmon big enough to provide a filet for each family.

The sandy road climbed a hill: from the top, I discovered a lake from which the short river drained. Following the road down the hill, through spruce and birch, I stood on the lake's pebbly shore. A couple in their sixties rowed past in a boat with two pairs of oars; he rowed backward while she rowed forward with an easy

cooperation between man and woman that I envied. As their boat glided through a sheen of sun sparkles, I took their picture.

I had a special purpose for these photographs. I wanted to send an ever growing collection to my mother and father in Florida, so they could see, through the four seasons, the homeland of our ancestors.

Pellets of hail battered the bedroom window like volleys of buckshot as an autumn storm roared off the fjord. I was sheltered inside sturdy log walls, seated in a rocking chair in front of a fire blazing in the fireplace, while I corrected essays. My chair creaked as I rocked back and forth. Let the winds howl! Let the waves pound the shore! I was as content as any king in his castle.

But oooooh, correcting those essays was dreary drudgery. Only half-way through the pile when my third red pen ran dry, I thought how much easier it would be to dunk each essay into a bucket of red paint.

My own efforts to learn Norwegian gave me patience, however; I kept reminding myself that it is no easy thing to master a foreign language. After two months of intensive summer courses at the University of Oslo, my conversational skills were rated as B+, though my reading was laborious, and my writing was no doubt as much a bramble patch as any essay I hacked through that night.

When finally I finished the last inarticulate, illogical and virtually illegible page, I closed my bleary eyes and leaned back in the chair, too tired even to rock. I listened as the hail became sheets of rain lashing the windows. I listened to the comforting murmur of the flames beyond my feet. And I listened to the creaking of a rocking chair, "creak . . . creak . . . creak". But I was not rocking. I opened my eyes, looked up at the ceiling. Yes, quite distinctly, in the room above me, a rocking chair was creaking. With a different creak from the creak of my chair: a little quicker, a little higher in pitch. A chill crept up my back, for somebody was in the house with me!

I had rented only the downstairs half of the house. The owner had told me that he used the upstairs "for storage". He and I had met in August, walked through the ground floor and signed the rental agreement. He had showed me a key in a kitchen drawer: a heavy, rust-pocked piece of iron that looked as if it unlocked a dungeon. He told me that in case of an emergency—roof damage, for example, from a storm off the sea—I could use the key to open the door at the top of the stairs.

The creaking continued above me. "Creak . . . creak . . . creak." Was it a window swinging in the wind? A room full of rats? Or could it be . . . the ghost? Nonsense. Most likely the wind. In any case, I'd better have a look.

I went into the kitchen, opened a drawer and found the heavy iron key. In another drawer, I found the flashlight which I had recently bought in Bodø. Then up the stairs I slowly climbed, the yellow circle of light on the steps ahead of me, for

there was no light at the top of the stairs. Evidently, only the first floor had been wired for electricity.

Three steps from the top, I paused, my heart thumping with apprehension. Should I phone the landlord? The police? My mother? But I heard no creaking now from beyond the door at the top of the stairs. Well of course I didn't hear anything, because I hadn't heard anything in the first place. My mind fuzzy from too many grammatical catastrophes, I had merely imagined the echo of my own chair. Onward then, and open that door, to verify that indeed I was alone in the house.

Bolstered by such rational thought, I marched forward, inserted the key into the keyhole and, twisting the iron shank with all my strength, managed to draw the rasping bolt free of the lock. As I pushed the door open, the twin squeak of its hinges went right up my spine, warning me that I stood on the threshold of rooms long sealed off from the realm of the living. Out came a wave of stale air: I smelled dust, and old furniture, and a hint of kerosene.

I beamed the wand of light around the interior of a fully furnished room: two bookcases stood tall against a log wall, filled with leather-bound books. An oil painting of a square-rigger, with billowing sails and a prow that cut a rolling sea, hung, slightly crooked, between two windows. An elegant kerosene lamp stood on a lace doily atop a round table; beside the lamp lay a dusty magazine.

Then I felt a jolt of fright, for in front of an iron stove—a stove of an older vintage than my stove downstairs—stood a rocking chair. Though I shone my spotlight on the chair, I could see no one—nor the spirit of anyone—sitting in it.

I shone the light once again around the room, but discovered no ghoul dragging chains, no corpse hanging from a noose, no skeleton laid out on the sofa. So I stepped cautiously into the room and walked . . . toward . . . that . . . chair. I examined the seat and the arms, and noted only an unmarked layer of dust. But of course a ghost would leave dust undisturbed. The only sure proof that the chair had indeed been creaking was to sit in it myself, and rock.

Afraid to sit, afraid not to sit, I sat, ramrod straight as I gave a little push. "Creak . . . creak . . . creak," *exactly* as I had heard it from downstairs. I leaped out of the chair and dashed for the door before some specter slammed it shut and turned the key, locking me inside a haunted prison.

Safe on the landing outside the threshold, I pulled the door shut and locked it myself. I'd sleep outside in my sleeping bag tonight. Tomorrow at the college, I'd tell the dean that he was right. As soon as I was finished with my classes, I'd look for a modern apartment right near the campus.

But as my thumping heart slowed, I looked down the stairs at the glow of light from the kitchen . . . and hesitated. Was I really going to abandon my dream house in Norway—my genuine log home beside the fjord, my homestead at the edge of mountain wilderness—because of a creaking rocking chair?

I turned around on the landing, inserted the heavy iron key into the lock, turned the key—the bolt slid more easily this time—and pushed the door open. I shone the flashlight once more around the room, where everything seemed absolutely normal, although at least a century old.

Then I noticed that beside the stove was a second door, leading into another room. A room over my bedroom.

Summoning the few crumbs of courage which I had inherited from my Viking ancestors, I stepped warily across the living room, put my hand on a tarnished brass doorknob, and turned it. As the door swung quietly open, I swept the beam of light back and forth like the blade of a sword, warning one and all who might be hiding in that room that I meant to flush them out.

Rain battered the bedroom window. The wind howled across the roof close overhead.

I shone the spotlight on an old-fashioned writing desk, which stood before the bedroom window, exactly as my desk stood in front of the bedroom window downstairs. On a faded green blotter were a silver pen and a bottle of ink. A pair of spectacles of the sort Benjamin Franklin had worn. And a seashell: the long slender shell of a clam.

To one side of the blotter was a small clock in a wooden case; I heard no ticking. On the other side of the blotter stood a kerosene lamp with a bulbous glass chimney etched with flowers and swans.

To the right of the desk stood another bookcase filled with dusty leather-bound books. Whoever had lived here had definitely been a reader. On the floor beside the bookcase stood a pair of hiking boots, their leather creased and cracked. A pair of ancient ice skates hung by their laces from a peg in the log wall. In a corner stood a pair of broad wooden skis, like those I had seen last summer in the Holmenkollen museum in Oslo, with leather straps for bindings. Beside the skis stood one pole, from the days when people used only one.

I stepped closer to the window. Along its ledge was a collection of seashells: mussels and scallops and snails bleached chalky white by years in the sun. Outside the window I could see a stretch of the coastal road between the house and the fjord, swept by rain in the light of a streetlamp. I could just barely make out the storm-blurred lights of houses along the far shore of the fjord, the same lights which I could see from my window downstairs, but now from a slightly higher angle.

The antique bed in one corner gave me a clue to the mystery of these two perfectly preserved rooms, for the bed looked as if someone might come home tonight to use it. One corner of a faded pink comforter was turned down. Sitting against the pillow was a rag doll with two black button eyes that stared at me.

This was the bedroom which parents had preserved, intact in every detail, after their daughter had died.

Had she been a child, who slept with a well-worn doll? Had she been a schoolgirl who wrote her assignments at that desk? Or a young woman, who had hiked through the meadows and mountains in those boots?

I stepped out of the bedroom and closed its door. Whatever spirit lived within, I had no business intruding. She could creak in her rocking chair all she wanted. The upstairs was her domain, the downstairs was mine, and as long as she meant me no harm, I would gladly leave her in peace.

Crossing through the musty living room, I glanced at a black umbrella with a handle hooked over a peg in the log wall. The rainy weather on Norway's coast had not changed during the past hundred years. I stepped across the threshold to the landing, pulled the squeaking door shut and locked it. I almost called through the door, "Good night."

Downstairs, I put the corrected essays into my briefcase, ready for classes tomorrow. I brushed my teeth and turned out the lights. As I lay in my own antique bed, listening to the rain battering the window, I rubbed my hand along a smooth log in the wall. This old house, my landlord told me, had stood here on the rocky slope above the fjord when Norway had been Denmark's northern colony. No doubt the family who lived here in 1814 had filled the rooms with intense and excited discussions, in their Nordland dialect, when the news swept up the coast that Sweden had taken Norway from Denmark, and that, despite Norway's fate as a pawn of greater nations, a group of radical thinkers had gathered at Eidsvoll in the south to write Norway's own constitution. Yes, and surely my bedroom window had been thrown open in 1905, when church bells along the fjord proclaimed freedom, finally, throughout the land.

So who was I to insist that I live in this house alone? If I shared it with a spirit from the past, I would consider our cohabitation as a privilege. Surely there was room for both the old and the new under one roof.

While pellets of frozen rain pattered against the window, I rolled over beneath my down comforter and peacefully slept.

One evening after dinner, I was sitting at my desk feeling sorry for myself because I had absolutely no one to whom to write a love letter. Gloomily I looked up from my weekly lesson plan to peer out the window . . . then I sat up straight and stared at the startling sight on the far side of the fjord: the clouds above the mountain range glowed with a fiery salmon pink. The jagged black mountains jutting onto the clouds were tinged with dark pink. This was a sunset unlike any I had ever seen. Jumping up from the chair, I grabbed my camera and dashed out of the house, hoping I wouldn't be too late, for I had no idea how long such a sunset might glow before it faded.

I ran down the sloping village lane to the coastal road, where I waited impatiently for a truck to pass by, then I ran across the road to the shoreline of glacier-polished granite. Glancing to the right, I could not see the sun that was casting such vibrant color across the southern sky; it was hidden behind a forested ridge that stood like a towering wall just west of the village.

Raising my workhorse Nikon to my eye, I focused the zoom lens on a rosy peak across the fjord. Never saw *that* in Florida. The light meter read 1/15th of a second: a hand-held picture would be blurred. I should have brought the tripod. But no time now to run back and fetch it, for the radiant orange-pink, a color I had never seen in the Florida sky, was already beginning to fade. I looked quickly around, saw a fisherman's shanty nearby, climbed over the rocks and braced my long lens against a corner of the weathered building. I composed fjord and mountain range and pink peaks and pink clouds into a rectangular moment of perfection, then gently pressed my fingertip on the shutter-button, CLICK. I nearly cheered with triumph.

Shadows crept up the lower slopes, so that within minutes, only the snow-dusted peaks glowed pink. The pink in the clouds had faded to the faintest tinge in billows of charcoal gray. Longing to share this precious moment with someone, anyone, friend or stranger, I looked behind me to see if perhaps one of my neighbors in Hopen had come out to watch. But no, no one else stood along the shore. Inside the window of a nearby house, I discerned the blue flicker of a television. I glanced at my own house, saw the desk lamp shining inside my window where minutes ago I had been sitting.

Then my eyes were drawn to a pink glow in the upstairs window. I thought at first that the glass was reflecting the sunset, until I discovered, to my astonishment, that the window had been swung open. Raising my camera, I focused its telephoto lens on a woman in the window whose pink dress exactly matched the faint pink in the clouds. Then I realized that not only her dress, but her face as well, and her hands on the window ledge as she leaned out, were all the same pink.

She did not merely reflect the sunset, but somehow absorbed and retained its color, for though the clouds and mountain peaks slowly darkened, the pink ghost continued to glow.

Embarrassed to be spying on her, I lowered my camera. Yet still I watched her, and saw that she too was now fading. Soon the window frame became empty, or at least empty of a visible spirit, for she might yet have been standing there. Yes, she must have been, for the window now swung shut.

For a moment I thought I might go up and knock on her door, to introduce myself. And to invite her downstairs, so I could ask her about . . . well, about herself.

But I reconsidered. I knew from experience that Norwegians were quiet people who took their time to get to know you. I didn't want to be a pushy American. Better to let her decide if she would bridge the distance between us.

* * *

I did not have to wait long. I finished the roll of film the next day by taking pictures around the college, then I drove my newly purchased old Toyota, faded red but with good tires, into Bodø, a town on the coast where the fjord met the sea, to have the slides developed at a Fast-Foto lab. That evening, I set up a projector and screen in my living room, to one side of the fireplace. (No fire tonight.) Though eager to see the results of my first two weeks of photography in northern Norway, I waited for the full darkness of night outside the windows, so the room would be as black as possible . . . and the colors on the screen most true.

At eight o'clock on that September evening, I turned on the projector, then looked with growing disappointment at pictures of out-of-focus seagulls; fishing boats too far away on the fjord; the house—taken from further up the hill, with the fjord and mountain range in the background—a bit underexposed; an outcrop of rocks along the river a bit overexposed. I was slightly cheered, however, by one perfectly focused, expertly exposed picture of the outhouse's antique roll of toilet paper.

And then I clicked the projector and shone on the screen the picture of pink mountain peaks, and pink clouds. A minute or two late when I took it, I had missed the vibrant color which I had witnessed from my window. Next time I would be outside, with the tripod, *before* the peak of sunset. But I had caught fairly well the first autumn snow on the mountains, glowing reddish-pink.

It was a start.

From the corner of my eye I spotted something behind me on the right, in the doorway between the living room and the hallway to the kitchen.

"Hooooo!" I cried, and nearly jumped out of my moccasins. For there she was, standing in the dark doorway, glowing exactly the same pink as the pink of the clouds on the screen. She did not look at me, but gazed intently at the picture. She was a young woman, wearing an old-fashioned dress, its collar fastened with a brooch, its long sleeves cuffed with ruffles, a dress she might have been married in . . . or buried in.

I should have been terrified by the presence of a ghost. But after my initial shock, I relaxed, slightly. Because she was smiling. Yes, she was clearly pleased with the dark pink peaks and pale pink clouds.

"Hello," I said quietly. Then I said, in my best Norwegian, "Won't you please come in and sit down?"

She looked at me; her dark eyes studied me.

Feeling the convivial American impulse to tell her a little about myself, I explained, "My name is Michael. I teach English at the college. Here, let me show you my office." I clicked to the next slide, a picture of my fourth-floor office, with a

big desk (my parents would be proud), and a computer terminal, and windows that looked out at the mountains across the fjord.

But the ghost disappeared; the doorway, and the dark hall behind it, were suddenly empty.

"Wait," I called. "Please, come back." Pushing the reverse button, I returned the pink clouds to the screen . . . and there she was again, still in the doorway, still looking at me. Studying me.

"You captured the magic." Her voice was not ghostly, but strong, warm, and emphatic.

She said nothing more, but continued, with a faint, mysterious smile, to stare at me. She had a lovely face, and soft curly hair drawn back in a bun. Though I had seen many faces in Norway during my summer at the University of Oslo, and during my first weeks at the college, something in this face let me know that . . . I was home.

Then she asked, "Have you other pictures of colors in the sky?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but the rest of the pictures are of the library and my classroom and the cafeteria." She looked so disappointed that I hurried to add, "I know what you mean, that the sunlight is special up here in the north. I've never seen such colors in the sky. Listen, I'll do my best to take some more pictures for you."

She stared for a long moment at the dark fireplace, then she said something that I did not understand. She spoke a dialect from long ago, a distant cousin to my language-lab Norwegian.

I apologized, "Excuse me, I didn't catch what you said."

She pointed her hand, with no ring on it—a bachelor always notices the presence or absence of a ring on a young woman's hand—toward the dark fireplace. "So long," she said, and this time I understood her, "so long since I have sat in front of a fire."

"Well then, why don't I build us a good roaring fire?" I left the picture of pink clouds on the screen while I cleared away the dead coals and ashes, laid wood shavings over the grate, built up a lattice of kindling, fashioned a half-dozen birch twigs into a teepee, then lit a match and touched the flame to the shavings. As the flame gathered strength, I gestured to the rocking chair in front of the fireplace, "Please, won't you have a seat?"

With a nod of gratitude, she sat in the chair. She was already beginning to glow a pale orange from the firelight. I turned off the projector, drew up the second rocking chair and sat beside her as the birch bark blazed and lit our faces.

She did not rock in her chair, but leaned toward the hearth and stared into the flames. Hesitantly, she held out her hands toward the fire's warmth. Then she shook her head and whispered, with a tremor of grief in her voice, "No, I feel nothing."

I didn't know what to say. What can a person say to an orange spirit with enough life in her to speak, and yet not enough to actually be alive? I could not reach

out to hold her hand, could not put a comforting arm around her shoulders. Because, of course, ghosts are dead people.

She sat up straight in the chair and folded her hands in her lap, calming herself. Then she looked at me. "I try not to be bitter," she explained. "Only, I wish I could have experienced a little more of the magic."

"But you can see the clouds and the mountains and the fjord from your window." I spoke with cheerful enthusiasm. "You can watch the sun sparkling on the water, and the sheen of the moon at night."

"No. You don't understand." She looked down at her hands in her lap, then she said with a desperate aching, "How I wish I could."

"But didn't I see you in your window yesterday evening? Weren't you looking out at those pink clouds?"

She looked at me with a glimmer of hope. "I could see the magic, because *you* could see the magic."

"Because I could?"

"Yes. Because you could see, I could see. Because you were so excited, I was excited. Don't you understand? Because you built a fire," she nodded toward the flames leaping on the hearth, "I can glow in its light. Even if I can't feel its warmth."

"You mean, you borrow your energy from the fire?"

"And from you. If what once excited me, excites you too. Then I can share your excitement."

"And what excited you was . . . ?" I wanted to know what would make her smile again.

"To see that magical light." She leaned toward me, her pale orange hands so restless on the arm of her chair that I thought she might reach out and grab my hand. "Will you stay in this house during the winter?"

"I certainly will. As I said, I'm a teacher at the College in Bodø, teaching courses in business English, so I plan to live here at least to the end of June."

She sat back in the chair and began to rock, her pale orange face filled with girlish joy. "Then you will be here to see the northern lights! Ribbons of green and pink, rippling across the sky. Oh, will you . . ." Her eyes widened with anticipation. "Will you take me out skiing with you one night?"

"Of course," I said, glad to know how I might bring her some happiness. "But I must warn you: I've never been on skis. I've never even seen snow."

She stared at me, utterly baffled.

"But I can learn," I said, reassuring her. "Certainly I can learn. Do you know a good route by skis into the mountains?"

"Do I know?" She tossed her head with confidence. "Haven't I explored every lake and stream and forest as far as a girl can hike and still be home in time for

supper?" She smiled, remembering back. "Have you ever seen the reindeer grazing in the high mountain meadows?"

I grinned. "Now there's something I'd like to get a picture of. My parents live in Florida, and by golly, if I sent them a picture of reindeer—"

"Florida! You're an American?" She started at me as if I, an American, were something more marvelous and exotic in this house than she was, a mere ghost.

"Well, I'm . . . hoping to become a Norwegian."

"Uncle Ole sailed many times to America. He would almost *sing* when he talked about New York. He told me that the Americans were always in a hurry. 'Where are they hurrying to?' I asked him, for in Norway nobody ever hurried to get anywhere, except maybe out of the rain. 'To the future!' he boomed with admiration, for that was the noblest thing a person could do. "They're hurrying to build the future!'"

She looked at me as if I might exemplify that noble American type. Then she frowned and asked, mystified, "You want to become a Norwegian?"

"Let's just say that times have changed." I did not want to talk about myself. I wanted to leave all that behind. As I stared into the fire, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the flames.

"You are a teacher." She spoke with quiet respect.

I nodded. Not much of a teacher. Not much of anything.

"I was a teacher too."

I looked at her. "You were?"

"Yes, in the village schoolhouse. For three years, and then . . ." Abruptly she stood up from her chair and walked to a window, where she stared out at the night. Her orange glow began to fade. I stirred the logs on the coals, then added a fresh log crosswise; its bark caught fire and the flames filled the room with their flickering light. But still she seemed pale, almost at the point of disappearing.

"I suppose I should have no cause for regret," she said, her back to me. "I was twenty-two in 1917, when boys younger than I were dying by the thousands in France. I at least had the good fortune to die at home, with my family around me. And I died slowly, so I could savor what I was leaving."

She pressed her faint orange hand against the black glass. "I sat outside in the garden all summer, covered with a blanket even on the warmest days. Papa brought me baskets of blueberries, picked in a mountain meadow; I could hardly eat them. Mama brought me bouquets of wildflowers to hold on my lap. We all knew." Her hand formed a fist on the window. "We all knew."

She paused, staring out at the yard where I had been so contentedly chopping wood.

"The sun did not set during the summer, of course. At midnight in June, I could look south across the fjord at the red glow on the mountain peaks. But I could not see

the sun itself, for at midnight it was due north, hidden by the mountains behind Hopen. Oh, how I wanted to get out of that chair in the garden, throw away the blanket and climb the tallest peak to the north. I wanted to climb, and climb, and *climb*, to the very summit. Because I was desperate to see, one last time, the red sun that defied the night."

She turned from the window to face me; I was shaken by the anguish in her face. "I begged Papa to take me out on his boat, all the way to the mouth of the fjord and then out on the sea, so that I could look north across water at midnight at the sun that conquered the darkness. But the doctor said I was too weak to be out on the cold sea at night on a boat. And poor Papa, it hurt him so to hear me plead, when he could do nothing."

She walked across the room, pausing at the dark slide projector, a strange machine, no doubt, out of another world from her own. "So I gave up on the midnight sun. Instead I hoped, though I became so weak that I could hardly walk, I *hoped* that I would live into the autumn, when the night would return. Yes, I waited for the darkness, because then I might be able to look up and watch the green and pink ribbons rippling across the entire night sky. I thought, if I could last long enough to see the magic just one more time . . ."

She stood now in the doorway where she had first appeared. "What day is today?"

I held the dial of my watch toward the firelight and read the date in its tiny window. "The tenth of September."

She was fading; I could hardly see her now. "At the end of the summer, the night returned, of course. But September of 1917 was a rainy month. I had to lie inside, up in my room. On the tenth, I . . ."

She vanished.

I didn't know her name. I didn't know if I would ever see her again. But I did know that tomorrow I would visit the camera shop in Bodø, to ask what sort of film people used to photograph the northern lights.