

Alone Together in a Deafening Silence

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On November 11, 1852, at nearly 4.30 am, a newborn took its first breath and let out a cry that even startled the weathered midwife. This was the mother's eighth birth in ten years. Five of the children were still alive. Berit Olsdotter, age twenty five, and Paul Pedersson Storseth, age thirtyseven, were now the parents of six children. Four boys and two girls. It was enough.

Paul Pedersson sat very still near the doorway of the one room cottage.

"En jente," said the midwife.

After a long silence, Pedersson said plainly, "She will be called Brynhild."

"Brynhild," repeated the exhausted mother and looked towards the open window before drifting off to sleep. She had not yet held her baby. It had been a difficult labour. Pedersson stood up. He wanted to get on with his chores. Glancing towards his common-law-wife, and stuffing a bit of bark-bread into his mouth, he stepped out into the dawn's early light. He had neither held nor looked at the infant before leaving.

"Brynhild Paulsdotter Stortheth," whispered the woolen draped midwife, first to herself and then again to the baby. Storseth was a determiner for the family. If Brynhild ever moved from the Storseth farm, it would be dropped. They used the name so folk would know where they belonged.

The rent for their cottage was paid for in services primarily performed by the mother and children. Mother Berit was a stern, hardworking woman. However, If Brynhild had arrived several years earlier she would have been born to a very different mother.

"She sang while she worked," they said.

"A beautiful smile," they said.

"Always something kind to say," they said.

"Kept herself clean and walked tall."

This was not Brynhild's fate. She never met that woman. The deaths of her children had killed her mother's spirit. The Pedersson's first born son died in a fluke farming accident. Their second to fever. There were more toes on Brynhild's feet than times she recalled her mother showing her, or anyone else, affection. Smiles were few and far between. Whenever Mother was smiling, it made Brynhild wary. Evil tongues said this was why Pedersson was away working so frequently. Brynhild always felt like her father was on his way somewhere, even when he had just returned from wherever he had been. Weather permitting, Paul slept outside when he 'visited'. On what should have been a spring day in May 1864, her father left and never came back. Winter, however, had not left them. The sun was hidden behind heavy clouds and the air smelled of sulfur. Brynhild was twelve. That was the last anyone saw or heard from Pettersson. It was the last time Brynhild remembered hearing her mother speak as well.

There was a well, but it had run dry. Fortunately, the Storseth Farm was near a lake. Fetching water was Brynhild's favorite chore. She would fill her belly with water to the point of bursting and sometimes to the point of vomiting. She felt clean and refreshed afterwards. It also killed the hunger pangs. With all the work that needed to be done, plus the long walks to the village for school and church, free time was very rare. Playtime was even rarer. Tired time was in abundance. However, this did not bother Brynhild. She liked her routine chores and even the quietness of her home. She liked to watch the animals at Lake Selbu. And why wouldn't she? She had never experienced anything else. What's more, she had her high spirited, older sister Nellie to entertain her. The two shared a bed made of hay and an old horse blanket. Their daily toils made for sound sleep. Being exhausted let them rest lest the bedbugs keep them awake. Nellie was Brynhild's safe place and with her she felt loved. If Brynhild had a nightmare, Nellie soothed her. When she was sick, Nellie pampered her. Nellie, Nellie, Nellie. Her brothers had moved before her father left, leaving the sisters alone with their mute mother. One night, before sleep set in, as they lay warm and cozy back to back, Nellie rolled over and said, "You are too cute to be a Brynhild. You are too pretty for such a name. I will call you Belle. You are my little Belle."

“What’s a Belle?” asked Brynhild.

“You’re a Belle.”

“But what does it mean?”

“Don’t you know what Belle means? It means, you! It means pretty.”

Belle smiled as sleep overcame her.

Not long after this, Nellie was sent to live on the neighbouring farm to work as a milkmaid and a kitchen girl. Belle missed her terribly and treasured each moment she was able to spend with her sister. Nellie had learned milking easily, and she tried to teach her younger sister how to tease the milk out of the teats. But the beast frightened the young girl.

“Come on, Belle. It won’t hurt you. This is a sweet cow. Aren’t you sweet?”

The cow did not answer. Belle took a step back away from the creature. It was so skinny she could count its ribs.

“Why are you so scared of everything, Belle?”

“I’m not!”

“You are!”

“You are even scared when getting the eggs from the coop.”

“They’re mean.”

“They’re chickens, Belle. You are a chicken. A big stupid chicken.”

Belle fell silent. She did not like it when Nellie called her names but dared not protest in fear that Nellie might get seriously mad and not talk with her at all. She stood silent and waited. This would pass. It always did. Besides, Mother had killed the chickens when they stopped laying eggs. Hens can’t lay without food. They had made a porridge of the chicken feed when they had nothing else and ate the chickens a few days later.

“William fancies me, Belle.”

William was the youngest of the Storheth boys. Nellie continued milking.

“He looks at me that way.”

“What way?”

Nellie looked over her shoulder at Belle without pausing from her work.

“This cow has hardly any milk. Will this winter never end? You know, like, he fancies me. His eyes get all soft and mushy. And suddenly he is everywhere I am. He pretends it is an accident but I know what he is up to.”

She pulled the wooden pail from under the udders and looked at the contents. She handed the pail to Belle with a frown, “Drink this Belle. You’ve gotten so thin.”

Belle drank the milk being careful not till spill. It was sweet and delicious and warmed her in the cold barn.

“William is everywhere I go nowadays. It would not surprise me if he was here right now, somewhere in this barn.”

Belle looked around quickly nearly dropping the pail. If anyone saw her drinking the milk she would be scolded. Nellie laughed her sing-song laugh and said, “You are such a scaredy-cat!”

Time passes as time will. The cold hung on on but the evenings grew brighter all the same. The winter nights were interminable. In contrast, the summer nights were languid. These daynights were part of the many children’s finest moments. On one such night in late May, Nellie took Belle to the lake. They sat close on a fallen birch. Nellie’s hands were milkmaid soft but her grip was like iron. She tickled and pinched Belle to the point of tears and laughter.

“Stop! Pleeese!!”

“Never!”

“Please, Nellie, it hurts!”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“Stooooop!”

Nellie did and the two caught their breath.

“Belle?”

“Mmm?”

“You know all those stories about America?”

“Kind of, yes.”

“I want to go.”

Belle sat silent, tensed and waited.

“I want to go to America, Belle. I am tired of this. All this work. Work, work, work, work, work. And for what? What do we get? Eh? Nothing. Just more work. I want to be happy and free... and fat!”

“Aren’t you happy? You seem happy?”

“Only when I am with you, Belle.”

Belle forced a smile. They sat silently together enjoying the midnight sun. Belle stood up and kicked pebbles into the water. Something about doing this made her remember the sharks.

“Sharks!”

“Sharks?” laughed Nellie

A boy in her class said that his uncle had been eaten by sharks when crossing the ocean to the place they called America. The ship had hit something, drawn water, and sunk.

“The sharks are patient. They know they will be fed. They know that soon they will be feasting on babies, men, even old hags. They follow the ship and wait. Sharks are not picky. They are like the wolf, they eat everything but prefer the spring lamb. They want to eat you!”

Belle’s seriousness and words caused her sister to stare at her with a worried expression. When tears welled up in Belle’s eyes, Nellie knelt to embrace her younger sister.

“Oh Belle. My beautiful Belle. Those are just stories. That stupid boy does not know anything. There are no sharks.”

Belle let herself be soothed but did still believe in the shark tale.

“Listen, Belle.” Nellie pulled back a little and looked at Belle intently. William and I are taking a ship to New York next week. I wanted to tell you sooner but I was scared that you would be sad.”

Belle began to talk but Nellie shushed her.

“We are going, Belle, and when we get there, and we have started our new lives, I will send for you. It won’t take long. Well, It may take a little time, Belle, but you are going to America too.”

Belle pushed away her older sister, but she did not fight when Nellie forced her arms around her. She knew that nothing she could say or do would change her sister’s mind. Belle did not want to leave the only home she knew, despite all the things Nellie complained about. The hard work, the cold winters, being hungry and having to deal with their hollow mother. Yet, if Nellie wasn’t there, what reason would she want to stay?

“Promise? Do you promise I will join you in America? Please promise.”

“I swear on all that is holy. William and I are clear on that. He wants you to come too. As soon as we are settled, I will send for you. Imagine it Belle, America!”
And it was settled.

That week passed by too quickly for Belle. It was a grey day when William and Nellie said their goodbyes. In an unusual act of tenderness, Mother Berit hugged the young couple, one after the other. The sisters’ goodbyes were neither joyous nor grievous.

Belle trusted that Nellie would send for her soon and felt neither want nor need of crying. Nellie promised again that it would not be long till they were all in America together and she hugged and kissed Belle’s stiff body until William coughed nervously. Belle turned towards the house. She did not watch as William and Nellie made their way over the rise to the waiting horse and wagon that would take them to the coast. Once inside, Belle saw the one-roomed shack with new eyes. It was dark, dingy and depressing. Her mother came in and said nothing. Belle saw her mother anew. She looked like a walking corpse. America, thought Belle. I am going to America. She smiled

and pitied her mother. She would be alone here. Maybe one of her brothers would let her end her days in one of their homes? The woman barely ate. She would not cost very much to care for. America. Belle started to giggle and cry at the same time. Mother Berit looked at her and opened her mouth as if to speak. Her voice failed her.

She tried again and managed, “sufferings are lessons.” Belle ignored her and ran to the top of the hill. She could still see the wagon.

She shouted with all her might into the head wind, “America! America! See you in America!”

Much time past before they received word from Nellie. The waiting had been difficult for Belle. She had once seen her home as just that, a home. Now the farm and town were like a leper colony. She did her chores half-heartedly, stopped listening in school, Belle even told the children of the village that she felt sorry for them as she was going to where dreams came true. Belle had America Fever. It was like having homesickness in reverse.

One afternoon she entered the tattered shack and found William’s father sitting at the worn table with her mother. Mother had started coughing shortly after Nellie and William had left and did not leave her bed very often. The man held what appeared to be a letter in his hand. When he saw Belle he motioned to her. He smelled of tobacco and had leathery skin. The bushy eyebrows and mustache made it hard to see his features. He had leaky eyes.

He dabbed at them with his kerchief.

“Can you read, child?”

Belle stared at the man in silence and nodded. He handed her the letter. His gaze fell on Belle, “What’s your name, girl?”

Belle stayed silent.

The man gave out a heavy breath, “Read the letter. I only ask for your sister wrote, Dear Mother and Belle. Who is Belle?”

Not answering, Belle took the letter and stepped outside.

New York, America

Dear Mother and Belle

I take my pen to tell you we are arrived. It has been a long time already, and you have not received a letter from me. I wanted to send money, but I still do not have any because there is little work to be had. William worked today but I do not know if he will tomorrow. You should not think that the streets in America are paved with gold.

Belle, you must stay there. Do not come here. Guess why? I am with child. Can you believe it? If a girl, I will name her Belle. Understand, We can not send you anything for some time. Maybe a year. Maybe more. What if I get pregnant again? We may move to a place where more Norwegians live near a city called Chicago. They call it Swede Hollow but there are others that I can talk with and work for William. I do not worry for I know you like your life there, Belle. You can see beauty in everything, Belle. Stay there with Mother. She needs you.

Nellie

Belle stared at the letter in disbelief then walked back into the shack. Her mother was in bed again coughing. The man was putting on his jacket preparing to leave.

“It is Brynhild, is it not? There is no Belle. Listen Brynhild, come around the farm when you can and you can work. Your sister was a good worker and well..” the man looked around the unkept shack “... just come around. Look after your mother now. She does not look well. I left some bread on the table.”

He waited a moment for her to say something. Brynhild opened her mouth to speak. She wanted to say that she was Belle, not Brynhild. She wanted to say that she did not need his bread for she was going to America. She wanted to say that there was no need for her to work for him. She wanted to say that her sister was going to save her. The man slowly shut the door as he left.

Brynhild looked at her smiling mother.

They were alone.

Alone together in a deafening silence.

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