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# **The Bird Tribunal**

Written by Agnes Ravatn

Published by Orenda Books

Translated by Rosie Hedger

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# The Bird Tribunal

**Agnes Ravatn**

Translated by Rosie Hedger



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My pulse raced as I traipsed through the silent forest. The occasional screech of a bird, and, other than that, only naked, grey deciduous trees, spindly young saplings and the odd blue-green sprig of juniper in the muted April sunlight. Where the narrow path rounded a boulder, an overgrown alley of straight, white birch trees came into view, each with a knot of branches protruding from the top like the tangled beginnings of birds' nests. At the end of the alley of trees was a faded-white picket fence with a gate. Beyond the gate was the house, a small, old-fashioned wooden villa with a traditional slate roof.

Silently I closed the gate behind me and walked towards the house, making my way up the few steps to the door. I knocked, but nobody opened; my heart sank. I placed my bag on the porch steps and walked back down them, then followed the stone slabs that formed a pathway around the house.

At the front of the property, the landscape opened up. Violet mountains with a scattering of snow on their peaks lay across the fjord. Dense undergrowth surrounded the property on both sides.

He was standing at the bottom of the garden by a few slender trees, a long back in a dark-blue woollen jumper. He jumped when I called out to greet him, then turned around, lifted a hand and trudged in a pair of heavy boots across the yellow-grey ground towards me. I took a deep breath. The face and body of a man somewhere in his forties, a man who didn't look as if he were in the slightest need of nursing. I disguised my surprise with a smile and took a few steps towards him. He was dark and stocky. He didn't look me in the eye but instead stared straight past me as he offered me an outstretched hand.

Sigurd Bagge.

Allis Hagtorn, I said, lightly squeezing his large hand. Nothing in his expression suggested that he recognised me. Perhaps he was just a good actor.



Where are your bags?

Around the back.

The garden behind him was a grey winter tragedy of dead shrubbery, sodden straw and tangled rose thickets. When spring arrived, as it soon would, the garden would become a jungle. He caught my worried expression.

Yes. Lots to be taken care of.

I smiled, nodded.

The garden is my wife's domain. You can see why I need somebody to help out with it while she's away.

I followed him around the house. He picked up my bags, one in each hand, then stepped into the hallway.

He showed me up to my room, marching up the old staircase. It was simply furnished with a narrow bed, a chest of drawers and a desk. It smelled clean. The bed had been made up with floral sheets.

Nice room.

He turned without replying, bowing his head and stepping out of the room, then nodded towards my bathroom and walked down the stairs, without indicating what was through the other door on the landing.

I followed close behind him, out of the house and around the corner, across the garden and over to the small tool shed. The wooden door creaked as he opened it and pointed at the wall: rake, shovel, crowbar.

For the longer grass you'll need the scythe, if you know how to use it.

I nodded, swallowing.

You'll find most of what you need in here. Garden shears and the like, he continued. It would be good if you could neaten up the hedge. Tell me if there's anything else you need and I'll see that you get the money to buy it.

He didn't seem particularly bothered about making eye contact with me as he spoke. I was the help; it was important to establish a certain distance from the outset.



Were there many responses to your advertisement? I asked, the question slipping out.

He cast me a fleeting glance from under the dark hair that fell over his forehead.

Quite a few.

His arrogance seemed put on. But I kept my thoughts to myself: I was his property now – he could do as he liked.

We continued making our way around the house and down into the garden, past the berries and fruit trees by the dry stone wall. The air was crisp and bracing, infused with the scent of damp earth and dead grass. He straddled a low, wrought-iron gate and turned back to look at me.

Rusted shut, he said, maybe you can do something about it.

I stepped over the gate and followed him. Steep stone steps led from the corner of the garden down to the fjord. I counted the steps on my way down: one hundred exactly. We arrived at a small, stone jetty with a run-down boathouse and a boat landing to its right. The rock walls of the fjord formed a semicircle around us, shielding the jetty from view on both sides. It reminded me of where I had first learned to swim almost thirty years before, near my parents' friends' summer house on a family holiday.

It's so beautiful out here.

I'm thinking about knocking down the boathouse one of these days, he said, facing away from me. The breeze from the fjord ruffled his hair.

Do you have a boat?

No, he replied, curtly. Well. There's not much for you to be getting on with down here. But now you've seen it, in any case.

He turned around and started making his way back up the steps.

His bedroom was on the ground floor. He motioned towards the closed door, just past the kitchen and living room and presumably facing out onto the garden. He accessed his workroom through his bedroom, he told me.



I spend most of my time in there. You won't see much of me, and I'd like as few interruptions as possible.

I gave one deliberate nod, as if to demonstrate that I grasped the significance of his instructions.

I don't have a car, unfortunately, but there's a bicycle with saddlebags. The shop is two kilometres north, just along the main road. I'd like breakfast at eight o'clock: two hard-boiled eggs, pickled herring, two slices of dark rye bread and black coffee, he quickly listed.

The weekends are essentially yours to do as you please, but if you're around then you can serve breakfast an hour later than usual. At one o'clock I have a light lunch. Dinner is at six, followed by coffee and brandy.

After reeling off his requirements he disappeared into his workroom, and I was left in peace to acquaint myself with the kitchen. Most of the utensils were well used but still in good shape. I opened drawers and cupboard doors, trying to make as little noise as possible all the while. In the fridge I found the cod fillet that we were to share for dinner that evening.

The tablecloths lay folded in the bottom kitchen drawer, I picked one out and smoothed it over the kitchen table before setting two places as quietly as possible.

At six o'clock on the dot he emerged from his bedroom, pulled out a chair and took a seat at the head of the table. He waited. I placed the dish containing the fish in the middle of the table, then put the bowl of potatoes in front of him. I pulled out my chair and was about to sit down when he halted me with an abrupt wave.

No. You eat afterwards. He stared straight ahead, making no eye contact. My mistake. Perhaps I wasn't clear about that fact.

I felt a lump form in my throat, picked up my plate and quickly moved it over to the kitchen worktop without uttering a word, a tall, miserable wretch, my head bowed.

I filled the sink with water and washed the saucepan and spoons as he ate. He sat straight-backed, eating without a sound, never once



glancing up. Fumbling slightly, I set the coffee to brew, found the brandy in the glass cabinet behind him and, once he had put down his cutlery, cleared the table. I poured coffee in a cup and brandy in a delicate glass, then placed both on a tray and picked it up with shaking hands, clattering in his direction.

When he stood up afterwards, thanked me brusquely for the meal and returned to his workroom, I took my plate to the table and ate my own lukewarm portion, pouring the half-melted butter over the remaining potatoes. I finished the remainder of the washing up, wiped the table and worktop and headed up to my room. I unpacked all of my things and placed the clothes, socks and underwear in the chest of drawers, the books in a pile on the desk.

I made sure my mobile phone was switched off before putting it inside the desk drawer. I wouldn't be switching it on again any time soon, not unless there was an emergency. I sat there, perfectly still and silent, afraid to make a sound. I could hear nothing from the floor below my own. Eventually I made my way to the bathroom before turning in for the night.





The blade on the scythe must have been blunt. I cursed the drooping stalks of wet, yellow grass that seemed to escape their fate, regardless of how hard and fast I brandished the blade. It was overcast, the air humid. He had gone into his workroom straight after breakfast. On my way out I had caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I realised that I looked as if I were wearing a costume. I was dressed in an old pair of trousers I'd worn painting Mum and Dad's house one summer; that must have been fifteen years ago now. I'd found them in a cupboard at home just a few evenings ago when packing to come here, along with a paint-splattered shirt. My parents had bid me a relieved farewell as I had left to catch the bus the following morning.

I started to feel my efforts in my back. Sweat beneath my shirt. Tiny insects buzzing all around me, landing in my hair, on my forehead, itching. I was constantly having to stop what I was doing to take off my gloves and scratch my face. The long, golden wisps of straw almost seemed to mock me as they swayed gently in the light breeze. I continued to swing the blade with all my might.

I'd try the rake if I were you.

I spun around to find Bagge standing behind me. I must have looked deranged, spinning around red-faced and decked out in fifteen-year-old rags. My fringe was clinging to my face. Without thinking, I swept it aside with my hand and felt the earth from the gloves smear across my forehead.

The scythe's no good when the grass is wet.

No. I tried my best to muster a smile, resigned in the face of my own stupidity.

And don't forget lunch, he said, lightly tapping his wrist to remind me of the time. He turned around and walked away. I quickly glanced up at the house, the window to his workroom. He had been standing there, staring down at me in disbelief as I ignorantly forged ahead with



my attempts at gardening until he could take no more. Shame crept over me. I picked up the scythe and carried it to the tool shed, hanging it back in its place on the wall. I picked up the iron rake and returned to where I had been working, tearing it roughly over the ground until I had filled the wheelbarrow with lifeless, slippery stalks of grass.



The bicycle was just behind the tool shed, propped up against the wood stack, an old, lightweight, grey Peugeot with narrow road tyres and ram's horn handlebars.

The cycle to the shop only took ten minutes or so. It was a small grocery shop on a corner, just across the bridge, the kind of place that time has forgotten. A bell tinkled above me as I pushed the door open. There were no other customers. An elderly lady stationed behind the counter offered me the briefest of nods as I entered. There were shelves stocked with packaged food, napkins and candles, a small selection of bread and dairy products; there was a freezer cabinet, and fruit and vegetables with a set of scales for customers to weigh their own items.

The shopkeeper's eagle-eyed glare prickled at my back, her eyes following me as I wandered between the half-empty rows of shelves. There was no mistaking her critical air. She knew who I was. I felt a knot forming inside me, tightening, plucked a few items from the shelves and placed them in my basket, every move wooden, my only desire to put down my basket and leave. Eventually I approached her to pay, placing the contents of my basket on the counter without looking her in the eye. She entered the prices of each item into the register, her expression unreadable. Wrinkled hands and a wrinkled face, a small mouth that drooped downwards at both corners. It was just her way, I suddenly thought to myself, relief washing over me, it was nothing to do with me, it was just the way she was.

I raced home, flying along on the thin bicycle tyres, with the fjord to my left and the dark, glistening-wet rock wall to the right, my shopping packed away in the saddlebag by the back wheel, cars passing me on the road that connected the two neighbouring towns. I hurtled down the steep, driveway through the forest before stopping my bicycle by the wood stack, crunching over the gravel, opening the door into the hallway and making my way through the house.



Something wasn't right about this place; it was home to a married couple, yet the garden was a neglected mess, they owned no car and he locked himself in his workroom all day long. His wife away like this. I put the shopping away and started preparing dinner.



It felt impossible to move. My body was as stiff and leaden as the rusted wrought-iron gate. For a long while I lay and gazed up at the knots in the wooden ceiling planks before finally managing to roll myself across the mattress and down onto the floor. Ridiculous. When had I last done any kind of manual labour? Never, that's when; or at least not until deciding to rake grass and dig away at solid earth for hours on end.

I staggered without a smidgen of grace between the kitchen and the table as I served his breakfast. Shame coursed through me; I knew that my ungainly hobbling vexed him. As I went to pour his coffee I let out a groan; it was hard to tell which of us was more embarrassed.

I think I went at things a little too enthusiastically in the garden yesterday, I mumbled apologetically.

He cleared his throat and stared straight past me.

After his breakfast he returned to his room without a word. Drinking the bitter coffee in solitude after he had left the room, my good spirits wavered. I had been so proud of my efforts the previous day, clearing the area of dead grass, all the while hoping that he'd catch a glimpse of me in action from his window. My back was so, so stiff.

The following day was worse. The simple act of placing one foot in front of the other was an almost unbearable ordeal, and I avoided sitting down all day long because I knew that I'd never be able to get back up again. My passion for gardening had lasted all of one day. It was always the way with me. I launched myself at things with gusto yet never saw anything through, always started with the same unbridled enthusiasm before swiftly giving up. I possessed no sense of perseverance, no will to accomplish anything in full. It was precisely this aspect of my character – an absence of resolve, my lack of self-discipline – that I had hoped might be transformed. But here was the thing: it *required* willpower to *build* willpower. A more dependable person, that's what



I had to become, a woman in possession of a firmer character. If not now, then when? Out here I had what little I needed: solitude, long days at my disposal, a small number of predictable duties. I was liberated from the watchful gaze of others, free from their idle chit-chat, and I had a garden all of my own.



On the evening of my seventh day, I set down the tray carrying the coffee pot and cup and the glass of brandy, and was just about to step back when he held up a hand, stopping me in my tracks. It was Tuesday. I had only been preparing his dinner for a week and had already run out of ideas. Today: chicken and tarragon. Monday: fishcakes and onions. Sunday: roast veal. Saturday: roast beef. Friday: fried fillet of trout with cucumber salad. Thursday: smoked sausages in a white sauce. Wednesday: poached cod.

Allis.

It was the first time I had heard him say my name.

Yes?

Fetch an extra cup and a glass and come and take a seat.

I did as he asked. He poured coffee into the delicate porcelain cup with a steady hand.

You've been here for a week now, he said, staring down at the edge of the table.

I said nothing.

Are you happy here? He looked up.

Yes.

Would you consider staying a while longer?

Absolutely. Thank you.

You'll be paid after the first month. Does that suit you?

I nodded.

Do you have any questions?

I hesitated for a moment.

Do you have any idea how long there will be a position for me here?

I'll need help in the house and garden for as long as my wife is away. All through spring and summer, to begin with.

That works for me.



He poured brandy into the tiny glass, then lifted his own in my direction.

Then we should raise a glass.

I lifted my own, and without thinking I carefully touched my glass against his with an all-but-silent clink. We sat in silence. He exhibited no desire for conversation after that point, his forehead creased beneath his dark hair. I drank my coffee and the contents of my glass, and, before he finished his own, I left the table and made a start on the washing up. I heard him push his chair back and disappear into his room as I rinsed the dishes, cold in the knowledge that it was done, I would remain here, yet warm for the very same reason. I had a place to stay, no need to go back. I could live out here in peace.





After a few days of sunshine, the garden was beginning to dry out. I had finally honed my skills with the scythe, too, and now left an aftermath of spiky clumps of straw in my wake. I had started to perspire in the cool air. The pale afternoon light dwindled as the sun disappeared behind the mountains. My back aching, I gazed around me. Spring flowers could be seen here and there. One day there had been a brief flurry of snow, while the next a butterfly had unexpectedly landed nearby. There was no order to things. I dragged the rake through the hay and weeds, clearing the area and wheeling everything to the end of the garden in the wheelbarrow. Dark, compacted earth had become visible beneath the weeds: old flower beds. I hadn't yet touched them, but it was possible that bulbs and seeds and life might be lurking beneath the surface, soon to emerge. Occasionally I would turn around and look up at the house as I worked, and would catch a glimpse of Bagge at the window, always in motion, so I was never able to tell if he had been watching me or simply passing by.

I returned the tools to the shed, banged the work boots against the wall beneath the veranda to remove the clumps of earth stuck to the soles and made my way upstairs to my bathroom. I filled the tub and slipped into the water, scrubbing myself clean of dirt and earth, uplifted by the new possibilities of my existence. Good, hard work beneath an open sky, the feeling it left in my body, the act of drawing fresh air deep into my lungs. I had never thought change was possible. Not of one's own doing, anyway. Never. The idea that I could transform myself had been nothing more than a notion I occasionally turned to for comfort but then found depressing when I acknowledged I didn't really believe in it. But now this. Committing myself to this: to the work in the garden. Clearing space, making things grow. There was salvation to be found, I could create a sense of self, mould a congruous identity in which none of the old parts of me could be found. I could



make myself pure and free from guilt, a virtuous heart. I pulled the plug and watched as the water was drawn down into the plughole. I rinsed my body and hair with the shower head, then stepped out of the bathtub. I heard Bagge's footsteps on the floor downstairs – could he be pure? – then dried myself off, dressed and entered my room.

From my window I watched him head down through the garden, on inspection duty, perhaps, the heavy soles of his boots crunching over the dry tufts of straw, the sight of his broad back as he marched past the fruit trees and carried on, disappearing down the steps to the jetty. I felt a flutter in my stomach. Men, I thought, such beautiful creatures. Some of them, at least. Their voices, their backs. Quickly I left my room and tried the door across the hall. It was locked. I stopped at the top of the stairs and considered running down, hurriedly snooping around; the thought made my heart pound within my chest. I let it be.



His bathroom was to the right, just off the hallway: an old-fashioned tiled floor, an ordinary toilet and a simple shower concealed by a curtain. My instructions were to clean the room and mop the floor once a week. I could decide for myself which day I preferred to do it, he had told me, but had added that he liked to start the weekend with the scent of soap in the house.

As I filled the bucket with water in the kitchen, I saw him walk through the garden. He was tall and broad-shouldered and bowed his head automatically as he walked in and out of rooms. Outside he stood erect in his heavy hiking boots and walked at a slow pace, always moving silently in spite of his size. For no apparent reason as I watched him move through the garden in the way he did, I was reminded of the Norse god Balder. I liked to gaze at him as he walked away, to observe him from afar. He always wore button-up shirts, and when it grew cool in the evenings he would pull on a coarse, dark-blue woollen jumper. He was entirely uninterested in me, uninterested in everything. Everything besides whatever it was that was going on in his workroom. I tried to rein in my curiosity, to mind my own business, to concentrate on what I was doing in the garden that I had already begun to think of as my own, to focus on the task of meal-planning. In the evenings I wrote lists of what I had, what I needed, what I could cook and how I might best make use of the leftovers. It was the kind of task to which I could anchor the stream of thoughts that otherwise drifted so easily to darker places.

The door to the bathroom cabinet clicked softly. Inside were pain-killers, plasters, mosquito repellent, a beard trimmer and a common brand of deodorant. It surprised me. I had almost taken for granted that he must be on some kind of medication or other. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I wiped it down. It was clear that the person staring back at me had just done something that she knew



was irrational; it was a look that I had seen a hundred times before. That's quite enough of that, I thought; be pure.