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Until Thy Wrath Be Past

Written by Asa Larsson

Translated from the Swedish by Laurie Thompson

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Åsa Larsson

UNTIL THY
WRATH BE PAST

*Translated from the Swedish by
Laurie Thompson*



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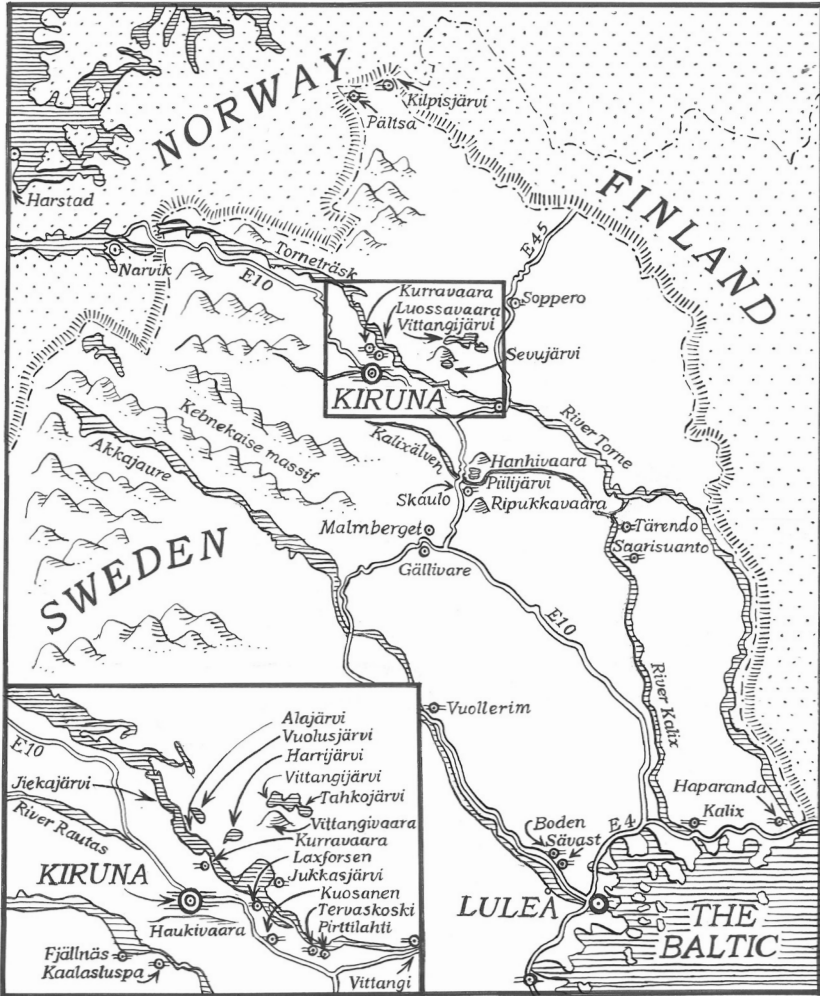
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product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events
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O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave,
that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past,
that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me!
If a man die, shall he live again?
All the days of my appointed time will I wait,
till my change come.

Thou shalt call,
and I will answer thee:
thou wilt have a desire to the work of thy hands.
For now thou numberest my steps:
dost thou not watch over my sin?
My transgression is sealed up in a bag,
and thou sewest up mine iniquity.

And surely the mountain falling cometh to nought,
and the rock is moved out of his place.
The waters wear the stones:
thou washest away the things which grow out of the dust of the earth;
and thou destroyest the hope of man.

Thou prevailest for ever against him, and he passeth:
thou changest his countenance and sendest him away.
His sons come to honour, and he knoweth it not;
and they are brought low, but he perceiveth it not of them.
But his flesh upon him shall have pain,
and his soul within him shall mourn.

I remember how we died. I remember, and I know. That's the way it is now. I know about certain things even though I wasn't actually present when they happened. But I don't know everything. Far from it. There are no rules. Take people, for instance. Sometimes they are open rooms that I can walk into. Sometimes they are closed. Time doesn't exist. It's as if it's been whisked into nothingness.

Winter came without snow. The rivers and lakes were frozen as early as September, but still the snow didn't come.

It was October 9. The air was cold. The sky very blue. One of those days you'd like to pour into a glass and drink.

I was seventeen. If I were still alive, I'd be eighteen now. Simon was nearly nineteen. He let me drive even though I didn't have a licence. The forest track was full of potholes. I liked driving. Laughed at every bump. Sand and gravel clattered against the chassis.

"Sorry, Bettan," Simon said to the car, stroking the cover of the glovebox.

We had no idea that we were going to die. That I would be screaming, my mouth full of water. That we only had five hours left.

The track petered out at Sevujärvi. We unpacked the car. I kept stopping to look round. Everything was divinely beautiful. I lifted my arms towards the sky, screwed up my eyes to look at the sun, a burning white sphere, watched a wisp of cloud scudding along

high above us. The mountains embodied permanence and times immemorial.

“What are you doing?” Simon said.

I was still gazing at the sky, arms raised, when I said, “Nearly all religions have something like this. Looking up, reaching up with your hands. I understand why. It makes you feel good. Try it.”

I took a deep breath, then let the air out to form a big white cloud.

Simon smiled and shook his head. Heaved his weighty rucksack up onto a rock and wriggled into the harness. He looked at me.

Oh, I remember how he looked at me. As if he couldn't believe his luck. And it's true. I wasn't just any old bit of skirt.

He liked to explore me. Count all my birthmarks. Or tap his fingernail on my teeth as I smiled, ticking off all the peaks of the Kebnekaise massif: “South Peak, North Peak, Dragon's Back, Kebnepakte, Kaskasapakte, Kaskasatjåkko, Tuolpagorni.”

“Upper right lateral incisor – signs of decay; upper right central – sound; upper left central – distal filling,” I'd reply.

The rucksacks containing our diving equipment weighed a ton.

We walked up to Lake Vittangjärvi. It took us three and a half hours. We urged each other on, noticing how the frozen ground made walking easier. We sweated a lot, stopped occasionally to have some water, and once to drink coffee from our thermos flask and eat a couple of sandwiches.

Frozen puddles and frostbitten moss crackled beneath our feet.

Alanen Vittangivaara loomed on our left.

“There's an old Sami sacrificial site up there,” Simon said, pointing. “Uhrilaki.”

That was a side of him I loved. He knew about that sort of thing.

We finally got there. Placing our rucksacks carefully on the

slope, we stood in silence for a while, gazing out over the lake. The ice resembled a thick black pane of glass over the water. Trapped bubbles traced patterns like broken pearl necklaces. The cracks resembled crumpled tissue paper.

Frost had nipped at every blade of grass, every twig, making them brittle and crispy white. Sprays of lingonberry and stunted juniper bushes were a dull shade of wintry green. Dwarf birches and blueberry sprigs had been squeezed into shades of blood and violet. And everything was coated with rime. An aura of ice.

It was uncannily quiet.

Simon became withdrawn and thoughtful, as he usually did. He's the type who can tell time to stand still. Or was. He was that kind of person.

But I've never been able to keep quiet for long. I just had to start shouting. All that beauty – it was enough to make you burst.

I ran out onto the ice. As fast as I could without slipping. Then I stood with my legs wide apart and slid a long, long way.

“You have a go!” I shouted to Simon.

He smiled and shook his head.

That was something he'd learnt to do in the village where he'd grown up. How to shake his head. They're good at that in Piilijärvi.

“No way,” he shouted back. “Someone has to be here to repair your legs when you've broken them.”

“Cowardly cowardly custard!” I yelled as I ran and slid again.

Then I lay down and gazed up at the sky for a while. Stroked the ice affectionately.

Somewhere down below there was an aeroplane. And nobody knew anything about it, apart from us. Or so we thought.

Standing up, I caught Simon's gaze.

You and me, his eyes said.

You and me, my eyes said.

Simon collected some dry juniper twigs and birch bark. So that we could start a fire and have something to eat before we made our dive. To give us the strength to keep going.

We grilled some smoked sausages on skewers. I didn't have the patience to do it properly – mine were burnt black on the outside and raw inside. Hungry jays gathered in the trees around us.

“People used to eat them,” I said, nodding at the birds. “Anni's told me about it. She and her cousins used to hang a length of string between the trees and thread pieces of bread onto it. The birds would land on the string, but it was so thin that they couldn't stay upright and found themselves hanging upside down. Then all you had to do was pick them off. Like picking apples. We ought to try it – have we got any string?”

“Wouldn't you rather have a piece of sausage?”

One of Simon's typically marvellous sardonic comments. And no hint of a smile to show that he was joking.

I gave him a thump on the chest.

“Idiot! I didn't mean that we should eat them. I just wanted to see if it worked.”

“No. We ought to get going. Before it gets dark.”

Instantly I became serious.

Simon gathered some more dry twigs and bark. And he found a hollow birch log – they burn well. He raked some ash over the glowing embers. As he said, with a bit of luck we would be able to blow the fire back to life after the dive. It would be good to be able to warm ourselves quickly when we emerged from the freezing water.

We carried our cylinders, regulators, masks, snorkels, fins and black army-surplus diving suits out onto the ice.

Simon led the way with the G.P.S.

In August we had brought the kayak, towing it through water whenever possible, along the River Vittangi as far as Lake Tahko. Then we'd paddled to Vittangijärvi. We'd plumbed the depths of various parts of the lake, and, once we finally found the right place, Simon had keyed it into the G.P.S. under the heading *Wilma*.

But during the summer there were holidaymakers staying in the old farmhouse on the lake's western shore.

"You can bet your life they're all lined up with their binoculars," I'd said, squinting across. "Wondering what the hell we're up to. If we dive now, everyone for kilometres around will know about it in no time."

So once we'd finished, we'd paddled over to the western shore, beached the kayak and strolled up to the old farmhouse, where we'd been invited in for coffee. I went on about how we were getting paid a pittance by the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute for charting the depth of the lake. Something to do with climate change, I reckoned.

"As soon as they close down the holiday cottages for the winter," I said to Simon as we struggled home with the kayak, "we'll be able to use their boat as well."

But then the ice came, and we had to wait until it was thick enough to bear our weight. We could hardly believe our luck when it didn't snow – we'd be able to see through the ice. A metre or so at least. But of course we'd be diving down much deeper than that.

Simon sawed through the ice. He started by hacking a hole with an axe – the ice was still thin enough to do that – and then he used a hand saw. A chainsaw would have been too heavy to carry, and

besides, it would have created a hell of a noise: the last thing we wanted was to attract attention. What we were doing suggested a book title to me: *Wilma, Simon and the Secret of the Aeroplane*.

While Simon was sawing through the ice, I nailed some lengths of wood together to form a cross we would place over the hole after attaching a safety line to it.

Stripping down to our thermal underwear, we pulled on our diving suits. Then we sat down at the edge of the ice hole.

“Go right down to 4 metres,” Simon said. “The worst that can happen is that we lose our air supply if the regulators freeze up. The start is the riskiest bit, just beneath the surface.”

“O.K.”

“We might also run into trouble lower down. You can’t trust mountain lakes. There could be an inlet somewhere, causing currents. The temperature could be below zero. The riskiest place is just beneath the surface, though. So: down you go. No hanging about.”

“O.K.”

I didn’t want to listen. I wanted to get down there. Right away.

Simon wasn’t an expert on the technical side of diving, but he’d read up on it. In magazines and on the Internet. He continued his unhurried preparations.

“Two tugs on the line means ‘come up’.”

“Right.”

“Maybe we’ll find the wreck straight away, but probably not. Let’s get down there and take it as it comes.”

“O.K., O.K.”

And so we dive.

Simon goes in after me. The cold water is like a horse kicking him

in the face. He places the wooden cross with the safety line attached to it over the hole in the ice.

He checks the dive computer during our descent. Two metres. As bright as day. The ice above us acts as a window, letting the sunlight in. When we were standing up there the ice looked black. From underneath it is light blue. Twelve metres. Murky. Colours disappear. Fifteen metres. Darkness. Simon is probably wondering how I'm feeling. But he knows I'm a tough customer. Seventeen metres.

We head straight for the wreck. Land on top of it.

I don't know what I'd been expecting, but not this. Not that it would be so easy. I can feel laughter bubbling up inside me, but it can't come out just now. I'm looking forward to hearing Simon's comments when we're back by the fire getting warm. He's always so calm, but the words will come tumbling out after this.

It feels as if the plane has been lying down there waiting for us. But we'd sounded the depth; we'd already done the searching. We knew where it ought to be.

Even so, when I see it at the bottom in the greeny-black darkness, it seems so unreal. It's much bigger than I'd imagined it would be. Simon shines his torch on me. I realize that he wants to see my reaction. The happy expression on my face. But of course, he can't read my face behind the oxygen mask.

He moves his outstretched hand up and down. Remain calm, he means. I notice how heavily I'm breathing. I need to collect myself if the air is going to last.

There might be enough for twenty minutes. We'll be very cold by then as well. We shine our torches on the plane, the beams of light working their way over the mud-covered fuselage. I try to make out what model it is. A Dornier, perhaps? We swim over the hull, wiping

away mud and slime with our hands. No, the metal is corrugated. It's a Junkers.

Following the wing, we come to the engine. It feels a bit odd, somehow. Something isn't right, something seems . . . We swim back. I'm close behind Simon, holding on to the safety line. He finds the landing gear. On top of the wing.

Facing me, he turns his outstretched hand through 180 degrees. I understand: the plane is upside down. That's why it looks so odd. It must have flipped over when it hit the water. Turned a somersault, then headed down into the depths, its heavy nose first. But settling on its back.

If that's how it happened, I expect they all died instantly.

So how can we get in?

After searching for a while, we find the side door just behind the wing. But it's impossible to open it. And the side windows are too small to wriggle through.

We swim to the nose. There used to be an engine there, but it's gone. It probably happened just as I suspected. The nose hit the water first. The engine broke off. Then the fuselage sank to the bottom of the lake. The cockpit windows are shattered. It's a bit difficult to get through them because the plane is upside down. But we'll manage somehow.

Simon shines his torch inside. Somewhere in there the remains of the crew are floating around. I steel myself for the sight of what is left of the pilot. But we can't see anything.

No doubt Simon is regretting not having bought a reel line, like I said he should. But we'll be O.K. There's nowhere to fasten the safety line, but I hold on to it, and we both check that it's attached securely to his weight belt.

He shines his torch on his hand. Points at me. Then points

straight down. That means I should stay where I am. Then he holds up the fingers of one hand twice. Ten minutes.

I shine my torch at my own hand and give him the thumbs up. Then I blow him a kiss from the regulator.

He slides his arms in through what was the window, grabs hold of the back of one of the seats and pulls himself gently into the plane.

He must move carefully now.

So as to stir up as little mud as possible.

I watch Simon disappear into the plane. Then I check my watch. Ten minutes, he'd signalled.

Thoughts drift into my mind, but I push them away when they try to take shape and distract my attention. For instance, what happens in an old wreck that has been lying at the bottom of a lake for more than sixty years when someone swims inside it and suddenly starts moving the water around? Just breathing out could be enough to break something loose. Something might fall on top of Simon. He might become trapped. Under something heavy. What if that were to happen, and I couldn't pull him free? If I run out of air, should I save myself and swim away? Or die with him in the darkness?

No, no. I mustn't think like that. This will be easy. A piece of cake. And then it will be my turn – I can't wait!

I shine my torch around a bit, but the beam doesn't penetrate very far. Besides, we've stirred up a lot of mud, and visibility has become poor. It's hard to imagine that just up there, not far away at all, a mere few metres, the sun is shining on a sheet of sparkling ice.

★

Then I realize that the ascent line running between me and the wooden cross lying over the hole in the ice is floating slack in my hand.

I pull at it, to make it tighter. But it doesn't tighten. I haul it in. One metre, two metres.

Three.

Has it come loose? But we tied it so securely.

I haul away at it more and more quickly. Suddenly I have the other end in my hand. I look at it. Stare at it.

My God, I must get up there and refasten it. When Simon emerges from the plane, we won't have time to swim around under the ice, looking for the hole.

I let a little air into my drysuit so that I move slowly upwards. Up out of the darkness, through the gloom: it's getting lighter. I'm holding the line in my hand.

I'm looking for the hole, a source of light through the ice, but I can't see it.

Instead I see a shadow. A black rectangle.

There's something covering the hole. I swim over to it. The wooden cross is no longer there. Instead there's a door lying over the hole. It's green. Made of simple planks with a slat running diagonally across them. A door from a shed, or a barn.

For a moment I think it's been lying around and the wind has blown it across the hole. I barely have time to register the thought before I realize how wrong it is. It's a sunny day up there, not a breath of wind. If there's a door lying across the hole in the ice it's because someone's put it there. What kind of joker would do that?

I try to push the door to one side, using both hands. I've dropped the line and the torch; they've both sunk slowly to the bottom of the lake. I can't shift the door. My heavy breathing echoes like thunder in my ears as I tug at the door in vain. It dawns on me that the joker is standing on top of it. Someone is standing on the door.

Swimming away from the door, I take out my diving knife. Start hacking a hole in the ice. It's hard. The water makes it difficult to move my hand quickly enough. There's no strength in my thrusts. Twisting the knife, I stab at the ice. At last I break through. It's easier now. I rotate the knife round the hole, scraping away at the sides. It's getting bigger.

Simon swims through the wreck as carefully as he can. He has passed the radio operator's seat behind the cockpit and continued into the cabin. He thinks he feels a slight tug on the line. He wonders if it is Wilma signalling to him. But he had said two tugs to come up. What if her airline is blocked? Worried now, he decides to swim out of the wreck. It is impossible to see anything in any case. The air and his own movements have stirred up so much mud that if he holds out his arm and shines his torch on it, he cannot even see his hand. It is like swimming through green soup. They might as well go back up.

He pulls at the line tied to his weight belt so it will tighten and allow him to follow it out. But it does not tighten. He hauls in more and more of the line, metre after metre. Eventually he is holding the end of the line in his hand. Wilma is supposed to be holding on to it. And the end is supposed to be fastened to the wooden cross over the hole in the ice.

Fear hits Simon's solar plexus like a snakebite. No line to follow. How is he going to find his way back to the cockpit window? He can't see a bloody thing. How is he going to get out?

He swims until he bumps into a wall. Groping around, he then starts swimming in the opposite direction, no longer knowing which is backwards, forwards, sideways.

He bumps into something that is not fastened down. Something that floats off to one side. He shines his torch. Sees nothing. Gets it into his head that it is a body. Flounders around. Swims away. Quickly, quickly. Soon he will be swimming through masses of limbs floating about. Arms and legs that have come away from bodies. He must try to calm down, but where is he? How long has he been down here? How much longer will his air last?

He has no concept of up or down, but does not realize this. Fumbles for one of the seats – if he can grab onto one, he will be able to work his way forward through the passenger cabin, but he is groping around on the ceiling, so he does not find a seat.

He swims back and forth in an aimless panic. Up and down. He cannot see a thing. Nothing at all. The line attached to his belt keeps catching, on cargo hooks on the floor, on a seat that has been wrenched from its moorings, on a loose safety belt. Everywhere. Then he begins swimming into the line. Gets tangled up in it. It is all over the inside of the plane like a spider's web. He cannot find his way out. He dies in there.

I've managed to hack a hole in the ice with my diving knife. I'm battling to make it bigger. Stabbing away. Working the knife round the edge. When it's as big as my hand, I check the pressure metre. Twenty bars left.

I mustn't breathe so rapidly. I must calm down. But I can't get out. I'm trapped under the ice.

I stick my hand up through the hole. I do it without thinking. My hand reaches out for help of its own accord.

Someone up there grips my hand firmly. At first I'm relieved to know that someone is helping me. That someone is going to pull me out of the water. Save me.

Then whoever it is really does start pulling on my hand. Bending it backwards and forwards. And then it dawns on me that I'm a prisoner. I'm not going anywhere. I try to jerk my hand free, but only succeed in banging my face against the ice. A pink veil spreads across the light blue.

Eventually I realize what's happening: I'm bleeding.

The person up there changes his grip. Clasps hold of me as if we were shaking hands.

I press my knees against the ice. My trapped hand between my legs. And then I push away. I'm free. My hand slides out of my diving glove. Cold water. Cold hand. Ouch!

I swim away under the ice. Away. Away from whoever it was.

Now I'm beneath the green door again. I thump it hard. Hammer on it. Scratch at it.

There must be another way up. A place where the ice is thinner. Where I can break through it. I swim off again.

But he runs after me. Or is it a he? I can see the person through the ice. Blurred. From underneath. Above me the whole time. Between breaths, when the air I'm exhaling isn't thundering in my ears, I can hear footsteps on the ice.

I can only see whoever it is for brief moments. The air I'm breathing out has nowhere to go. It forms a big, flat bubble like a mirror beneath the ice. I can see myself in it. Distorted. Like in the hall of

mirrors at a fairground. Changing all the time. When I breathe in, I can see the person on the ice above me; when I breathe out, I can see myself.

Then the regulator freezes. Air comes spurting out of my mouth-piece. I stop swimming. I have to devote all my strength to trying to breathe. A few minutes later the cylinder is empty.

Then it's over. My lungs heave and heave. I fight to the bitter end. Mustn't inhale water. I'm about to burst.

My arms are flailing. Banging in vain against the ice. The last thing I do in this life is tear off my regulator and my mask. Then I die. There's no air now between me and the ice. No reflection of me. My eyes are open in the water. Now I can see the person up there.

A face pressing against the ice, looking at me. But what I see doesn't register. My consciousness ebbs away like a tidal wave.