

One Small Saga

BOBBIE LOUISE HAWKINS :: A NOVELLA

Introduction by Laird Hunt & Eleni Sikelianos

Interview with the author by Barbara Henning

Including the short story “En Route”

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Jørn the beautiful boy, eight years old, his yellow hair and eyebrows a line straight across his face, red-cheeked and vigorous, tramps the coastline in all weather. He stands, eyes blue as birds flown to the horizon to return in their own good time. His boots are made of heavy black rubber and mash their print into the sand in his wake. He returns in the late winter afternoon back along his tracks to his own garden's gate. Over his head bare branches twine and mesh in a lacework canopy. The last of the pearly twilight seeps coldly through, and the garden, darkening at the corners, grows larger. The sitting room window flickers with warm color through the crooked fruit trees. A scraggy skeleton of lilac scratches his coat as he passes to go through the kitchen door.

The kitchen air is steamy and flavored. Armandine, her face shiny, moves among the clutter of cutlery, crockery, rag-ends of trimmed fat. She smiles at him and wishes him good evening. A light sweat of steam covers the boy's face as he supports himself, hand on the wet wall, and fights his boots off. In the narrow pantry window at his side all the panes of glass have run stripes of small rivers from the top to the bottom.

The house is in threefold celebration: Christmas is near; the family is together; Axel has brought home a bride. They are all in the sitting room. Their faces are lighted by candles among pine boughs on the room's central table. It is the fire that lights the walls around them and shows the old-fashioned room more clearly with its pictures and heavy, comfortable furnishings. They turn to welcome him in, their most recent seafarer. He circles the room formally, shaking hands with each of them and bobbing his head.

Fru Raasloff is the room's coquette: charming, demanding, her gestures youthful. Her daughters are her tragedy. Birte

sits in a chair, large and heavy, with a jolly maliciousness. Gena, thin and quince-mouthed, soon to be divorced, sits on the curving loveseat. They are the traditional “two ugly sisters.” They have never learned to “enter” a room. “Ah,” Fru Raasloff will say in the next breath after such a sad admission, “but my *sons* are delightful!” Axel and Jørn were accustomed to their mother’s unqualified approval.

Fru Raasloff is attempting English for her new daughter-in-law.

She names something, adds a verb. It makes no sense. Her hands define graceful shapes in the air. There is the feel, the broken rhythm of a motor that won’t catch. At last, making a face of mock despair, she speaks a whirl of Danish, ends with a peremptory circle of her right hand. “Tell her,” she says in English, and relaxes back, smiling and nodding, while Birte, smiling, translates for the bride.

I am attentive. I care very much that I should be liked. I smile at anyone who looks at me. The smallest politeness enlarges in my grateful consideration. I say Thank you when I mean to say Good evening.

Birte’s exposition translates a graceful Danish to an abrupt English.

“She says how could your mother have let you go so far away with a man you only knew for two weeks?”

It could have been said many ways. Fru Raasloff has perhaps said it differently. This is the way Birte will always say it.

Muddled by my new sister-in-law’s meanness, I answer that my mother trusted my judgment.

“He looks to be trustworthy,” Axel’s father says in English. They all look at Axel. Pale blue eyes. Cheerful smile. They all believe that a mother might trust him.

“Love will find a way,” Axel’s father adds.

Fru Raasloff smiles fondly at her son and at his young wife.
The moment is past.

It seems that I am a novelty. So young a bride to not be pregnant.

In Denmark, they tell me, no one marries younger than twenty-five without special permission from the King.

He always grants permission when asked.

Everyone knows what the king's permission means.

Sour-faced Gena's marriage and first child came under Royal auspices.

Eight years of marriage and a second child have not redeemed Gena's professor/husband in the eyes of her family.

"So foolish! to get a girl pregnant!"

And now they are proven right.

Gena's domestic collapse has provided us with a house of our own, a honeymoon cottage.

We bicycle the two miles between the houses.

We eat and bathe and visit with the family in the family home.

We sleep and wake and have some privacy in the limbo of this house that will be disposed of according to the divorce decree.

Yellow-stuccoed, two stories high, it sits off on its own road, as bleak in this Danish winter as the regulated hatred it has held.

There have been no passionate arguments in these rooms. They reek of dry-eyed endurance.

Only the study, exorcised by walls of books, can be sat in. I sit, hugging my chest, overheating the round-bellied stove with blocks of pressed peat, watching the cast-iron fire to a glow.

On the other side of the wall, unseen, the paint blisters away, flaking off the wall in protest.

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“Jørn says that you let him come into the bathroom when you were naked in the tub.”

It is Gena who speaks.

The smell is food and waxed furniture.

We are all at lunch.

The dining table is covered by a heavy linen cloth.

Between the table and the kitchen Armandine moves in a clean white apron.

Armandine's apron is starched so stiff that it will crack like thin white stone and shatter but it will never wrinkle.

Foolish!

Foolish and mistaken.

Axel has told me that they all swim naked in the summer and I have taken that for an ease with nakedness. Now it seems in this instant of all their faces turned toward me that the ocean allows nakedness and the bathtub is taboo.

“He knocked to say he had left something. I said he could get it.”

Gena is smiling a tight lipped smile. Another pin put in.

“She thinks I'm a fool,” I think.

I have never darned a sock.

“What do you do when socks have holes in them?”

“We throw them away.”

Now they must question the wife Axel has brought home, an American wife after all, who has never darned a sock.

“They are cheap. We buy new ones.”

“She means cotton,” Axel says, “and nylon. It is warmer there.”

After dinner Fru Raasloff brings out her basket of wools,

places it between us and begins to teach me. I'm reassured and cozy in the rightness of it.

I mean to have a different life.

I also feel it is a proper bride's occupation, learning to darn socks.

The family eases back.

There is a party where the bride wears a bride's dress, white and sheer chiffon with long sleeves falling in soft folds to a narrow band at the wrists. Draping folds over the breast catch to a wider band at the waist. A full skirt falls in soft pleats to the floor.

She wears a small pin of blood-red garnets, a gift from Fru Raasloff.

"I have worn it many years," Fru Raasloff tells her. And as if they have a secret, "My daughters... it would not suit them. It will suit you exactly."

The bride wears the pin on a thin velvet ribbon around her neck.

The two ugly sisters, when she is near, cannot keep their hateful eyes off the red garnets on the black ribbon on the white skin.

Axel wears a dark blue suit, a white shirt, a red bow-tie, a satisfied expression.

He raises his glass to toast his young wife across the table.

Before-dinner drinks, beer and schnapps on the table, wine, champagne, brandy, liqueurs: it is a traditional and acceptable drunken celebration with speeches and toasts. One fattish man serves as the classic obscene guest. He no sooner sits than he lurches again to his feet to make another toast in Danish. The table roars. He is taken for wonderful. The groom's first wife is there with her fiancé and takes the look of a martyr when her husband-to-be reaches over and grabs at her breast. He is glaring at Axel. Fru Raasloff speaks down the table to a young man, the

son of her first husband by his second wife: "On your father's deathbed," she tells him, "he said that I was the only woman he ever really loved."

The fat guest rises with his latest toast.

Fru Raasloff rises also.

At her back her chair tilts and crashes to the floor.

Carrying her wineglass, carried by her emotion, Fru Raasloff comes around the table, walks the length of the table smiling and in a dream. The bride rises, to be caught in a tearful embrace.

"Welcome to our family!" Fru Raasloff cries out in English.

Her champagne pours down the younger woman's back.

For dessert there are thin pastry cornucopias filled and spilling sweet red berries. There is cream whipped as thick as butter in a large crystal bowl and, to lift it out, a heavily patterned silver spoon.

London

The night-boat from Denmark to England gleamed: polished brass and waxed wood; dark red carpeting underfoot; excellent food.

“How well you speak the language,” Axel was told by an Englishman.

“I’m Danish,” he replied, glowing; a compounded compliment.

From the night-boat to the boat-train and Liverpool Street Station.

Slimed cement, mucky with train-station dirt; thin slop squished in bubbles around Axel’s sponge-rubber soles. We walked along the train to reach the front and be off the tracks.

Overhead, a high sloped roof, grimed-over windows let through a filtered gray light in angled widening bars, to the interior far below.

War sucks color out.

Gray faces. Gray hats. Gray mouths. Eyes gone grim.

War and rationing. A deep harsh winter. Outside the sky was gray, darkened by the drizzling slant of rain. The faces we passed were a fish-white pallor in the air's thin water.

It would be lovely to have style superior to every occasion. We had no such hope. Oddments of luggage and overstuffed paper bags. Three dozen eggs from Denmark and a huge chunk of cheese. We moved down the platform and through the station and into the street like a history of immigrants. I hung back against a wall, my fingers cramped and fixed through strings that held parcels of paper that couldn't be put on the wet sidewalk.

Axel was one more pale stranger moving back and forth along the curbing, ghostly, his right arm raised in a dancer's curve over his head. The isolated and predictable dance of a man who hails a cab in the rain.

War is a monstrous mouth.

London had great bites eaten away, whole city blocks gone in a bite. The rubble was cleared away. Wallpaper and fireplaces floated up the sides of buildings that still stood.

Doors opened into the third floor, the fifth floor, as many floors as there were. No more fires. No more rooms on this side to be entered into. All those stories of happy-home got stopped.

Axel's act of passion had cost him Africa, temporarily. His courtship and honeymoon had caused him to so overstay his six-months' leave that someone else had been sent in his place. Now he had to stay and work in London for at least a year, possibly two.

Mr. Collins invited us to dinner.

Mr. Collins was long-boned and gawky. His lack of grace



Photograph used for the original publications of *One Small Saga* and *En Route*.