

MATS HARALDSSON

To TRAVEL AGAINST HEADWIND

A FAMILY SAGA



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JOHAN

SEPTEMBER 1873

“GET OUT OF BED, Johan! It is your turn to help Father in the barn.”

His big brother Carl firmly shakes Johan, who is scared to leave his warm bed to go out to the cows. The day before yesterday, he was squeezed between two of the big animals when he was going to give them more hay. He only turned seven a month ago and is small for his age.

Since school is three kilometres away, an hour’s walk on long, dark forest roads, he had to start a year early, so that he and his three-year-old brother Carl could walk together with their older sister Märta in her last year of school. He was almost half a head shorter than the other boys in first grade and has been called Little-Tiny-Johan since the first day.

Now he is in second grade, and the others have continued to tease him. Yesterday, when he was in the privy, two of the older boys came in and pushed his head deep into the hole where he had just been sitting.

“If you don’t bring us smoked pork tomorrow, we’ll press you all the way down to the shit,” says Sven, the bigger of them.

“Your father has such a large farm that he won’t notice that you bring some meat to us,” says Jöns. “I haven’t eaten bacon since Christmas, and I’m tired of herring.”

“And don’t tell anyone it’s meant for us, even if they catch you when you take the pork,” says Sven and presses him hard into the wall.

Johan manages to keep himself from crying this time. The last time they beat him, and he started crying, the teacher asked him why he was whimpering. Before he could answer, Sven turned around from his seat in front of him and whispered, "If you tattle, you'll get a good beating."

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Once he is done in the barn, he must figure out a good way to get into the root cellar without anyone noticing. His father is waiting for him in the kitchen, and together they walk out to the cows.

"I need a new farmhand urgently. It's not possible to do everything myself nowadays when we have another child arriving any day, and you big boys must stay at school most of the day."

The last farmhand, Adam, married the widow Svensdotter at mid-summer and thus became a homesteader even though he was only 23 years old. The widow is ten years older, but with three children to take care of, she would certainly take any man who could work the farm. During the summer, Märta, Carl and Johan have been forced to help with the daily chores.

Märta, who just turned 13, has left school and will stay at home as a maid for the time being. The paid maid milks the cows, but little brother Henrik, who is only three years old, needs care, as do the chickens and pigs. That will be Märta's job from now on.

They have the largest farm in the area, with two horses, fifteen cows, four pigs and at least twenty hens. It is very remote – it takes almost two hours by horse and carriage to the church and an hour for the children to walk the most direct route through the forest to the elementary school.

Father shovels the cow dung onto the wheelbarrow, and then Johan has to push it to the manure pile. The cart gets heavy and often unevenly loaded, so it takes all his effort as he tries to balance it over the footbridge. Last week, it tipped over, so Father got angry and slapped

him. Then a crying Johan had to pick the ground clean of all the manure while more and more horseflies attacked him.

Today, there are four rounds of manure with the wheelbarrow. Luckily, the pigsty is only cleaned every other day. Their shit stinks much worse than that of other animals, and he is afraid to go near the big sow.

When they are finished in the barn, his father orders Johan to fetch butter from the root cellar. It gives him an opportunity to steal the cured pork, too. He hopes that his parents will not notice that he has cut off almost an inch from the large side of the meat. He knows he's doing the wrong thing, no matter what he chooses. Either he risks being beaten up and dipped in the privy by Sven and Jöns, or he will have to face the rage of his father.

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On the way to school, Carl laughs when he proclaims that he, as the eldest son, is going to take over the farm, so Johan and Henrik will be his future farmhands. Although Carl has seen that Jöns and Sven are cruel to Johan, he doesn't care, as he believes Johan must learn to endure a little hardship if he is to become a good farmhand.

It's his heaviest walk to school ever this morning. The pork and his conscience weigh more than two filled wheelbarrows. Even when there was half a metre of fresh snow last winter, when he, Carl and Märta were forced to take turns ploughing their way forward, the road to school was not as burdensome as today.

He is afraid that Carl will smell the smoked meat he has hidden in paper wrapping inside his shirt, so several times, he falls seriously behind.

Just before they reach the schoolyard, he considers turning around. But where would he go? Coming home again in the morning would raise so many questions, and he has no good answers for them. Why does life have to be so unfair? Carl is Father's favourite, and Märta is

Mother's. He himself has no one. Sure, little brother Henrik is kind to him, but he's still too young for this to be much of a comfort.

Once again, he has fallen far behind Carl, so Sven and Jöns eagerly meet him outside the school. Jöns smiles greedily at him and holds out his hand while Johan feels a pit of dread building in his stomach.

"Well, Little-Tiny-Johan, have you brought the bacon?"

Johan is shaking with fear. Then he notices the teacher walking past, behind the boys.

"Help!" he shouts instinctively.

Sven, who has not seen the teacher, punches him hard in the face. Johan falls, with blood coming out of his nose. Jöns is about to kick him when he is suddenly lifted upwards, so that his clog flies away from the kicking movement.

"What in the name of the Lord do ye do?"

The teacher's harsh voice makes the bullies stiffen, so the man has time to take a firm grip on the terrified Sven as well.

"He's taken our pork," Sven stutters.

"We wanted to bring it to Sir Teacher," Jöns adds quickly.

Johan, who thought for a moment that he was out of danger, feels the teacher's enraged look focus on him.

"Is this true?"

"No, Sir Teacher. They forced me to bring them pork, or they would dip me in the privy," Johan sobs out.

The schoolchildren have gathered around them in a circle. They whisper with each other about what has happened. Carl looks down at Johan with disdain and says something to the pupil next to him, where Johan only understands the words "... weeping over a little nosebleed ...".

"Now, all three of you come with me. The rest of you will stay outside until I call you."

The teacher pushes the three boys towards the school door.

“Stay still while I unlock.”

“If you tattle, you’re dead!” Sven hisses to Johan.

Once inside the classroom, the three boys have to stand at attention in front of the teacher. Although Johan nervously looks down at the floor, he glimpses, out of the corner of his eye, that the curious school-children have moved up the hill outside the window to get a better view of what is happening inside.

The teacher takes his time. He hangs his coat up on the wall, carefully puts his bag on the desk and then grabs the cane, the dreaded bat with a hard lump at the end. So far, he has only used it on the older pupils. When the cane is used, even the toughest boys cry like toddlers.

“Here we have breaches against both the eighth and ninth commandments of the Lord,” he says firmly, letting his gaze slowly wander from boy to boy. The three stand in complete silence with their heads bowed.

“Let’s start with the eighth. What has been stolen and by whom?”

None of the boys lifts their eyes from the floor, and no one makes an effort to answer.

“Apparently, we have to get to the answer in a different way!”

The teacher picks up the bat and walks up to Sven, who had previously said that Johan stole their pork.

Sven is shaking. On the floor below him, a wet spot is spreading. Sven is eight years old and comes from a small cottage where they only have a cow and a few chickens. The teacher is well aware that the boy doesn’t have access to bacon.

Sven hesitatingly points at Jöns.

“He was the one who came up with the idea.”

Jöns shies away from suddenly being in focus. He has turned nine but had to retake the last year after his father died. Instead of going to school, he had to help his mother look after his younger siblings while she worked as a maid. They only have a few hens at home, so the meat can’t possibly come from them. Jöns is also one of the pupils that the

teacher has a particular disdain for, so he's already had a taste of the cane.

"Johan promised to bring pork, so that we could give Sir Teacher something good to eat tonight," he says defiantly.

The teacher appears to buy the answer and turns to Johan, who instinctively raises his hands to protect himself against the blow, causing the piece of meat to fall out from under his shirt and onto the floor.

"And may I ask where Johan got this from?"

Thoughts are spinning in his head as his heartbeats race like never before. On the one hand, he does not want to lie, but at the same time, he understands that there is no answer good enough that does not lead to severe punishment either by the teacher, by Jöns and Sven, or by Father, or – in the worst case – by all of them.

"It's our pork from home."

"I understand that it comes from your farm, but who has given Johan permission to bring such a big piece of meat with him to school? Has he perhaps broken both the eighth and ninth commandments of God?"

Johan is saved by Jöns, who is naïve enough to put himself in focus, by saying, "He wants to be one of us, so he promised he'd bring bacon so that we could give it to Sir Teacher," he says, trying to be cunning.

The teacher raises the dreaded stick towards Jöns, making him take a couple of steps backwards. What Johan doesn't know is that his father often brings food to the teacher, and that the man therefore knows better than to bite the hand that feeds him. Thus, it is a providence for the teacher to be able to take out his wrath on Jöns.

"Now we must beat the truth out of Jöns."

Determined, he pushes Jöns down onto his stomach against one of the school desks. He lifts the cane and hits three quick, hard strikes. Jöns screams so loudly that it pains Johan.

"Well, let us finally hear the truth!"

Johan is the only one of the boys who doesn't cry. Sven stands in his

puddle and sobs loudly, while Jöns whimpers while holding his hands to his sore back.

“The truth, or you will regret that you were born. I don’t want to know that any of you are breaking the Lord’s ninth commandment, not to bear false witness.”

Johan decides that it is time for a confession. He wipes off the dried blood itching his upper lip, before telling the teacher that Sven and Jöns usually beat and bully him, and that they forced him to bring bacon or they would dip his head in the privy. Furthermore, he admits to taking the smoked meat without either Father or Mother knowing, for fear of punishment from Sven and Jöns. He concludes by acknowledging that it was wrong and that he hopes that God will forgive his sins, even if his father, mother, and teacher do not.

“Your father will have to dole out your punishment, while I will handle these two sinners.”

The next few moments are unbearable for Johan, even though only Sven and Jöns feel the awful whipping. It’s as if the teacher also gives them Johan’s dose of the blows. When the teacher is finished, he wipes sweat from his forehead, breathless.

The two boys are lying on the floor, completely knocked out. Johan doesn’t see them at school again for several weeks.

On the way home from school, his thoughts are swirling. Carl asks curiously why the three had fought and why the teacher was only hitting the other two. Johan doesn’t say a word, and Carl seems to know better than to force him to tell. In his pocket, Johan has a letter from the teacher for his father. He was made to promise to bring it back signed the following day.

When they reach the farm, little brother Henrik rushes towards them. Enthusiastically, he shouts, “We’ve got a little brother!”

During the day, their mother, Magnhild, gave birth to her fifth child, another son. Their father sits proudly in the kitchen with their older

sister Märta and grandfather Håkan, who has been invited in from his allotment. The two men have been drinking schnapps, and their father brags about how capable he is in producing healthy boys.

Johan sees an opportunity and takes out the letter from the teacher.

“Sir Teacher wanted Father to sign this letter for me to bring back tomorrow.”

“Have you caused mischief, little Johan?” his father grins.

Father then drunkenly turns towards his own father.

“At his age, I must have been the teacher’s worst pupil. Johan is probably taking after me, even though he is still so small in stature.”

Without hesitation, Father picks up the goose pen that remains on the table after he and the midwife signed the birth certificate of the newborn earlier in the day.

He dips it into the inkwell and signs without reading the letter.

"History lover or not, you'll be absorbed by this fascinating novel about some of the people who built our country."

Agneta Norrgård,
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JOHAN, an insecure young man from southern Sweden, emigrates to North America almost unintentionally at the end of the 19th century.

MATHILDA faces adversity in a male-dominated society, but makes the most of her circumstances.

Both had few expectations beyond their parents' lives, yet their stories are filled with drama, joy, sorrow, and hardship.

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To travel against headwind is historical fiction based on real people. Their journey begins in poor, stagnant 19th-century Sweden, when many emigrated to North America in search of better lives. The story continues into the 1920s, a time of change and rising welfare.

Mats Haraldsson was born in 1960 in Växjö, Sweden. He studied Industrial Management and spent over 30 years with an American corporation, working in Stockholm, Paris, Houston, London, Brussels, and Salzburg.

In 2018, he began new ventures, starting with this book. This English version is based on his debut novel, first published in Swedish in 2020.

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