

Svena Leiber

THE LAST LAND

Novel

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I

1911 – 1917

THE WOMEN ARE HARVESTING PLUMS. Already another summer, sun like oil on canvas, laundry spread out on the grass to whiten. The women pick and gather. They are talking about Ruven, the younger son of the wheelwright Preuk. The boy has been standing between field and the tree-lined road since morning, and has not moved. “God knows,” they say, “what should be done with someone like him?”

On an August day in 1911 Ruven Preuk stands apart from the village and listens. He counts the time the light and the poplars beat, light, dark, light. Around him brood the fields, German, Protestant and silent with heat. A respite within the ripe oats – then straight into the middle of the stillness a *Lala* and *Lalei* which does not belong, distant first, then ever closer. Ruven lays his head to one side and closes his eyes. A fluttering of his fingers, the right ones following the beat, the play of light and shade, the left the song, *Lala, Lalei*. And now he even raises his arms, conducts. The women turn and wipe sweat from their brows. Simply standing around and waving your arms you won’t amount to anything, they think, the basket won’t be filled.

Two wooden caravans and their tired draft-horses appear, and slowly make their way up the road. The first is driven, with only one hand, by a man. He leans against the carriage body as if

asleep. The second by a woman in a red jacket and skirt, it is she who sings. Behind them march, one, two, one, two, a pack of boys from the village, all of whom have been lying in wait since morning too, led by Fritz Dordel, with his fish otter face and trousers that are far too short. Noisily they pass Ruven by, parade-like, and the path grows dark with faces, and the woman's mocking songs, rage and triumph, she bares her teeth and cracks her whip at the side and at Fritz, who is already halfway onto her wagon. Barely a whisker to his face he simply fingers the hem of her skirt. She kicks him off the front with a bare foot and he falls backwards and lands in the oats. Angrily he picks himself up then tails after the wagon into the village.

Ruven follows them with his eyes. There they are at last. He had hoped they would come. Fritz, as always, had wanted him to be together with them on the lookout, but this time Ruven had not. It is an unusual day, one like it happens only once a year, and he wants to follow, but there at the ford, just to the side of the bushes, comes his father, who had better not see him anywhere close to the otter. Ruven steps behind the trunk of the next poplar. Old man Preuk does not see him and leads his brown horses on through the soft sand. The reins rub foam from their coats. The cartload clatters as the wagon struggles up the embankment. Nils Preuk gets down and pushes from behind, then, once over, gets back on top and therefore does not realize that his boy has also leapt up onto the wagon. He only turns around when the clattering is no longer as loud, thinking his things must have fallen off, but there sits his son, blond as cauliflower, who says: "They've come again," and is already next to Nils on the seat.

"Who?"

"The fiddler together with Sophie."

"They came earlier last year," Nils says and then goes silent. "This Sophie, forever from farm to farm. Turned everyone's heads with her singsong. Even Röver. And those eyes! Doubly poisonous," he says and stares ahead.

While listening to Sophie's songs the farmer Röver's hand had gone into the well crank. Afterwards they brought four of his fingers to the pastor. But he did not know what to do with them

either, so put them into his pocket and promptly forgot about them. It was only in the afternoon, presiding over a baptism, that he almost fainted when his left hand, reaching into the sewn pouch, suddenly came upon the cold fingers and a few moments later he understood what it was that he was kneading, just then, as he was speaking to the baptized's mother about the Lutheran Beyond with a glance toward the heavens and a breathless voice. Afterwards he buried the four fingers in the Röver family's grave. "It never went far enough for my wife," he softly sang, the schnapps he had been given to help his nerves continuing to pulse wildly through his veins.

The wainwright's home is behind the village. The house is not impressive, but one could have indeed done worse than inheriting a brick building with a field and a well, which, from morning to evening, is circled by the billygoat Wildman. Because of his large balls, Wildman thinks he is the biggest. Whatever walks on two legs he knocks to the ground: a quick warm up, a few bounds, and it's over. Then he stands still and looks dumbly at his victim.

"He should be castrated," Nils says, grinding his teeth, when he himself has been caught, but in the end he always lets him go. He leads the billygoat with his twice-curved horns into the enclosure and does not castrate him, as if by some secret arrangement.

He unhitches his horses and unloads the wagon. The workshop smells of animals. Nils scratches his beard. "Go on, get going," he says to Ruven who is standing before him with imploring eyes. "But don't forget to deliver the pigeons to Frau Klunkehöker." Frau Klunkehöker is the richest woman in the area, and she is always hungry for pigeons. Everyone in the village wants to sell her something, but for conscience's sake she only takes the pigeons from little Preuk. The boy is handsome, they say.

Ruven runs to the village square. He has already forgotten Frau Klunkehöker or at least put her to the side for the moment as he only has eyes for the two wooden wagons and remembers how the previous year one of them had smelled inside. Sweet and like a woman, Ruven thinks, although he does not really understand what that means. Only once did he get through the door to Sophie's. And

then she had simply sat there and laughed and given him a slice of bread and jam and for a moment let him see her shin, while outside all the village boys had piled up at the window, Fritz Dordel on top. But Ruven had only wondered, what can I do with a shin, and had immediately turned as red as Sophie's jacket, which, strangely, from up close seemed quite shabby.

The wagons are standing in the shade, a bit catty-cornered, and Joseph, the old fiddler, has chased off the fish otter and fed the ponies and is now leaning against the oak, where he does not at all fit, smoking and looking about. His grey hair is woven into a braid, and his inflamed eyes squint. They say he comes from the Black Sea, maybe even Italy, in any event, from far away. Next to him stands Farmer Jacobs, there to represent the community as well as to control everything to a tee.

"If you don't cobble the street soon, I'm going to go to America," Joseph says and spits out a stream of tobacco.

"If you think," Joseph says, tucking the money for the hay into his pocket, "we can do without you here," and grins, and Joseph grins too, showing off a golden tooth as if to bedazzle him. Jacob, however, is already looking contemptuously at the ponies. They need something decent, he grumbles, oats for example. With that he hopes to do even more business, something like the gold on Joseph's tooth maybe, but the latter cuts him off with a wave of his hand and says: "It's fine the way it is, and if not, then Satan himself will pull the wagons, you only have to cobble, at that point I could even harness a goat," and with his index fingers makes the sign of horns. Suddenly his face grows warmer. He has discovered the boy, who is standing nearby, and waves him over. Ruven smiles cautiously. He comes to pet the ponies and carefully claps the dust from their coats.

"Do you want to see them?" Joseph asks, "come a bit closer," a small bow, and then Ruven is red once again, thinking he will have to see Sophie's shins another time. But Joseph is not that kind of person, he earned his gold tooth by other means. By means of his own talent he made the people soft and supple, so much so that they would have loved to completely cover him with gold, or at least that's what he says. He twirls a key on a ribbon until it purrs then beckons Ruven in behind him.

In the wagon it is dark.

“Close your eyes,” Joseph says. He takes a top hat down from off of a shelf. In reality, it is not really a top hat, but that is what he calls it when Sophie is to brush it out.

“What do you have there?” Ruven asks and closes his eyes, or at least tries.

“What indeed,” Joseph whispers, and then: “Open your eyes!” Ruven cannot recognize anything at first, the thing is glowing a golden red, and then with a little swagger Joseph pulls it out of the hat: “A violin!” He puts it to his throat and begins to fiddle. Then he holds the violin out to Ruven: “Go on, play!” But Ruven does not know how, he takes two steps back then two again forward, actually I would like to, he thinks, and so he takes the violin, the bow in his right hand, and scrapes the strings a few times.

“You play the way a cow shits,” says Farmer Jacobs, who is leaning against the window. Ruven wheels around and glares at him.

“Well then!” Joseph threatens him with the top hat and to Ruven again says: “Play!” And something like a screeching comes out, in any event, better than simply cow shit, but the melody eventually calms a bit and even becomes almost pretty.

“That’s what I said.” Joseph looks at him softly. “I can see it from far away.” Then he whispers: “I can also see notes!” He pulls Ruven to him close, ““You brothers from hell’, I ask, ‘what are you doing to me?’ When I play I can see blue and green and yellow! They come up from the violin here, like vapor! And I think, ‘you’re feverish, Joseph, no one will believe you! You’re imagining things!’” He thoughtfully runs a hand through his hair, down to his braid, and looks at Ruven.

“I believe you,” Ruven says quietly, and with a trembling hand sticks the violin back into its hat, which Joseph is holding out under his nose.

“Good,” he says, “and for the moment, bye-bye, come again tomorrow, today I’m too tired. I have an entire evening before me still.” He opens the wagon door. “Get lost already! And tell your father I need a new wheel. The last one didn’t last too long.”

Ruven takes off. He walks along the fields behind the farms and is about to go through the hedges when his pigeons flap from the roof, as if they could sense danger. "I won't bring you to Frau Klunkehöcker," Ruven mumbles, "baron pigeons are better for her, she even thinks she's eating something finer." He goes into the stall to get his slingshot. "She'll have to wait a long time for you guys." And outside of waiting, Frau Klunkehöcker does nothing. No one knows where she got her money from. Maybe she's got a mandrake, or some other genie in the box, they say, for she always has money and she buys and has delivered, and that is why every two weeks Mother Preuk sends her son over with five pigeons in his hands. That money goes into the chest, and of course Mother hopes a little that once the Thaler is in there, enveloped as it is by some invisible power, she will only have to close the lid and then the money-spirit will never again get out.

Ruven has already made it a good bit of the way, walking as quickly as he is. He sings a quiet *da* and *di*, for he can no longer get the notes out of his head. He still has to chase down the baron pigeons before he goes to bed. In hundreds they sit on the gables of the workers' houses there by the manor where they can rest from their eternal going-in-circles, and Ruven must indeed pass by there on his way to Frau Klunkehöcker. He only needs to grab five, it's almost as easy as picking fruit, and then quickly and silently deliver them. And if there are too many men standing about who very well might wonder about such lordly pigeon-picking, well, then he'll simply turn off into the woods and pluck a few wild pigeons from out of the linden trees.

"Bring me more of these the next time," Frau Klunkehöcker says obliviously when Ruven brings her the wild ones, "the fat ones with the blue feet are particularly good." And then she always looks at him for a long while, from top to bottom, taken by his white-blond hair, his face with its two almost transparent eyes and the black spot above the mouth. Then with a whistling sound Frau Klunkehöcker breathes in and out through her nose, and her glance goes further still, over the small boy-like chest, over the short trousers and straight straight legs, all the way down to the naked feet. Then she crosses herself, Frau Klunkehöcker is Catholic, and sends Ruven home. The dead birds dangle headfirst near her skirt.

At home Ruven lurks beneath the window eavesdropping, trying to gauge the mood. Most of the time it is not so good. Mother Preuk and Gesche, her ward, seldom agree with each other on anything. Gesche by now is seventeen, and she knows what she wants, and, above all, what she does not.

“What are you always griping about?! You look like a pair of pliers gone-a-courting when you gripe,” Mother says. “Get the pot ready and get over here!” She takes off her apron, pushes the ladle to her husband and reassuringly nods to John, her oldest, as she knows how much he likes Gesche. But Gesche only stands there griping and will not sit.

Nils Preuk lays the ladle down and stands up in such a slow and threatening manner that Mother Preuk has quite a long time to think.

“Lit-tle Miss!” Nils says. Gesche sits back down, bows her head and cries, for she so would have liked to go with Werner, the servant, into the village to listen to music and now he probably thinks that she’d rather go with someone else. Gesche’s back quakes with sobs. Her braid quakes too, heavy as rope and so long that she can sit on it.

“You mustn’t listen to what Werner might think,” Mother Preuk says and adds: “Amen.” And Nils too silently sits back down and finishes one plate, and then another.

“Werner doesn’t think,” he says and later: “Where’s the boy?”

And though still wracked with sobs, Gesche begins once more: “He’s with the musicians, you better be careful, or at some point he’ll walk off with them and away from you.”

“That one won’t,” Nils says then stands up again and goes to the door and somewhat anxiously looks out for Ruven.

Mother Preuk shakes her head: “Why you always got to jump up from the table. I’m eating as fast as I can and I still can’t keep up. Gesche, put something warm to the side for the boy and bring something to Werner in his room.”

“I’m not going to bring anything to Werner,” Gesche says and clears the table, and Greta Preuk raises her hand to hit her but does not strike, as she sees her John so gloomy there, and she herself

in fact likes poor Gesche, living as she has in the wainwright's home since little. Her father the brick-maker one day simply fell down dead. "It was the evil eye," the people said, their tongues always quicker than their thoughts, "that certain evil eye" – and then silence so the statement can grow more powerful on its own.

The brick-maker, that much one knew, had had something with the Magpie. They not only called her that because of her black hair and the two snow-white strands above her brow. "She steals," it was said, "and with her own father she...well, you know..." and they showed what they meant with their fingers.

The Magpie lived with her father at the edge of the woods. They did not come from the area and left as soon as the story with the brick-maker happened. One suspected them for a long time thereafter as they had from start to finish. They put their hands into the mud, like a baker into his dough. That almost helped. That almost helped them forget a few of their own sins, gathered over a lifetime. The whole village well nigh felt itself purer and more pious after the Magpie had gone, and everything would have been fine if only the brick-maker's wife had not gone crazy, believing as she did that her husband had been with this Magpie first and only thereafter with her. In her pain she tore out all of the hair along her forehead, precisely there where the Magpie was white.

"Leave the hair," Mother Preuk had said, "what does the hair have to do with it?!" The brick-maker's wife had looked at her so harshly then, although Mother Preuk had not really meant it to sound so mean. But the poor woman had only continued to tear at her hair and did not want to live anymore and so in the end climbed up the village oak, ever higher, just a little bit more, and ultimately attempted to fly. And so Gesche was all alone and came to Mother Preuk, and that was good but also a bit tough for Mother Preuk is often both. "It's the fault of the weather," she says about herself. "Summer is good, but winter is also as it is." But now she lets her hand sink back down, as Ruven has just come through the door and silently laid the money from Frau Klunkehöcker on the table.



“He’s something special,” Greta Preuk one night had whispered to her Nils. “He must learn something proper, the cane said so.”

Greta Preuk was the proud inheritor of a wise cane, a cane which could neither be burned nor broken, and sometimes she even had to go off with it on journeys unknown to find out what was normally concealed. But Nils had only answered, “he will go to primary school and then together with John will learn how to make wheels. And what your stick has to say doesn’t interest me in the least.” Then he had turned to the wall. But he had in fact been interested, for the following morning he had grabbed Ruven by the neck and taken him all over, almost softly, and Greta Preuk had seen it and tapped the weatherglass, and then she was out into the garden in order to take a deep breath.

“What do you want with Werner?” she asks Gesche now, “the way he is he can’t dance at all, or can you do the laundry with only one arm?” She said this in a friendly way, so that Gesche would calm back down. Maybe Werner had spoilt his arm for good. One night when he was drunk he had put it into the forge, and the entire workshop had smelled like a tannery, that’s how badly it had been burned. And they had thought, well, that’s it, but then it had begun to ooze. Mother Preuk had had Gesche pick wild comfrey and yarrow, and had run her cane over his arm while muttering to herself; it had given Werner the creeps to be alone with her.

“No scampering about today,” Nils says near the door, “and if he *does* run off, he’s going to get a good hiding. That servant is needed here!”

“But this music is only here today, this one time only in the whole year! And everyone’s going,” Gesche says and begins again to cry.

“Then go with John or with Ruven,” Mother Preuk says but thinks, that won’t work, and Ruven thinks so too: not with Gesche. But I *do* want to go, he thinks and shakes his head, there where the little violin continues its dance; nothing to be done now, it will never leave him alone again. It is stuck there in his thoughts just like the bullet in Farmer Jacobs’ upper-thigh, the one he got while on the hunt back in 1905.

“Do I look like a wild pig to you?” he had yelled. And Farmer Jacobs really was not a yeller. But he so took to that thing about the wild pig that thereafter it was mostly only swinishness that came out of his mouth, especially when there was an easterly wind, and the bullet in his thigh had things to say.

“That bullet wanders,” the pastor would say as soon as he heard Jacob’s curses, “whenever one talks too much trash something like that will wander. Straight to the heart as to a magnet, and then he’ll give up the spoon.”

Ruven silently sits down at the table and eats.

“Who took you along in their wagon?” his mother asks. But Ruven remains silent. Outside something sings in the hedge, and something else answers from the roof, and in between they can hear the billygoat at the fence. His urgent bleating makes Gesche blush, she takes the plate and brings it to Werner in his room. And then she does in fact have a nice evening, even without dance music. She too knows a little three-quarter time, and through the twilight something soon begins to creak, as Werner’s left the window cracked and everyone can hear.

Ruven, however, still has not said a word. He knocks on the glass with his fork, he closes his eyes, but it’s got nothing to do with his eyes. Rather, he sees the colors with his ears. Until today he would not have called the clouds and shapes he sees when he listens to music colors. Only when Joseph had told him about it did Ruven begin to suspect that not all days were that way, that there were also colorless notes and that one had a reason to be anxious when colors danced around that way as soon as a farmgirl began to sing or a blackbird or even when only a fork clinked against a glass. And how they skip about later, up on the Brammer, bats thick above their heads, as Ruven and John and their parents stand a little to the side of the square where Joseph plays. Taut like his bow the fiddler arches his back and wheels with the violin as if the music could do nothing other than to throw itself onto the instrument. And with that Sophie turns on her heel and begins to swing and shake her hips so that all of the men must tilt their hats deep down over their faces, their eyes disappearing into shadow.

Nils Preuk turns away. "It all makes me too nervous," he says, "and I won't be able to sleep."

Whoever would want to sleep, thinks Ruven, and watches his father go. If only I learn how to play, I will never want to sleep again.

It is cold the next morning when Ruven leaves the wainwright's for the village square. With his walking stick he gives one to Wildman right between the horns to get him out of the elderberries. "Get moving," Ruven says but then immediately feels ashamed, as Wildman has already moved on. From a distance he already sees the wagon, the doors are still closed, the windows draped. Only from out of the stovepipe came little streams of smoke.

Joseph is cooking acorn coffee. To make him happy, you only have to give him a little bit of real coffee, but the farmers keep to themselves. In fact, they hate him because he is not from around there and because he can read cards and tell people's future by shaking magic from his sleeves. And on top of it, those grisly shadow shows! On the other hand, he had stories to tell and he bought hay and other things besides, and he knew how to play music, you could hear that. At the moment Joseph is passing his cup under his nose and almost seems content. He opens the curtains with his left hand and sees the boy coming.

"Do you want coffee?" he calls out the door. Ruven shakes his head and pulls a bottle of birch sap out from under his shirt. He had collected it over the last few days up in the trees, there where no otter-face could see the bottles. Birch sap is precious. It is clear and sweet. Joseph smiles happily. He takes the bottle, turns it about in his hands and nods: "I get it already. Alright, go and get her!" He points to the shelf where the hat is laying, bottom up. "But don't break any strings, or I'll send you to where they'll burn your hands." But there was no need to say that. In one hundred years no one had taken up a violin as carefully as the boy did now. "Where did he get those hands anyway? Did you do it with a jackolope? Those are paws," Nils would sometimes say. "How is he supposed to swing a hammer? Or do you secretly salve them, you sweet old mother you?" And

Greta would laugh so hard that her breasts would shake beneath her frock, as he was not entirely wrong, for, given the chance, she would have gladly done so.

“I’m listening,” Joseph says and puts a hand behind his ear. “Get on with it, she will show you where she wants your fingers!” Joseph leans back. He runs a hand through his hair and smiles tiredly. “Just dirty jokes,” he says, “that’s age for you. They just shoot through your head like shooting stars in August. Even when praying, Maria, right then! But you don’t know anything about any of that, just play!” Ever so softly Ruven tries to bow. It scrapes and sounds like the wind over the bottles that Mother Preuk buried by the vegetables to keep away the moles. “Don’t be so afraid!” Whatever you want, Ruven thinks, and bows a bit more forcefully, the bow moving faster and faster.

“In a half-moon!” Joseph says, “always in a half-moon, otherwise the bow will fly over your shoulder when you have to play a fast tempo. A half-moon I told you!” Ruven tries. “What’s your name again?” Joseph asks.

“Ruven.”

“Ruven!? Are you the firstborn?”

“The second.”

“What kind of name is that, what was your father thinking? What can you say to that. Only the firstborn is ever called Ruven. But right now I just want you to play, I can see that you’ll be good, son. Not as good as me, forget it, not as a second child, but nevertheless good.” He looks out the window. “I’m getting old,” Joseph says. “Every day I say to myself, Father Joseph, you’re getting old, that’s all there is to it. But do you think that makes it any better? It doesn’t. Give me the little one, pass her over! Can you hear the ponies outside?”

Ruven asks whether he can feed them.

“You can. And bang on Sophie’s wagon, will you. The cat! She should get up. Your provost promised me a cherry tree. I’m allowed to pick one clean, even if it’s Sunday, he said. And so I’m going to send my little cat up the tree, so long as she still can.”

The tree is in the road, just before the third curve. Ruven quickly feeds the ponies then follows behind the two at a bit of a distance. Sophie has knotted her skirt and scales up the big old cherry tree so quickly it's almost uncanny; then she throws the fruit down to Joseph and into the wide basket. A few she eats right away.

"Not too many," the old man grumbles as he takes a few for himself. They spit the seeds into the grass, and Ruven's mouth begins to water. Then Sophie jumps down from the tree. She undoes her bun and shakes her head so that the strands of hair fall to the backs of her knees. "A woman's beauty lies in the length of her hair," says Mother Preuk every Saturday and rubs egg and beer into Gresche's hair. But what flows from Sophie's head is much more than just beautiful.

"You be here at the stroke of twelve," his father had said. Ruven hears the bells drifting over from the next village, one, two, nine, ten, and he takes off running. By twelve he is already at the intersection, there he has to steer clear of Peter, Röver's son, who calls out after Ruven in a strange tone: "Bye-bye! Be careful not to get black eyes from being so far abroad."

Nils Preuk is standing in the door. He turns his head once to look back into the hallway, and glance at the clock – blue numbers on white enamel – then nods. He himself always arrives just in the nick of time. That's because of when he was born, right before annexation to Prussia.

"Mother needs water," he says, once Ruven stands before him breathless. And so he turns and walks into the courtyard, Wildman completely forgotten. With a running jump the billygoat ambushes him, striking him so strongly in the backs of his knees that Ruven lands near the well. "You're going to pay for that!" Ruven says, just like one of the elders, and grabs a piece of wood and smashes it across the billygoat's foreleg. Soundlessly the strong body caves in. The animal stretches its unhurt leg out, tries to raise itself up, but falls down on its side so that its large balls strangely come to rest, then rolls its bewildered marble eyes. Ruven stares at Wildman and says: "Get up!" But the billygoat cannot get up any longer.

“And I’m telling you, don’t let him go to that fiddler, he won’t make him better. But he didn’t want to hear about it at all!” Farmer Jacobs is sitting with the others at the large table by the window in the Heidkrug pub and shaking his head. His Sunday haircut, like all those around him, did not go too well. “That he could go off like that! Preuk exploded like a geyser, I tell you, like something had been boiling away there inside for a long while. I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“What does expectation have to do with it, he did it,” Werner says, the lame-armed one who nevertheless had run into the village with unusual speed in order to get help before the wainwright Preuk could finish off his son that bright Sunday afternoon.

It had taken three men, the crazy otter – who inexplicably to all was attached to Ruven like a wet nurse – in the lead, three men to pull Preuk off of his son. Afterwards, they had immediately gone to the Heidkrug in order to recover from the shock.

“He kept yelling, ‘I’ll drive that fiddler soul out of you!’” Werner says and means Preuk, who had all of the sudden fallen upon his son like the north wind over the apple blossoms.

“And all of that because of an old billygoat! As if a billygoat were more than a son.”

“Well, come on, say something!” Nils Preuk sits on the stool next to his younger son’s bed and runs his rough fingers over the bedcover. That is something that he has never done. His wife stands next to him, arms akimbo, her eyes so full of contempt that he would feel cold were it not for the shame which burned inside him.

“I’m going to go now and get the rope,” he says after breaking the silence with a sigh and stands.

“Get Düwel,” Mother says, “you go and get the pastor!”

But that was not really going to be necessary, for no sooner is Nils out of the room than Ruven opens his eyes and looks at his mother for a long time. Then he stares for an even longer time at the wall across from him, as if his angel were standing there, but there is nothing at all standing there, on the contrary, there is something hanging there, and Ruven thinks he must be dreaming and as

Mother Preuk follows his eyes she nods: “That Joseph left her here for you. ‘He’s blessed,’ he said, ‘you better not break him.’”

Mother takes the violin down from the nail and lays it on the cover for Ruven. Without even a glance he plucks the four strings: Glorious Days Arrive Early. He runs his hand across the lacquer. He gently runs his finger down the scroll and over the smooth neck.

“Father says if you don’t die you can go to the cantor and learn how to fiddle.” She wipes something off her cheek.

“What have I got to do with Death?” Ruven asks quietly and smiles weakly before falling back asleep.

Mother goes to make a coffee for the pastor, as otherwise he will have come in vain. He should tell Nils some stories and brainwash him a bit as holy folk do, she thinks, and picks up the heavy waffle iron and puts in the oven to warm. She cracks seven eggs into the bowl, for today nothing will be spared.

“My God, Nils,” the pastor says later, and his eyes seem perplexed. “If at least it had been for the good lord God, like Abraham, or because of the lamb, but because of such a German billygoat! Why are acting like your Wildman? You’re supposed to be peaceful. Or do you think Charles the Great came here to smash heathens’ heads for fun?” The pastor makes a pious face, then purses his lips somewhat and contemplates Charles the Great a little before spreading his waffle with raspberry preserves, which fall off all four corners.

“He has promised to let the boy go to the cantor as soon as he can walk again.” Mother Preuk sits across from the pastor. Her cheeks are always a bit red from a number of small, dilated blood vessels.

“To the cantor? He doesn’t fiddle. But old man Dordel, he fiddles, I’d send him to Uwe. At the beginning that’ll be enough. But later he’ll have to go to town, to a real teacher, if he has talent.”

“He does,” Nils says, “he does.” And it is not just his bad conscience that makes him think so, but it was also the glow in Joseph’s eyes when he had held the violin out to him.

“I’m heading off,” the pastor wants to go. “Until Christmas I will see you both every single Sunday, and Gesche and Werner and the two boys, you bring them with you. For the Lord in his satiety...” the pastor looks confusedly at his empty plate “...and his grace and so on.”

Nils nods: “Yes, yes.”

As the pastor steps out the door, a swallow almost flies into his head. “It’s going to rain,” he says, “we could use it.”

“Yes,” says Mother Preuk, “the cane’s already told me.”

“You shouldn’t be asking your cane,” the pastor says sternly. But already the first heavy drops are beginning to fall upon the path. Mother Preuk hands the pastor an umbrella, and smiles.