

The Poet's Daughter

by

Konnie Ellis

Also by Konnie Ellis:
The Dharma of Duluth
The Ice Dancer

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For the immigrants

PART ONE - NORWAY

BERTHA

1891

Chapter 1

“YOUR MOTHER IS DEAD.” I was six years old when I heard those words. After that pronouncement, everyone around me seemed to be speaking at once, yet I heard nothing but a blur of voices and the clinking of coffee cups. The room was strong with the smell of coffee, and I stood at the edge of a forest of black skirts and heavy shoes. I maneuvered myself to the back of the pantry where I could look out the low window to the green yard and our apple orchard and the fjord beyond. The gulls were circling out over the bay and back toward the dock, where they dipped down, snatching bits from the fish cleaning table. Nearby, the small green boat rocked in the water beside the dock. It was the boat my mother used to row me and my brothers down the fjord to the flat rock point for picnics.

“Berta, come here,” someone called, and when I turned, I walked through flour on the pantry floor and watched my footprints appear as though made by a ghost. Aunt Inga led me to the parlor and settled me on the rocker that creaked, the one I didn’t like. Before she returned to the kitchen she said it was all right about the flour. I didn’t remember spilling flour and I said it was a ghost that did it. I felt the heat of guilt on my cheeks, as though I were to blame for of all the darkness in our house that day. I slipped down from the rocking chair and stood behind the drawn curtains

The Poet's Daughter

of the parlor and felt the sun on my face. I closed my eyes and became invisible.

That same day I was put to bed on a cot with a heavy patchwork quilt in a back room where I had never slept before. It was still light out and my aunt's big yellow cat sat at the end of the bed, looking straight at me. I fell asleep, even though I tried to keep my eyes open. I didn't know if I was awake or dreaming as I relived the events of that day of my mother's death. My father had walked with me to her room where she was lying in bed with her hair down and shining like it had just been combed. She smiled at me and held my hand in hers, and I felt the burning warmth of her hand around mine. Her smile was just a little smile, but I knew it was just for me. Her face was pale and she looked very tired, but also beautiful. I knew that my mother was beautiful, even more so than anyone in our whole town. She didn't cough once the whole time I was in the room.

It was while I was in the kitchen having a glass of milk that she died. I knew this before anyone told me because I heard someone scream with the worst sorrow you could imagine. The scream started high and then dropped as low as a sorrow could go. I went to the bedroom door and looked in. I saw that my mother's face was empty and that she was dead. My whole body shivered and then I was gone. When I came to, the house was crowded with people and my aunt was sitting beside me.

From that day until I left by train, my little sister and I stayed with my aunt, who lived on the upper side of our house, just up the hillside from our house. Since my mother's illness, our baby sister, Aagot, had been staying with the Johnson family who owned the store down near the dock, so it was just little Mette and myself at home now,

Konnie Ellis

with Father, and our two big brothers, Konrad and Peter, up until the time Mother died. By then we had sometimes stayed at Aunt Inga's house overnight, so in some ways it didn't seem like a sudden move away from our own home. I think that since it was impossible to understand my life at that time, I just had to go along with whatever happened. At least that's what I tried to do. I mostly kept my feelings to myself during the day.

My sister, Mette, slept when they took my mother to the graveyard beside the church. Mette was only three years old and still took naps. I was not allowed to go to the church or the graveyard, but I watched the procession from my aunt's bedroom window. I was supposed to be napping too, but I was too old for that, and I watched my family and the minister and the school teacher and all the neighbors walk slowly toward the churchyard, everyone dressed in black. I remember it as if the people were walking a few inches above the road, like they were floating toward the graveyard. Although I could hear the clomping of horses' hooves, even the horses seemed to be hovering slightly above the road as they moved along. The wooden coffin was covered with white and yellow flowers, and appeared to wobble as the horses pulled the wagon along the old dirt road. My brothers followed close behind and I wanted to leave the house and run after them, but I knew that I couldn't. I had to stay with my sleeping sister.

I was old enough to know that my mother would be buried in the ground. I had been to the graveyard with my mother in the very recent spring to put flowers on great grandmother's grave. Mother had told me how it was done and that the spirit of the dead rose to a special place of peace and that the body remained in the ground, for the flowers, she said. And I knew the verse about "dust to

The Poet's Daughter

dust.” Still, I felt afraid. If she was gone, anyone could be gone. I didn’t want it to be true. I lay down on my cot and hid my head beneath the pillow.

It was not long after the burial that my father received a letter from our relatives who lived on the Lofoten Islands, off the coast of northern Norway. Erling Johnson brought the letter to the house one sunny afternoon when I was in our yard folding clothing fresh off the clothes line. Aunt Inga would take down the items, and I would fold them carefully and place them in the basket. The whites were bleached white from the sun and the whole basketful smelled like summer.

I followed my aunt inside. My father sat down in the big chair and took his glasses out of the round table drawer and opened the letter. I folded my hands together tight because he looked serious. When he finished reading, he looked at me for what seemed like a long time, and then smiled a sad smile. He didn’t say anything at first, so we just stood there waiting, with my aunt holding my dried yellow Sunday dress over her arm. That’s when he told me I would be going to stay with my aunt and uncle on the Lofoten Islands. He said Uncle Albert Bratberg was Mother’s brother. Father spoke directly to me and not to my aunt, saying that they were kind folks and that I would like them. Then he stood quickly and looked out the window.

My aunt and I finished with the clothes line as if nothing had happened, but we were both thinking very hard. When we finished our chores, my aunt said we would look at the map tonight and she would show me the Lofoten Islands. After supper, Aunt Inga unfolded a worn-looking map onto the kitchen table. She pointed to where we lived,

which is on a fjord in the middle of Norway. She slid her finger from our location along the map up to the very top of Norway, to a group of tiny islands out in the ocean. She said it was very beautiful there. I asked if she had ever been there but she hadn't. She had heard about it from our relatives and had seen pictures in one of her school books. I asked if there were palm trees and tigers, like in Peter's picture book. She pursed her lips and said no, it was more like here; it wasn't a tropical place at all. There were lots of fish and mountains, and she said I might see whales and seals there too.



My sense of time was vague, but it was not long after the letter arrived that my travels began. Mette and I had been staying at Aunt Inga's house. It was very early one morning when my father came to Aunt Inga's to wake me. He said it was time to get up. It was the day we were to take the train and it was time to go. My brother, Konrad, was waiting for us in the dark kitchen, and I thought I saw a shadow of someone in the parlor, but it was just one of those odd glimpses you get when you're not quite awake. My father helped me into my winter coat, which surprised me, since it was still summertime.

Outside, the buggy was ready to go. While my dad tied the suitcase to the back of the buggy, I petted our horse, Flicka, before climbing up onto the high seat. I fell asleep almost as soon as I curled up under the blanket where I leaned against Konrad, who had grown tall that summer, though he was just ten years old.

The sun was up when we arrived at the train depot. My big surprise was that only my father and I would be taking

The Poet's Daughter

the train. Konrad was staying behind. I knew, of course, that I was going to my aunt and uncle's house, even though I had never met them because they lived very far north. I tried not to cry when Konrad took my hand to say goodbye and handed me a little bag, for later, he said. My father settled me at a window seat and sat beside me. We watched Konrad wave as the train pulled away and I waved back like I was accustomed to taking the train and going far away from my own life. Father patted my hand.

The train was large and black and the whistle blew as we started to move. Konrad disappeared in the morning mist and black smoke from the train, and I strained to see where he had been waving, until my neck hurt. I sat back in my seat and played with the end of the envelope my father had pinned to my coat collar, probably bending its edges. Why did he have to pin an envelope to my coat like I was a tiny child? I knew how to read and I was smart. My father said it was to be sure, just to be safe.

We were a reading family, and we had a fine bookcase filled with wonderful books. We had more books than anyone in town and sometimes the school teacher even borrowed from us. It seemed like I had always known how to read. I used to sit next to Konrad when he read Hans Christian Andersen stories to me and Peter, and it wasn't long before I was reading for myself. I just figured it out, and asked Konrad or my mother about the words I didn't know. I had a special place where the sun shone onto the blue rug where I liked to curl up and lean back against my father's chair and disappear into a story. Mother told wonderful stories without books. They were about trolls, and flowers, and walks in the mossy woods. I loved closing my eyes and picturing the stories she told. She had a soft, true voice that brought you right into her story.

What would my aunt and uncle be like? Would they really be nice, like Father said? I felt like I was in the middle of my own story. And even though it was scary, it was kind of exciting to be on a train heading to the Lofoten Islands. I liked saying those words to myself. The Lofoten Islands. I might see whales and seals! How remarkable it seemed, that I was going to live on an island out in the great blue ocean. I had no sense of time as we traveled along. One minute I would be scared and sad and the next minute I was all excited. I was like two people in one. The train was noisy and crowded and part of the time I stared out the window trying not to think, just make-believing I was brave. I saw a white horse on a hillside that looked like Flicka and I rose out of my seat, but then I was old enough to know it wasn't our horse. How could it be? Still, it was horses that I watched for after that, until I dozed off again. Horses and mountains and dark places filled my dreams on that train going north.

Sometimes I startled myself upright when the steam engine whistled. When I did wake to a fully alert state, I was surprised to find a little grey pillow under my head and a plump woman sitting on the seat beside me. She was eating raisins, and her jaw moved with little jerks as if the raisins were too hot to eat, like when your potatoes are too hot and you should have let them cool before taking a bite. The lady said my papa would be right back. Then she put away her raisins without offering me any, stood up and bustled down the aisle of the train car to the door, and I watched as she stepped off the train. From the window, I saw her walking away with a woman in a green coat. They walked just the same and looked like two fluffy birds as they swayed away up the road.

The Poet's Daughter

My father came back with our bags, saying this was our stop. He was sorting our tickets and I told him about the women and how they walked and that I couldn't think of what kind of bird it was they walked like. I wasn't sure he was listening, but then he said that Mother walked like a sand piper. "So light she was," he said.

Just then a man in a uniform stopped beside my dad and he signed a paper. From here, he told us, we would be transferring to a buggy, and that would take us to the boat. We walked to the depot where Papa found a bathroom for me to use, and then we went around the front to a buggy which was pulled by two large horses, one white and one reddish brown. We sat in the backseat and our suitcases were tied to a rack in the back. Just opposite us sat an old man and a boy about Konrad's age, or maybe a little younger. The boy's name was Bjorne, but I couldn't understand his grandfather's name because I think he was speaking with chewing tobacco in his mouth, and so was my father. The men talked about the weather, and a tunnel that was to be built through the mountain. I was tired and barely listened. Then it was quiet, except for the boy's occasional humming, which I liked. The old man closed his eyes but I don't think he slept because the road was rutted and bumpy, at least at first. I closed my eyes and thought of Mother. I could almost see her crossing the yard, carrying a basket of buttercups. She loved wild flowers, especially buttercups. I opened my eyes again so I wouldn't cry. The boy was looking at me. He smiled and looked away.

The road followed the curves of the mountain and went up steep hills and past waterfalls. At the highest point we had a glimpse of blue water below, and we turned a corner and started down the mountain to where it leveled out and

the horses snorted. I listened to the sound of the horse's hooves clomping along and I snapped the clasp of my little purse open and closed to their rhythm. The purse was my birthday present from just two weeks earlier. It was my mother's purse, the small lavender purse she kept inside her big purse. She would give me her big purse to hold when we went to the grocery store. She kept money in the little purse to pay for what we bought, which was usually flour and sugar and coffee, and maybe spices or tea. Sometimes she picked out material from long rolls kept under a table in the back with the thread and buttons. We had our own cows and summer garden, so there was little we needed to buy, but I had always admired both the big purse and the little one, and Papa said she wanted me to have the lavender coin purse.

The buggy passed more waterfalls and crossed wooden bridges and followed a road bordered by long expanses of green land with farms and red barns, much like at home. By the time we came to the sea's edge, I was glad to climb down from the hard seat of the buggy. The old man took the boy's hand and they walked off down the road toward a farm. The boy turned around and waved at me before they continued on like they were going home. It was good to be on plain ordinary land and smell the sea in the air. But I didn't see my aunt and uncle anywhere. Where were they? What would we do if they didn't come? How would we get to the Lofoten Islands? And just which of the islands would we go to? What if it gets dark? Papa said not to worry; soon I would meet Uncle Karl and Aunt Elvine and we would be crossing the water to Stamsund, my new home on the Lofoten Islands. We stood side by side looking at the distant islands and inhaled the salty breeze off the sea.

The Poet's Daughter

Then there they were, waving. They came rushing toward us in a kind of fast walk and my aunt scooped me up into a big, wiggling hug and it was like we had known each other our whole lives. My uncle had such a big smile that I started laughing, and he clapped his hands together and then picked up my suitcase. Aunt Elvine held my hand as we walked toward the dock, and I felt safe and knew that it was going to be okay. Father was calm, like always, and he and Uncle Karl walked along talking as if no time at all had passed since they had last seen one another.

We boarded a large fishing boat that would take us to their island and I sat beside my aunt, who put a wool blanket over our legs as we sat on a wooden bench. The sea was dark with bouncing waves and I liked it. The sun was bright, making many colors dance over the bubbly waves. Near the shore there were a lot of gulls hopeful for fish, but we left them behind as the boat was empty of fish as we made our passage across the strait.

My aunt asked me to tell her all about my train ride and I did. She was interested in everything I had to say, and so I was interested in her too and asked about their house on the island, and did they have a yard? Did they have an apple orchard, and what was their house like? "You'll see," she said. "It's your house now, too." We were quiet then, watching the sea as we swayed along with the waves toward my new home. Once out in the sea, I could spot the furthest mountains, which were white with snow; the nearer ones looked as green and smooth as the finest moss. We passed another fishing boat on its way toward the mainland. It was smaller than the one we were on, and we all waved at the fishermen. They didn't have their nets out, so they were moving pretty fast. Here on the sea I felt good. I'd had many boat rides in our little oar boat back home,

but this was a big boat on the enormous sea and I liked its rhythm and sitting next to my aunt and watching the island as we came near. Although I wanted to get to the island, at the same time I wanted to stay on the boat like this forever, watching the waves. I kept thinking it was like the sea was breathing. I wasn't at all afraid, even though my shoes were getting wet from some of the waves. I was a born sea person.

It wasn't long before we could see the dock, and other fishing boats anchored partway out from shore. The houses on the hillside were mostly red, like in our village back home. To the left of the houses, a flock of sheep was grazing on what seemed way too steep a hill. My uncle shouted out toward shore and soon we were gliding in beside the dock. We had arrived at our Lofoten Island! My father helped me off the fishing boat and onto the dock, and he and Uncle Albert tied up the boat. Uncle carried my suitcase and Aunt Elvine held my hand. As we walked along, my uncle said, "Well, here we are. We'll have to get you some good boots on Saturday."

The rest of the day went by quickly. I saw all the rooms of the house and I met my cousins. They were quiet and formal toward me, but I had a curious feeling I would like them. We had a delicious supper of fish stew, rye bread and cheese, with berry juice to drink. I was so tired I must have seemed stupid to my new brothers and sister. I was told to think of them as my family rather than my cousins. As it was summer and still the time of the midnight sun, it was light out when I was settled in my new bed and I didn't really know what time it was. When my aunt shut the door to my room, I was ready to fall asleep and my eyes hurt from the sun and the sea and all of my traveling. I fell

The Poet's Daughter

asleep to the sound of my father and aunt and uncle talking downstairs.



I awoke to the sound of squawking seagulls, a familiar sound. Except for listening to the gulls, my mind stayed empty for what seemed a long time and I wanted it to stay like that. I was thinking that I was like an empty boat, when I heard the door creak open and my aunt looked in. She came to sit on my bed and her hand smoothed over my cheek. The sun was shining on her hair and on her silky dress, which was covered with little red roses.

She helped me arrange my suitcase clothes in the wardrobe, and then I dressed for the day. We went downstairs together where my father and uncle were at the table having coffee. My father said he needed to start back home after I had my breakfast. It seems they had been waiting for me. I could hardly eat my oatmeal, my hands shook so. I hadn't known Papa would be leaving so soon.

Down at the dock with all the fishing boats and people loading nets and gear, I was distracted before I had time to realize what was happening. My father kissed me on top of my head and climbed into the boat that was to take him back to the mainland and off he went, leaving me alone with my aunt and uncle on the shore. I didn't want him to go. I was stubborn and I wouldn't leave the dock. My aunt stayed with me while the boat became smaller and smaller as it sailed away on the sea. It was a hard day.

From the house and whenever I was out in the yard that day, I watched the sea for my father. But he was nowhere to be seen. He was gone. That night I watched the sea from

Konnie Ellis

my window. Every day afterwards, whenever I had some time to myself, I watched the melancholy sea.

As time went on I forgot the details of the day my father left in the boat, but I knew when I was looking out to sea that I was looking toward my old home, and Peter and Konrad, Mette, and my baby sister, Aagot, and my mother in the graveyard under the Linden tree. In some part of my mind, my father was still in the boat on his way home, always at sea, rolling along with the waves.



The days flew by that summer on my Lofoten Island, and by August I hardly had time to think about my old life because I was so busy living the new one. The mornings were organized so that we all had our chores, from the moment we got up until the breakfast dishes were washed and put away in the cupboard. It was at breakfast that I got to know my brothers and my older sister, Astrid. Astrid was old enough to help my aunt with breakfast, and she made delicious blueberry pancakes. Magne was only three years old and very active and funny. Anton was ten years old. He was most like my brother Konrad.

I sat next to Magne at breakfast and Anton and Astrid were across from us, with uncle and aunt at the ends, unless my uncle was already out fishing. Often, Magne would start laughing for no reason at all. He might hold up a raspberry like it was something magical, and then pop it into his mouth, saying it was a fish. Or he would look at himself in the mirror of his spoon and then hold it out for me to look into. Anton would roll his eyes, considering himself too grown up for such foolishness. Astrid humored him and thought he was cute. Still, sometimes we all started

The Poet's Daughter

laughing at the same time. You could feel when us children had that morning energy and just about anything could set us off. It was quite surprising, but I think that's how I settled into the family sooner than you might have thought one could, at least for a lot of the time. Except for my times looking out to sea.

I could tell Anton and Astrid had been told not to make a fuss over me, and to just act like I had always been a part of the family, and they did as they were told, pretty much. Still, sometimes I caught Anton looking at me with his deepest eyes. I pretended not to notice.



I was adapting to my new home. Every day I played by the docks or back on the big, flat expanse of rock behind the house. I came to know the neighborhood and the hills, the bushes and trees along the gravel street that wound all the way down to the dock. I liked the look of the sea in the morning after breakfast on a sunny day, and the orange of the evening sky when my uncle's fishing boat came in for the day.

In my room I had a shell collection along the windowsill, inspired by Anton's much larger collection. The table next to my bed held a small bowl of moss with a wooden rabbit in its center. The rabbit was a present from Konrad, which he must have carved with his pocket knife. I found it on the Sunday after my father left for home, which was the first time I had worn my winter coat since the train ride. I named the rabbit Hvit, and liked to hold it in my hands.

Konnie Ellis

On days when Anton was off in the boat with my uncle, and Magne was taking his nap, I would sit up on the biggest rock behind the house and make up stories. They were often about my rabbit Hvit, and how we would sail through the sea of tall grass on a smooth piece of driftwood. Sometimes we would sail near Anton and Uncle Albert in the fishing bay; other times we would sail home to Father. In truth, I wanted to go back home and have everything as it had been before my mother died. At the same time, I wanted to grow up as soon as possible and go fishing with Anton and Uncle Albert.

For the first weeks at uncle and aunt's house I was rather quiet, and mostly listened to the others, but it wasn't long before that changed. I talk all the time now and make up stories when I am inside doing chores with my aunt. She likes my stories and has her own to tell, often about when she was little and growing up on a nearby island where she and her sister watched the seals come and go.

Big sister Astrid likes stories too, but she is seldom at home since starting to work full time at the dairy just outside of town. I miss seeing her smile at breakfast, which had made me feel good, even when she didn't say anything. She is nice, but at the age where she is finding her own life.

One day Anton heard me talking to myself outside and made fun of me, so I stopped that and just kept those stories going in my head, unless he wanted me to entertain him with my "wild tales of the sea," as he called them. I told of herds of bright blue whales that amazed everyone and how they came when you were least expecting them, such as when you were sitting in the yard with a glass of raspberry juice, just biding your time watching the white caps in the

The Poet's Daughter

sea. Sometimes I didn't know if my stories were true, or if I had made them up.



In late August, Anton promised to take me to the end of the road after supper. We had potatoes and fish, and the last of the season's cloudberry with cream for dessert that evening. I pretended I wasn't excited and took my time with the berries. "Coming, aren't you?" Anton had to say to get me moving. I slipped on my sweater and we took off up the road, which curved at the upper part and from where I wasn't to go further by myself. From the top you could see far out to sea, where the mountains of the other islands were green as emeralds below their tall jagged peaks. As we started down the road where it heads back toward the sea, I saw a man with a limping dog. Anton said he was Old Man River. He turned off by the time we got down to the sea, and we walked along a nice beach with overturned driftwood in big clumps, like an old dead forest. He said we couldn't take off our shoes because of fish hooks and poisonous jellyfish, but I think he was making that up. We stopped to sit on a long, dry log where we could listen to the waves and see what there was to see.

I was thrilled just being there on that log with Anton. It was the best day. He was quiet and started to say something, but then he didn't. We kept listening to the sea and watching the waves. A big white bird flew past and landed out on a rock. It was bigger than a seagull and had extremely long legs that looked crooked. When it flew off, Anton got up and said it was time to get back, and then, like he had just thought of it, said he was very sorry that my mother had died. He held my hand as we started up the

road, but let go when we got closer to the turnoff to Old Man River's place. My hand felt alive.

We took that same walk many times afterwards, and Anton became my best friend. I don't know if he thought that I could be a best friend, because mostly I talked and he listened, though most of the time we just walked without talking, usually picking wild berries along the side of the road and eating them as we walked along. At our beach we hunted for shells and interesting pieces of driftwood and looked for whatever had come in with the tide the day before.

Usually he acted grown up, but sometimes he would play like I did. He helped me make a sea monster from a special tree stump, which we covered with long strings of seaweed that we wound around its wooden arms and big lopsided head. We called our monster Hegge and pretended it came alive to tell us stories. I said that Hegge was friendly during the day, but at night he became an evil troll who ate every child who dared to come upon this very beach. Anton said Hegge threw the children's bones into the sea, where they turned into twisted clumps of driftwood. "See this?" he said, holding up a small, pointy stick. "That's a finger bone." Anton laughed and chased me down the beach, howling like a gruff old sea troll. I screamed like crazy and there was no one to hear, just the wind over the sea. It was the very best place to scream, and then you'd feel better ever after.



When I started school, Anton would pretty much ignore me during school hours, and then after school he was off with his friends. I had my own girl friends to walk home

The Poet's Daughter

with and more indoor chores and schoolwork to do. I loved school and reading and writing, and especially story time when our teacher would read to us in the late afternoon for half an hour before the school bell rang to end the day.

She has been reading a story about a little woman who lives in a miniature wooden house in the woods, with a roof covered with grass and flowers. Her two pet goats use a ladder to climb onto the roof, and she uses their fur to spin into yarn. One goat is as black as night, and the other is snowy white. She dyes their yarn into brilliant colors using flowers and leaves and secret potions that she cooks in a big pot out in her yard.

The brightly-colored yarn would hang on a branch of her apple tree until the moon was full, when she would take it down and begin to weave. Under the moonlight she wove magic shawls with designs of many colors. She wove red birds the color of sunsets and blue birds the color of mountains, and purple birds the color of spring violets. These shawls she traded to the wicked troll of the mountain so he would protect her chickens from the fox that lived by the river, and her goats that ate grass on her roof. We all loved to hear what happened next in the story, even though our teacher would stop reading just at an exciting place, like when the old troll poked his head out of a cave and you could smell its horrid breath, so we had to wait until the following day to hear what happened next. It drove us crazy.

There is a girl in my class who likes to draw and paint. Her name is Marget, which I find to be a friendly name. She brings her drawing book and little watercolor set with her everywhere, and she and I like to plunk down in the wild flower field near her house. While she paints

Konnie Ellis

buttercups and daisies, I make up stories. Sometimes I continue the story of the shawl weaver and the fox and the troll. Often Marget and I are silent, or we end up having philosophical discussions out in our field of flowers, like little adults, because Marget knows about death too, as her brother died of consumption during the winter before I came to the island. More often though, we talk about school, our teacher, and cute Bjorne Narvik who lives out by Old Man River's road. We have our serious days and our other days, when we end up giggling ourselves silly in the grass, holding our stomachs because we laugh so much it hurts.



I had just changed into my after school clothes and was thinking about the apples I could smell baking downstairs when my aunt called up to me. "Berta!" I hurried down to the kitchen, wondering at the excited tone of her voice. There was a letter from my father! I sat on the butter stool and Aunt Elvine sat on her kitchen chair and opened the letter. She read it aloud:

Dear Berta,

Everyone is fine here and we hope that you are fine too. Konrad has been helping with the haying at the neighbors, and last week Peter helped me dig up the potato patch, which produced an excellent crop this year. We have plenty of apples from the orchard, and a good supply of carrots, beets, and rutabagas, enough to last through the winter and enough to share with the neighbors.

The Poet's Daughter

Baby sister Aagot is living with the kind folks next to the grocery store, and Mette is still with Mrs. Johnson. We all send our warm greetings to you.

What are you learning in school? I hope you like your teacher.

I send my love to Uncle Karl and Aunt Elvine and to Astrid, Anton, Magne and my dear little Berta.

With a warm heart for you,

Your father

Indeed, this letter warmed my heart, and I think I have especially loved baked apples ever since that day of the first letter from home. My aunt read the letter to me several times that day and helped me follow the words written in the swirls of my father's cursive hand. I knew just where he sat when he wrote the letter. I pictured him seated at the small desk beside the window overlooking the fjord, pausing to look out over the water, just as I look out to the Lofoten Sea where he sailed away, leaving me here. With this letter in my hands, I was now confident that he was no longer at sea, but safely back home. I wasn't sure if this comforted me or not.

I had so much to say, so much to tell him and to tell my sisters and Konrad and Peter. I missed Mrs. Johnson and Aunt Inga too, and I wanted to thank her for finding the Lofoten Islands on the map. I wanted to see everyone back home. That was when I made a vow to myself that I would work harder at my lessons so I could read the next letter

myself, and be able to write in cursive, and tell about my new life on this island in the sea. Yes, I will write soon. I will.

When I was alone in my room at the end of the day I held the letter close and thought of the sound of my father's calm voice. I suppose it was a coincidence, but when I looked out my window late that night, I saw the northern lights for the first time since arriving at Lofoten. The lights were whirling and flashing from red to purple and white, and I thought they were an echo of light from the cursive words of my father's letter.



I was a good student and became an even better one. I admit to being obsessed about learning to write well enough so I could write a good and proper letter. My early attempts at cursive writing were not at all successful. I practiced writing my own name, adding many loops and curls as I tried to duplicate the look of my father's elegant handwriting. My teacher was strict and insisted I stop adding unnecessary loops, and I improved my legibility considerably following her instructions.

After school and after chores, instead of joining Marget as before, I practiced my letters, making row after row of the letters of the alphabet in cursive. Using pencil for the first few days of my practice, I quickly made the change to pen and ink. I was careful not to drip ink and made small but precise letters so I wouldn't use up my writing notebook too quickly.

After working on single alphabet letters, I graduated to common short words, such as "look" and "boat," taking

The Poet's Daughter

great pleasure in connecting the letters into whole flowing words. Following the easy words, I took up words I liked the look of, such as the word “Lofoten,” my most challenging word, with its cursive letters connected with just the right amount of curves and circles and lofty letters. I also enjoyed the capital B of my own name - Berta. I can hear the soft “B” as pronounced by my little brother, Peter, as I write my own name. “Ber-ta.”

Marget had not been happy with my student resolve, as I had abandoned our expeditions to the wildflower fields since concentrating on my cursive studies.

“Berta, you shouldn’t ignore your friend,” my aunt said. “She comes everyday looking for you and finds you always too busy. One day she’ll stop coming by. You don’t want to lose such a good friend, do you?”

I knew my aunt was right and I was aghast at the thought of losing Marget’s company. I set aside my writing. On my walk to Marget’s house, I scolded myself for ignoring our friendship. Would she forgive me? Would she be out exploring the hills with a new friend? But Marget was in her front yard playing her circling game around the flag pole. She just said “Hi” and laughed, and we were like we always were.

We walked up to our field, jabbering all the way. It was a warm fall afternoon, following several chilly days when frost covered the road and dock each morning. We were both energized and decided to continue on at the top of the meadow, turning onto the road Anton and I used to reach our secret beach. I didn’t say I wasn’t supposed to take this road alone, but then, Marget was with me. Still, we both knew we were doing something daring.