

Sculptor's Daughter

Tove Jansson

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The Golden Calf

GRANDFATHER WAS A CLERGYMAN and used to preach to the King. Once, before his children and his children's children and his children's children's children covered the face of the earth, Grandfather came to a long field which was surrounded by forests and hills so that it looked like Paradise. At one end it opened out into a bay for his descendants to bathe in.

Then Grandfather thought, here will I dwell and multiply, for verily this is the Land of Canaan.

Then Grandfather and Grandmother built a big two-storey house with a sloping roof and lots of rooms and steps and terraces and a huge veranda and placed plain wooden furniture everywhere inside and outside the house and when it was ready Grandfather began to plant things until the field became a Garden of Eden where he walked around in his big black beard. All he had to do was to point at a plant and it was blessed and grew until it groaned under its own weight.

The whole house was overgrown with honeysuckle and Virginia creeper and walls of small rambler roses grew round the veranda. Inside these walls Grandmother sat in a pale-grey silk dress and brought up her children. There were so many bees and bumble bees flying around her that it sounded like soft organ music, and in the daytime it was sunny and at night it rained and in the rock-garden there lived an angel who wasn't to be disturbed.

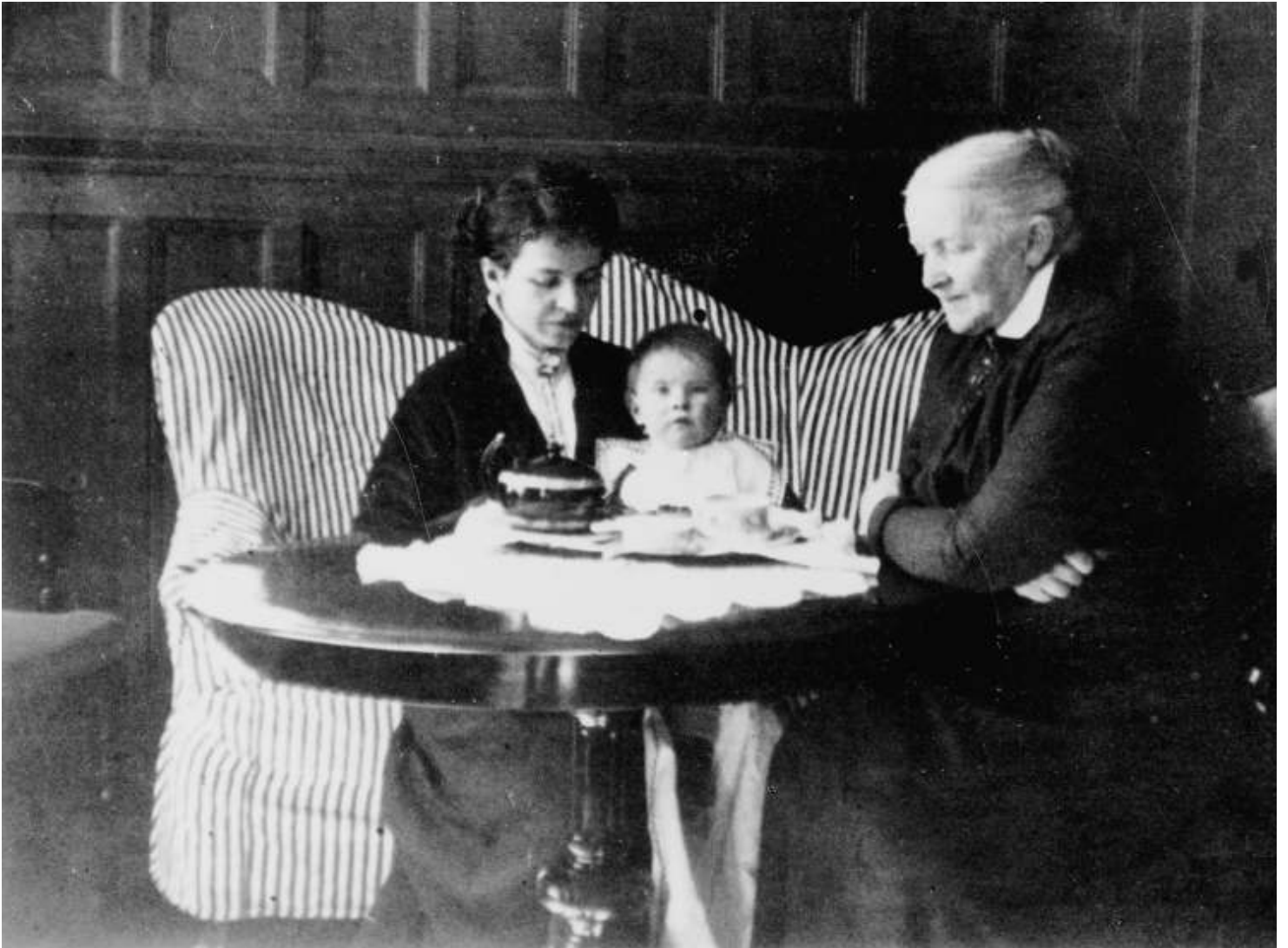
She was still there when Mummy and I went out to live in the West Room, which also had white furniture and peaceful pictures but no sculpture.

I was a grandchild. Karin was another grandchild but her hair curled naturally and she had very big eyes. We played The Children of Israel together in the field.

God lived on the hill above the rock-garden and there was a forbidden cart up there. At sunset he spread out like a mist over the house and the field. He could make himself quite small and creep in everywhere in order to see what one was doing and sometimes he was only a great big eye. Moreover he looked just like Grandfather.

We raised our voices in the wilderness and were continually disobedient because God so likes to forgive sinners. God forbade us to gather manna under the laburnum tree but we did all the same. Then he sent worms up from the earth to eat up the manna. But we went on being disobedient and we still raised our voices.

THE GOLDEN CALF



All the time we expected him to get so angry that he would show himself. The very idea was tremendous. We could think of nothing but God. We sacrificed to him, we gave him blueberries and crab apples and flowers and milk and sometimes we made a small burnt-offering. We sang for him and we prayed to him to give us a sign that he was interested in what we were doing.

One morning Karin said that the sign had come to her. He had sent a yellow bunting into her room and it had perched on the picture of Jesus Walking on the Waters and nodded its head three times.

Verily, verily I say unto you, Karin said, many are called but few are chosen.

She put on a white dress and went round all day with roses in her hair and sang hymns and carried on in a very affected way. She was more beautiful than ever and I hated her. My window had been open too. I had a picture of the Guardian Angel at the Abyss on my wall. I had burnt as many burnt-offerings and picked even more blueberries for him. And as for raising my voice in the wilderness I had been just as disobedient as she in order to get divine forgiveness.

At morning prayers on the veranda Karin looked as though Grandfather was preaching only to her. She nodded her head slowly with a thoughtful look on her face. She clasped her hands long before the Lord's Prayer. She sang with great emphasis and kept her eyes on the ceiling. After that business of the yellow bunting God belonged to her.

We didn't speak to each other and I stopped raising my voice in the wilderness and sacrificing and was so jealous that I felt sick.

One day Karin lined up all the cousins in the field, even the ones who couldn't talk yet, and held a Bible class for them.

It was then that I made the golden calf.

When Grandfather was young and was planting like mad he put a circle of spruce trees at the bottom of the field because he wanted a little arbour to have his afternoon tea in. The spruce trees grew and grew until they were huge and black and their branches got all tangled up with each other. It was quite dark inside the arbour and all the needles fell off and lay on the ground because they never got enough sunshine. Nobody wanted to have tea there any longer but preferred to sit under the laburnum or on the veranda.

I made my golden calf in the arbour because it was a pagan place and a circle is always a good setting for sculpture. It was very difficult to get the legs to stay upright but in the end they did and I nailed them to the plinth just to make sure. Sometimes I stood still, listening for the first rumble of the wrath of God. But so far he had said nothing. His great eye just looked right down into the arbour through the hole between the tops of the spruce trees. At last I had got him to show some interest.

The head of the calf turned out very well. I used tin cans and rags and bits of a muff and tied the lot

together with string. If you stood a little way away and screwed up your eyes the calf really did shine like gold in the darkness, particularly round its nose.

I became more and more interested in it and began to think more and more about the calf and less and less about God. It was a very good golden calf. Finally I put a circle of stones round it and collected dry twigs for a burnt-offering.

Only when the burnt-offering was ready to light did I begin to feel afraid again and I stood completely still and listened.

God kept completely quiet. Perhaps he was waiting for me to take out the matches. He wanted to see if I really would do something so awful as to sacrifice to the golden calf and, even worse, dance in front of it afterwards. Then he would come down from his hill in a cloud of lightning and wrath and show that he knew that I existed. Then Karin could keep her old yellow bunting and her prayers and her blueberries!

I stood there and listened and listened and the silence grew and grew until it was overpowering. Everything was listening. It was late in the afternoon and the light coming through the trees made the branches look red. The golden calf looked at me and waited and my legs began to feel weak. I started to walk backwards, towards the gap between the trees, looking at the calf all the time, and as it became lighter and warmer I thought that I should have signed my name on the socle.

Grandmother was standing outside the harbour and she was wearing her lovely grey silk dress and her parting was as straight as an angel's.

What have you been playing at in there, she said, and walked straight past me. She stood in front of the golden calf and looked at it and smiled. She put her arm around me and absent-mindedly pressed me against the grey silk and said: look what you've made! A little lamb. God's little lamb!

Then she let go of me and walked slowly down the field.

I stayed where I was and my eyes began to smart and the bottom fell out of everything and God went back to his hill again and calmed down. She hadn't even noticed that it was a calf! A lamb! Good grief! It didn't look one little bit like a lamb, nowhere near it! I stared and stared at my calf. And what Grandmother had said seemed to have taken all the gold away from it and the legs were wrong and the head was wrong, everything about it was wrong and if it looked like anything at all perhaps it was a lamb. It wasn't any good. It wasn't sculpture at all.

I went to the junk room and sat there for a long time and thought. I found a sack. I put it on and then went out into the field and shuffled around in front of Karin on bended knee with my hair hanging over my eyes.

Whatever are you doing? Karin asked.

Then I answered: verily, verily I say unto you, I am a great sinner.

Really? said Karin. I could see that she was impressed.

Then everything was as usual again, and we lay under the laburnum tree and whispered together about God. Grandfather walked up and down making everything grow and the angel was still there in the rock-garden as if nothing had happened at all.

The Dark

BEHIND THE RUSSIAN CHURCH there is an abyss. The moss and the rubbish are slippery and jagged old tins glitter at the bottom. For hundreds of years they have piled up higher and higher against a long dark red house without windows. The red house crawls round the rock and it is very significant that it has no windows. Behind the house is the harbour, a silent harbour with no boats in it. The little wooden door in the rock below the church is always locked.

Hold your breath when you run past it, I told Poyu. Otherwise Putrefaction will come out and catch you.

Poyu always has a cold. He can play the piano and holds his hands in front of him as if he were afraid of being attacked or was apologising to someone. I always scare him and he follows me because he wants to be scared.

As soon as twilight comes, a great big creature creeps over the harbour. It has no face but has got

SCULPTOR'S DAUGHTER

