



2018 First Place

## Night Riding *Candace Simar*

Midwife Olava Wick heard their whispers whenever she entered the Norwegian American Church or rode her pony to Nickelbo's General Store. Folks called her an old witch because of her herbal treatments and potions. They said she knew things before they happened. They stopped short of saying she should have stayed in Norway, though at her age, it would have been wiser to stay back where her life had been.

Of course, the good people of Nickelbo did not hesitate to call on her if they broke a bone or took sick with a fever. She was as close to a doctor as they had on the Dakota prairie.

Olava sighed, pulled her shawl tighter around her face and urged her pony over the frozen ground. Maybe she was a witch. Why else would she leave the new mother and baby to venture out so late on this frigid Christmas Eve?

The baby was born slow but healthy. Big and strong, he was, a beautiful boy child. He came out screaming like a Viking berserker. Such lungs! He faced an uncertain future, even in America. In Olava's long life, she had never known a *eukte*, a bastard child, to overcome the scandal of his birth.

Ahead lay Nickelbo Lake guarded by a rim of cottonwoods. Olava rode through an ocean of ice-draped cattails on a moon-spilled path onto the frozen lake. Overhead a million stars winked. A snowy owl hooted and flapped giant wings in the shadows. A wolf howled a lonely song.

Deep cold penetrated her buffalo coat. Her feet were blocks of ice by the time she reached the homestead across the lake. A small light showed under the door of the dugout. When she tried to dismount, her ancient joints creaked like old hinges, and fire shot through both feet. She was too old for this.

She knocked, and called at the door, clutching her bag of supplies against her chest. No one answered. She could not feel her face or hands. She pounded on the door again, her heavy mitts muffling the sound. Slowly, the door opened a crack, and then burst open.

"Come in," a young man said. "Come in out of the cold."

He was long haired, and a wild beard curled around his neck. His eyes looked as red as his beard. Red-rimmed they were, like he had been weeping. He wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"What are you doing out so late on Christmas Eve?" The man swiped his sleeve across his eyes, and sniffed. "Did you come alone?"

A grease lamp glowed on a rough table. The dugout stank of boiled fish, creosote and dirty socks. So cramped that the bed built into the western wall served as chair for the table built into the eastern wall. A stove and wood pile filled the far end. Built into the side of a hill, it had dirt floors and earthen walls.

Olava's teeth chattered and her limbs shook so that she could not speak. She was chilled to the bone. She fingered the asaphidity

bag around her neck, and held it to her nose for a deep inhalation of camphor and garlic. Perhaps it would be enough to prevent pneumonia.

"A new baby," she finally said between chattering teeth. She leaned against the table to steady herself. "Someday I'm going to ask God why babies are born so late at night." Her words came out in near-whisper. "My pony is lame."

The young man roused himself to action with the quickness of youth. He poked wood into the stove and opened the oven door. "Come, warm yourself." He pulled a stump toward the stove. "Put your feet in the oven. Don't worry about manners."

He pulled the blankets off his bed and wrapped them around her. The hem of her skirt dripped melting snow. He poured a cup of warm water, and added a finger width of aquavit.

"Not a word," he said when she protested the liquor. "Drink, and warm yourself. I'll care for your mount."

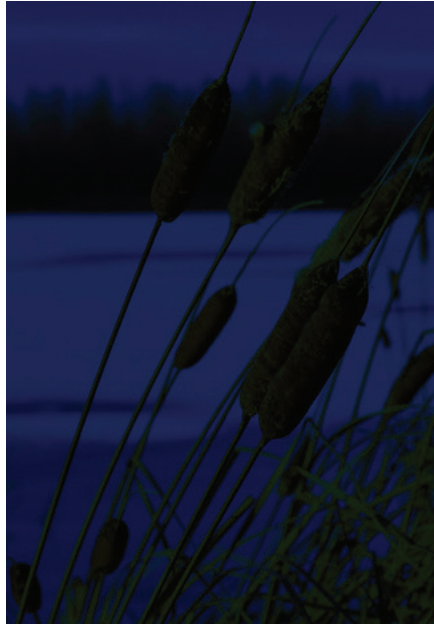
He left in a blast of cold air. She chided herself. Her pony was not lame. She told a lie to a stranger—and on Christmas. The words had popped out of her mouth without thought. Easier for her to speak a lie than the hard truth of her mission. She sipped the hot toddy.

As the heat penetrated her bones and the blood began to circulate in her veins, she planned her words. She must not say too much...or too little. A life depended on it, no two lives.

"Your pony is exhausted," the young man said when he returned. "You must spend the night, and tomorrow we'll plan what to do."

"You are kind," she said. She looked around the cramped dwelling. She had been in cleaner barns. "But with little room to share."

"Nonsense," he said. His voice had a desperate ring to it, similar to the tone



of the new mother's wild threats. "If there is a will of heart, there is always house room."

The Norwegian saying brought a smile to her lips. She sipped again, feeling the fire of liquor flush to her face.

"You are a stranger," she said. She glared at him with mock severity, pulling the long hatpin from her hat and holding it like a Viking sword. The glow of the lamp reflected off the thin metal shaft. "I don't even know your name." Another lie. She knew his name. "Am I safe with you?"

The young man stood with gaping mouth. "I assure you," he said with a nervous sputter. "You need not worry about your safety. I am Magnus Madson."

His distress brought a giggle to her throat that swelled into a full belly laugh. She was old enough to be his grandmother, and well past the age when she had to worry about unwanted advances from strange men.

"You should see your face!" She laughed until she wheezed and coughed. "Thirty years ago I might have had reason for concern."

He stood as if unsure what to make of his visitor.

"I am Olava Wick," she said. "Also from Norway. Though you should know that the good people of Nickelbo name me a witch."

"You cackle like a witch," he said. "You're the old doctor woman."

"That's right," she said with a clap of hands. "You're the one who chopped his leg with an ax last fall but were too proud to ask for my help—though you needed it."

"It wasn't bad," he stumbled over his words. He combed through his beard with his fingers, tangling them in the mass of curls. "I didn't want to bother."

"You didn't ask because you had no money," she said. All young men were the same. More pride than sense.

He weakly protested, and then nodded. "You're right. I had no money."

"I've never asked for money," she said. "I've delivered babies, set bones and even amputated frozen toes. Sometimes folks give me a few eggs or a joint of meat. No one has money here on the prairie. I've never turned anyone away."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to offend."

"My salve would have fixed your leg in no time." This young man's prideful ways were known about the community. A hard worker, but prideful. "Did it heal?"

"Almost," he said. "It wasn't bad then, just bothersome with flies."

She removed her feet from the oven door, and reached into her bag. "Here," she said as she thrust a small gourd of salve into his hands. "I make it myself. Some claim it will pull ten penny nails out of boards, it has such drawing power."

He sniffed. "Smells like turpentine."

"I'll not tell you my recipe," she said with a laugh. "I'll turn my head, and you doctor your wound. It will heal up by New Year's—if you can stand it."

She turned her back and cackled when he gasped in pain. It was always the same. The strongest men were the biggest babies. A woman sometimes endured childbed with barely a whimper, but a man was a different story. She had known a grown man to faint when she lanced a carbuncle. She turned around in time to see him fastening his trousers.

"I feel it draw already," he said. Tears welled in his eyes, and he rubbed his face again with his sleeve. "It's my first Christmas away

from home." He mumbled into his beard so quietly that she caught only a few words. "It's hard... alone."

He pulled a cast iron frying pan onto the burner and tossed a pork rind into it. "You must be hungry." The smell of sizzling fat filled the air. Then he sliced potatoes into the hot fat, and plunked down onto the bed opposite her.

"I am a doctor," she said, "at least as close to a real doctor as most folks around here will ever know." She leaned forward, and looked into his blue eyes. "I see in this short time that you have lost your *livsgleden*, your joy of life."

He squirmed and tried to look away, but she pressed.

"Do you deny it, Mr. Madson?"

He shook his head. "In truth, I am desperate." He told how he had been tricked by a Yankee horse trader who

swindled him out of all his money. The story burst out of him as the new baby had burst into the world earlier in the night. "I can't stand being alone here on the prairie, listening to the never-ending wind blow. I was tying a hang knot when you came." He pointed his chin toward a rope lying on the dirt floor next to the stove. "You're an angel sent by God to stop me." He hung his head into both hands, mumbling something about his mother's prayers. "You are the first person I've seen in more than a month."

She propped her feet back on the oven door and listened without comment. Of course his Norwegian mother prayed for him. Of course God had sent Olava to his door that night, but she was no angel. She closed her eyes and leaned closer to the heat of the stove.

"Your potatoes are burning," she said with a sniff. "Takes a woman to mind a stove."

He jumped up and stirred the potatoes with his knife.

"You have your youth, and your land, and this good start in America." She stood to her feet and removed her coat. She stuck the hat pin into the hat. "You were taken advantage of by a Yankee-boy, but you are from

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good Viking stock." She lay her coat over the foot of the little bed. "There never was a Yankee born who could outlast a determined Norwegian."

He cracked an egg over the potatoes, and stirred again. She felt a sudden hunger. It had been a long while since her last meal, so busy she had been with the new baby.

"I always carry my own dish." She rummaged in her bag for a tin plate and fork. She doubted the man owned an extra plate, and if he did, it would be too filthy to use. She held out her plate and he divided the food. They ate in silence. He ate directly from the pan with the tip of his knife.

The lamp sputtered. Again the sound of wolves howling and the moaning wind. A log settled in the stove box with a thump. A whiff of smoke seeped from the glowing red pipe.

"We all make mistakes," she said quietly. "It is how we deal with them that matters."

He looked into her eyes with what she perceived as a glimmer of hope.

"Do you have a remedy for one who has lost his joy of living?" he blurted. He covered before her as if waiting for a rebuke.

"Ya, ya," she said. "I have a cure if you are strong enough to take it."

"Does it burn like your salve?"

"So it burns you, does it?" Laughter burst out of her throat. No matter how many times she said that her salve worked like a cleansing flame, she had learned that people were always surprised.

He nodded. "Like fire."

"Then it's working," she said with a smug smile. "All my cures work if one is willing to put up with the pain." She hesitated. "You'll be cured by New Year's if you can take it."

"And the cure for lost *livsgleden*?"

"Ah yes, the cure." She felt her way through the conversation as a blind man felt his way in a dark room. God protected fools. She barged ahead. "First you must take a bath, and I will cut your hair."

"In this weather?" His eyes bugged and he shook his head. "I'd catch my death of pneumonia." He stood to his feet and paced back and forth in front of the stove. "It's late and the spring is frozen solid. I'd have to chop a hole in the ice for water."

"It's *Jul*," she said. "There is a full moon." She felt sorry for the young man, but it must be done, just as a suppurating wound must be purged. "Everyone washes for Christmas."

He paused. She saw him wrestle with her words. Finally he relented. He didn't look happy about it. She breathed a sigh of relief when he left with two buckets and an ax. In truth, he stank like an old goat, and his hair hung almost to his shoulders.

She stoked the fire until the stove glowed red hot. While she waited for his return, she washed her dish and straightened the room. She placed a small gourd of soft soap on the table, along with a pair of shears used to harvest wool. He returned to the dugout with a red face and full buckets, his breath steaming in the cold air from outside, snot frozen on his beard. She yelped a warning before he added the cold water to the pan. She first emptied the hot water into a wooden bowl also pulled from her bag.

"Now then," she said with a firm grip on the shears. "You must shave your *skjegg*, beard, and I will trim your hair." She eyed him in the lamplight. "We'll see what you look like under all that brush."

He protested. "I will not keep warm without a *helskjegg*, full beard." "My cure," she said. "Take it or leave it."

He gritted his teeth as she clipped his long beard. He stropped his razor and lathered his face. As he cleared his cheeks, she felt

a lightening in his spirit, perhaps new *livsgleden* springing up within him. She clipped his hair as he shaved. The locks fell to the floor.

"When was your last haircut?" she said.

"My mother trimmed my hair before I left Norway." She heard the catch in his voice. He swallowed hard. "Almost a year."

She stuffed the fallen hair into the stove. "And now you bathe," she said. "Do you have clean clothes?"

He rummaged in the trunk and found a wrinkled shirt and sweater. A clean pair of holey socks lay in the bottom of the chest, and a pair of knitted underwear. Some old trousers.

"All over now with soap, and don't forget to wash your head and feet."

He stood holding his clothes. She chuckled. A man could clear a field, fight a war and tackle mountains. Not a one could figure out the simplest household thing without a woman guiding him.

"Blow out the lamp. I'll turn my back," she said. "Afterwards I will see how you look. I hope you aren't hiding pigs in the forest behind all that dirt."

He laughed nervously and extinguished the light.

"More salve on your wound if you can stand it."

He splashed water. She could only pray the rag also washed away his loneliness and despair. A hang knot indeed. He had everything to live for. He sputtered and blew like a horse drinking from a trough. She heard the pull of clothes over his body.

"Are you decent?" She didn't wait for his answer. The stove lid rattled and the lamp flickered again. "I knew it all along," she said with delight. She dug again into her bag and pulled out a small hand mirror. "Underneath that beard hid a good-looking man, a real Viking-boy."

He peered into the glass. She noted the look of satisfaction in his eyes. *Livsgleden* always began with a good cleaning.

"I hope you don't expect me to share your bed," she said. She laughed loud and long. Hope rose within her, too. Perhaps her mission was not in

vain. "Although you are good looking enough to tempt even an old widow woman like me."

His naked cheeks flushed. "You shall have my bed, and I will sleep on the floor." He hesitated. "Or I could go to the barn."

"No need," she said. "Stay inside by the fire." She gathered his dirty clothes and put them into the pan on the stove. "No sense wasting the water. They'll cook all night. By morning they will be almost clean." She gathered her mirror and other small items. "Besides, I have something to confess."

She blew out the lamp and lay on his bed covered with her buffalo coat, and he cocooned in blankets on the floor. The bed stank of sweat and cow manure. A lumpy mattress poked in all the wrong places.

"Mr. Madson," she said. She weighed her words and decided to go with the obvious. "You may have noticed my pony is not lame."

"That horse is done in."

"Maybe," she said. The stovepipe contracted with a pop. "He's always on his last leg, and yet keeps going. As I must do, even at my age. But my horse is not lame."

"I don't understand."

"The baby," she said. "The one just delivered."

The darkness caressed like an extra blanket. A sliver of light glowed around the stove door. Somehow the words came easier in the darkness.

"The young mother is from Norway, and new to Dakota. She lived in a logging town back east on the Mississippi River." She sighed. "A wild place. Dance halls and saloons. Evil men take advantage of women in such places. Especially if they are alone and without money."

He did not answer. She waited. A mouse rustled behind the wood pile.

"And tonight there is a baby?" he said at last.

"A baby boy without father or future," she said. "And a young woman without *livsgleden* threatens to take her own life, and that of her child."

He gasped. She had the strong impression that he thought again of the hang rope still on the floor.

"I came tonight, because I heard you were a good man in need of a wife." She took a breath and continued. "My man hung himself back in Norway." She paused. "He lost his *livsgleden*." The stove pipe snapped, and Magnus took in a sharp breath. "I know the pains of life. I know them well."

She told how the young woman sent word to her uncle when she found herself in trouble. He sent money for her to come here. "But he took ill and died before she arrived," Olava said. "On his deathbed, he made me promise to help her."

"Is there no other family?" he said.

"None in this country," she said. "And no welcome if she went home with a bastard in tow."

"I suppose not," he said. "People are cruel."

"Wouldn't you agree that a wife and family make life worth living?" she demanded. "A wife to cook for you and warm your bed. A son to grow up and help with the farm." She paused. "You stuck alone out here, drowning in work."

He didn't answer.

"She would be your wife if you were big enough to overlook her sins and raise her son as your own."

"A stranger?" he said in the darkness. "I couldn't possibly..."

"Take on another man's child?" she interrupted. "You could not marry a woman with a past, with sins to be hidden."

"That's right."

"You could not overlook a young girl's sins, though in your pride, you hope others will forgive your failings."

The silence grew louder than her beating heart.

"Her name is Hannah Lothen. She has her uncle's homestead, a cabin and what livestock and equipment he had gathered. She cannot manage alone." Her voice drifted a bit. How tired she felt. It must be the aquavitt working. "Neither can you manage alone."

"So the woman and child is your treatment for my loss of *livsgleden*?"

"My cures work if you can stand them."

She told him that no one else in the area knew of the young woman or her situation. Her uncle had sworn Olava to secrecy. "He said it

was a chance for her to find a new start. He didn't want her burdened with scandal."

"Shame will follow her," he said. "Her sin would sleep between us at night."

"We all carry sins," she said.

The wood settled in the firebox, and a puff of smoke seeped from the red-hot pipe. It was cold outside, how cold was anyone's guess. Her eyelids heaved with fatigue. She had barely slept the previous night while Hannah was in her agony.

"The preacher is coming day after tomorrow. It will be the last time he comes this way until spring," she said, her voice just above a whisper. "Meet Hannah Lothen tomorrow, and have the preacher tie the knot while he is here."

She forced herself to continue though she felt his interest turning. Pride again. He thought his *dritt* didn't stink.

"Most will think you sent for her, already expecting your child. Not exactly right, but not unusual in such times." She took a raspy breath and

**"Shame will follow her," he said. "Her sin would sleep between us at night." "We all carry sins," she said.**

coughed again. "You wouldn't be the only one with night riding before the wedding. Nobody's business."

"Is Hannah a handsome woman?" he blurted.

"If you are a big enough man to forgive her, you will find her to be the most beautiful woman in the world." She paused. "But if you do not forgive her, she will never be good enough, no matter how pretty her face."

The silence deepened, and she was almost asleep when she heard him roll closer to the stove.

"I was thinking about Joseph and Mary," she said in a sleepy voice.

"I'm not a saint like Joseph was," he said. "I can't help your friend."

"You won't help her, you mean," she said. "How is your leg?"

"I'm thinking about going outside and sticking it in the lake," he said with a groan. "It burns like fire."

"Good," she said. "It's healing."

The next time she woke, she had been dreaming of a screaming eagle. Her mother in Norway would have seen meaning in the dream, perhaps a death or another baby soon to be born. Olava knew only that Mr. Madson had set his mind against marrying Hannah Lothen. A wasted trip. A pity.

Olava got out of bed and threw more wood into the stove box, stepping over the sleeping form on the floor. It was before dawn. He could not be blamed for not being a big enough man. She sighed. Hannah's desperate words floated through Olava's mind, "*I will smother him and shoot myself after you leave.*" It would be Olava's fault if she returned to find it so. She had been wrong to leave the young mother alone.

She rummaged in her sack for a bag of coffee beans and a small grinder. The coffee boiled on the stove when he roused.

"Merry Christmas," she said. "How is your leg this morning?"

"Better," he said in surprise as he pulled his trouser leg to reveal a smaller wound. "Your salve works."

"My cures all work," she said. There was no use in beating a dead horse. "I must be on my way."

She did not mention the woman and baby. Instead she chatted about skis and horses, crops and chicken pox. The coffee fortified her like a strong medicine.

The temperature had dropped like a stone, and the skies were clear. Sun dogs guarded a weak sun, small rainbows on either side of the milky blotch of sun in a blue sky.

"You shouldn't leave in such weather, Mrs. Wick," he said. "Stay longer."

"I must be on my way," she said. She did not tell him that she must return to the cabin across the lake to see if the mother and child lived. "Some poor soul might need me."

He helped her climb into the saddle of her little pony. She said nothing about their conversation of the night before. It was no use. She had failed. She flicked the reins and waved over her shoulder as the pony walked slowly onto the lake and traveled the frozen path through the snow.

On her trip across the lake, Olava tried to think of a different plan. Hannah needed a man to do the outdoor chores. She couldn't both care for a newborn and work outside. Olava did not know of another bachelor in the township. There was a widow man, but he was too old for the girl, and Olava had heard he had been cruel and heavy handed with his former wife.

She rode up to the cabin. Not much of a house, but a palace compared to the dirty dugout of the night before. A new husband would inherit the house and barn, a mule, and a flock of hens. Pride

kept Mr. Madson from having the world handed to him on a plate. She knocked on the door and braced herself for the worst. She might be walking into a tragedy. The cold wind bit the tips of her nose and made it drip.

The door opened. Hannah Lothen's blond hair swirled in messy ringlets around her thin face. She was too pretty for her own good. A homely girl might have been spared unwanted advances, or at least had sense enough to disbelieve wild promises of unscrupulous men. She wrapped in a huge black shawl that almost covered a gray flannel nightgown. Woolen socks poked out from beneath the hem of her gown.

Blue eyes, as blue as the sky over Ten Mile Lake, looked back at her. Olava recognized their sadness, the loss of *livsgleden*. But Hannah lived. Where there was life there was hope.

The baby cried, and Hannah turned toward the sound. "Come in out of the cold," Hannah said. "I didn't know if you were coming back." Her attention clearly focused on the baby.

He was red faced and howling. The girl sat on the bed and covered the baby's head with the edge of her shawl. She showed no animosity toward the child who nursed with loud gulps. Olava breathed a silent prayer of thanks.

A weak light streamed through the southern windowpane, falling upon the woman and nursing baby. The baby burped.

"Where did you go?" Hannah said. "I woke up and you were gone."

Olava was about to explain when a knock sounded on the door.

"Who could that be?" Hannah said. "I don't know anyone here."

Olava burst out laughing. She had been right after all. She knew who it was, who had finally accepted her cure. She opened the door to a wind-burned Magnus Madson. He held his skis in his hand and wore a sheepish expression on his clean face.

"Come in, Mr. Madson," Olava said. "I've been expecting you."

Surely these two young people could build a good life for themselves if they worked together. They could live in the cabin and farm both tracts

of land. A cabin already constructed would be a leg up. Fields already under tillage. A mule. The preacher was coming. There was much to discuss.

"Who are you?" Hannah said. "Are you looking for my uncle?"

"I'm Magnus Madson from across the lake," he said. He pointed his chin toward Olava. "She fetched me."

Somehow the words came, the words that needed to be said. The words Magnus obviously wanted to say once he saw Hannah. Hannah kept her gaze on the sleeping baby the whole time he spoke, not once looking up. He said that the preacher was coming and they could be married. Only then did she raise her eyes and look at him full in the face.

He squared his shoulders and stood bravely under Hannah's scrutiny. He showed himself to be the fine young man Olava had hoped him to be. Thank the Lord he was at least clean shaven and shorn of his greasy locks. No woman would look twice at a dirty man. Olava took the sleeping baby from his mother's arms and stood to the side. She thought to leave, but was almost afraid that if she moved, she would break the spell of what was happening before her.

"Do you think you could love my son?" Hannah said at last. Her voice so soft and low that Olava had to lean forward to hear.

A cloud shifted, and a beam of Christmas sun streamed through the window, turning the cabin as bright and clear as any Norwegian winter day. Olava handed the baby to the young bachelor, hoping he at least knew how to hold a newborn. It was the moment of truth. What he said next would decide their future.

"He's fine," Magnus said. He held him up, then bent to kiss the top of his head. "A real Viking-boy."

Olava saw hope in their eyes.

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Minnesota author CANDACE SIMAR writes historical novels and short stories. She is the grateful recipient of a 2012 Spur Award, 2013 Spur Finalist Award, a 2016 Willa Finalist Award and was a 2016 Midwest Book Award Finalist. [www.candacesimar.com](http://www.candacesimar.com)

