

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

For a year I lived in Arctic Norway, at the very part where the country is at its thinnest. From the college where I taught I could just see to the west the beginnings of the sea; if I looked east I caught a first glimpse of the Swedish valleys. And between the two ran the main road north, and beside that the railway line. At night I used to watch the yellow caterpillar of the train thundering north and west to the final stations on the line. When I came back, people asked if it hadn't been an ordeal suffering the winter. The paradox is that the worst winter I've ever known is the one *after* I returned to Britain, because the cold here in December is a wet and shivering rawness that's made all the worse by the gnawing of the wind. The Scots have bottled that whole description with their single word *dreich*. The best winter I've ever known was that one, north of the Arctic Circle: an encapsulation of all the childhood dreams of northern-ness – pine forest and deep mountain and frost-covered snow. And the Northern Lights.

The last thing I used to do at night was to go onto the balcony for a cigarette. It was winter and thirty below: I went out like an extra from *Dr Zhivago*. I will never forget the quiet at ten o'clock: you could have heard a pin drop in Moscow. It was somehow quieter than silence itself: the snow six feet deep and covered with frost crystals. It was what the Norwegians call 'the time of darkness': there was no light whatsoever, just days and days of moon and star darkness. Yet it was a bright darkness; it was a beautiful darkness.

And I went out at ten o'clock every night for the rising of the Northern Lights. I could set my watch by them: when others were switching on their televisions for the news, I went out onto the balcony to await the start of their dancing. For I never knew what colour they might be: that was what held me in suspense every night. Often it was blue and green; sometimes there were ghostly white breaths and flickers, only very occasionally did I witness them vivid red.

But always they were there at ten o'clock in the silence that was bigger than silence, rising above the pine trees and the sharp white edges of the mountains. I thought of their leaping as like that of strange and ancient ghosts; I fabled that once upon a time in the very north of the world there were beautiful horses that galloped and leapt, but something terrible had befallen them and they had died and these were their spirits.

I wasn't alone under the Northern Lights. Other people came out onto their balconies here and there; they waved handkerchiefs at the fire in the sky and I heard them whistling to them. For the Northern Norwegians believed that these things would make the Lights shine brighter still.

What I found eeriest of all was the silence of them. You stand under these great risings and fallings of light and they are soundless. It was so quiet I could hear my own breathing; all I could scent was the pine smoke from chimneys around me, rising in blue pillars into the night. I watched until the cold overcame me and the Lights themselves began to fade, came inside with ice on my mouth and face, not quite able to believe I was really there. It was a childhood dream, and it had happened.