



Island of the Naked Women

INGER FRIMANSSON

The Master of Psychological Thrillers
Twice Winner of the Swedish Academy of
Crime Writers' Award for Best Crime Novel

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Island of the Naked Women

by Inger Frimansson

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The End of September

1

SHE WOKE HIM right before dawn. Her voice was thick and husky from sleep.

“Tobias ... time to wake up. The wind’s died down.”

He was lying in bed, his arm raised at an unnatural angle, his hand in a fist. When her voice reached him, he punched as if he had to defend himself, and his fist hit the wall. Still half-asleep, he swore out loud.

“Damn it, I’m coming already.”

She’d turned the light on in the hallway, and stood backlit. Through her nightgown, he could make out the strong, well-developed contours of her body. He stood up, and a fringe of his hair fell into his eyes. Animal stench still seemed to permeate every strand of hair on his head. He’d made sure to wear a cap out in the barn, but it hadn’t helped.

She carried the stink of the animals, too. He’d noticed it the minute he arrived on Thursday. She probably wasn’t even aware of it.

“I’m going to go get dressed,” she said, and her voice was not yet her natural Sabina-voice; it was thick and forced. The stairway groaned as she walked away. He heard her breathe.

“All right, I’m coming,” he whispered, and his voice hung in the room.

Tobias rolled up the blinds and pushed away the curtains. There was frost covering the grass, and the chill was sharp and direct. A low hum came from the boiler, which sent out warmth as if it were the house’s very own blood circulation. He’d been sleeping pressed against the wall, warmed from its life-giving heat. His own body odor—strong, familiar—now mixed with the animals’ scent; the air all around him was filled with it, their manure and their sweat.

His smell was no longer his own.

He experienced a brief moment of dread.

He stood in the middle of the floor, standing straight but tired, and adjusted the clothes he’d been sleeping in. The wallpaper in the room was the same—wide, silver-white ribbons with ornamentation. That heavy, old-fashioned furniture and the tapestry on the ancient chair’s upholstery. No one could bear to sit on the lumpy seat for long; the back support was an anatomical joke. When he was a child, he’d lost himself in its pattern of fairy-tale trees; the tips of his fingers had traced the embossed velvet surface.

The sofa could be pulled out and made into a bed. When he and Görel were newlyweds, they’d often slept there, quiet and breathless during the marriage act. Görel had never felt comfortable in this house. Not even when they were alone. Strange noises and knockings made her tense. She would jump up from her chair and pace between the windows.

“I know someone is out there, Tobi. Someone wants to break in!”

It took a great deal of his patience to calm her down again.

Outside, the dogs had already sensed that people were up and about. Their deep, calm barking showed they knew he was there; nothing escaped their acute hearing. They would stretch their necks, point their noses to the sky, and howl that ancient wolf cry: *There's a human being at the edge of the forest! And a deer!*

They were kept mostly in the dog yard. Not pets. They were meant to guard, hunt, and herd animals.

Sabina was already in the kitchen, completely dressed, wearing her green sweatpants and her sweater with sleeves that were much too long. She'd rolled them up over her wrists, but they kept sliding back down. She was massaging her hands with hand lotion, kneading them.

"I've started some coffee."

Tobias nodded, sat down on the chair closest to the window, heard the soft sound of her heels on the rug. On the table was the container of butter, a sticky butter knife straight up in it, and a plate with sliced liverwurst, rather dry around the edges. She was slicing tomatoes, and the seeds were sliding all over in the juice.

"I can make some hot cereal for you if you'd like; it'll warm you up."

"Hot cereal?"

"Oatmeal."

"Hell, no. My mom stuffed that into me when I was a kid. I had enough to last the rest of my life."

Her back was to him as she stood in front of the counter, her hair in a strong, twisted braid, intertwined and shining warm.

"Were you able to sleep at all?" she asked.

"A bit."

"Is the bed soft enough for someone like you?"

"Someone like me? Cut it out."

Her eyes were like blades in the whiteness of her face.

"Of course, you're used to much better accommodations, what with being on TV and all."

He didn't bother answering. She had dragged the cot out of the attic and added an extra mattress. Honestly, he'd had much more comfortable beds, but since she'd made the extra effort, he was touched. He slowly buttered a bit of dark, sweet rye bread, and pulled apart a few slices of the liverwurst. A scratching noise at the door made him look up. Sabina's face turned soft and open; she looked at him and smiled.

"He's learned to behave, and he's clean, now," she said contentedly.

It was a golden retriever pup. Not a very useful creature. The old man had bought it for her because she'd been longing for something soft. Sabina went to open the door and ice-cold morning air was drawn in along the floor. The puppy scooted through the doorway,

his nails tapping. Sabina squatted down to the puppy; her hand was big and flat on its head.

“What do you call him?” he asked.

“I already told you. Frett.”

“Fred?”

“No, you heard me, Frett.”

“Frett? But that’s a kind of polecat.”

“What?”

“It’s another name for a polecat.”

“I just thought of it out of the blue. It’s short enough, he hears me when I call him, and he comes right away.”

She sat down in front of him, legs apart, the puppy in her lap, his tan paws hanging over her arm. An odd shyness came over Tobias. It seemed she expected him to say something, something awkward and unnatural for him.

“Frett,” he said, thoughtfully. The puppy’s ears pricked up.

“These little ones are just so cute, aren’t they?” she kept prattling away.

“Sure.”

She was sitting there, rubbing the puppy’s warm earflaps.

“Lion cubs are also cute,” flew out of his mouth. “And tiny baby tigers, too.”

Stomping sounds came from the staircase. Adam had woken up. He was unshaven, and his greasy hair hung straight to his neck. He went right for the table and thumped down next to his mother. The puppy let out some whining noises. Adam gave it a confused look.

“You’re scaring him,” Sabina said. “You have to be calm and gentle around animals. You know that already. You can’t just come barging in like that.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Then you’ll have to move so I can get through.”

Adam got up, leaning away, and Sabina slid her way past him, letting the puppy loose onto the floor. The puppy immediately began to play with an empty toilet paper roll.

“So it’ll be you and me and Adam,” she said to Tobias from the stove. “And Hardy is coming, too, Hardy Lindström, if you remember him.” Her voice dropped. “He often helps out. It’s hard to find people who are available and have the skill to help these days. And he’s good with Adam. He even has a few ideas... .” She turned and cast a glance toward Adam. “Some kind of singing tour.”

Tobias had a memory flash: a tall, sinewy man with a haircut that made him resemble Jesus. He’d arrived on a Vespa the last time that Tobias had been at home. He’d shaken hands as if they were friends, but he didn’t want to speak.

“Hardy’s my manager,” said Adam in a voice that even sounded somewhat normal. Adam broke apart a piece of hard tack and dunked it into the butter container, then licked it clean with the tip of his tongue.

“Stop that, for Chrissake,” Tobias said.

“What’s he doing?” Sabina came to the table with the coffee pot. “Do you want a warm-up, Tobias?”

Tobias nodded. “What kind of tours? Is he still doing that Elvis crap?”

Adam laid his arm on the table. It was wide and grayish in the light.

“You wanna arm wrestle?”

“Not in the middle of breakfast, you moron.”

Tobias instantly berated himself. He really ought to watch what he said; he really ought to have more patience. Something was wrong with Adam; Adam couldn’t help it. He was developmentally disabled, or something like that. Adam had gone to a special school in the city, but Tobias doubted that he’d learned much. Adam could barely even write his name. But oddly, he had an almost sick interest in Elvis Presley and loved wearing glittery training suits with belt and scarf, and, surprisingly, he had a melodic and beautiful voice. He’d learned all of Elvis’s songs, and he sang them well, there was no doubt about that.

“So he’s got time, does he?” Tobias said toward Sabina’s back. “Doesn’t Hardy have a job?”

“He was working at the sawmill, you know, but they’ve cut back and laid off fifteen people.”

“Is he coming the whole way here?”

“No, we’ll meet at the bridge. Finish up, and I’ll go take a peek at Carl Sigvard.”

“How’s he doing today?” Tobias pointed toward the ceiling. Sabina shook her head.

“He’s awake a great deal of time now. He has a lot of pain, but he refuses to take any medicine for it. You know how he is. He’s always been against that kind of thing.”

“I don’t see why he has to be so damn stubborn. I thought that most people get wiser with age, but not him. How old is he now? Seventy-five?”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, not knowing how old your own dad is. Don’t you remember he turned seventy-one on August third? Hardly two months ago!”

Tobias finished his coffee. It was hot and bitter.

“Well, he’s too old to keep working. People usually retire at seventy-five, and some folks even retire earlier than that, if they have a chance.”

Sabina squatted down next to the puppy. Quietly, she said, “Your father is the kind who will never grow old.”

Tobias found himself standing on the bridge. The air sweeping into his nostrils was below freezing, and it stung. Everything appeared to stand still. Some of the bushes had

broken down during the night, and the currant berries had withered and shrunk. Tobias lit a cigarette and looked out over the field of stubble. The sun was about to break through as if leaking some warmth with a few rays. But it was too late. At the very end of September, the leaves of the birches had already turned golden and were beginning to fall. Frost coated the fence. Below them, on the road, the Räcklinge bus thundered past, followed by three cars. The cars seemed to be hoping to pass the bus; he watched their shadows. In the pen, the dogs were howling their thick howls; they sounded slow and tired even though it was morning.

Suddenly, something thumped him between his shoulder blades and he whirled around. Adam stood there, wearing his plaid jacket, collar turned up, happy.

“Love me tender,” he moaned. Tobias saw remains of food on Adam’s teeth.

“Calm the hell down. Where’s your mom?”

The rough giant of a man danced a few surprisingly skillful steps and wriggled his backside in rhythmic jerks.

“In the gh . . e . . e . . to!”

Sabina was already walking toward them with Billy, the border collie, who would help them drive the steers. There were about twenty cattle, all young, at pasture out on Shame Island, and now they had to be brought in. They would have been fine if it were only cold, but the eternal winter rain would give them pneumonia. Actually, they should have been brought in a week ago, but it had been too windy. Now the weather had turned and the wind was still.

And of course, there was that accident with his old man, the accident which had thrown off all the farm routines.

They took their seats in the car. Tobias was in the back seat with one of the herd dogs, and Adam was in the front passenger seat. Tobias didn’t have much room for his knees. Sabina was driving, and the car smelled of gasoline.

“Do you have a leak somewhere?” Tobias asked, leaning forward toward Sabina. He would have been able to rest his chin on her collar bone if he had wanted. “It stinks like hell in here.”

“No, that was the reserve can. Before I thought to tie it down, it fell over and dripped a bit back there.”

She turned onto the road. The asphalt glittered. The entire field of stubble was filled with sunshine, golden and warm, but Tobias’ fingers were still freezing. Tobias had borrowed his old man’s work clothes to pull over his own once they got to the water. He held on to the dog’s paws, warming his hands from those hairy toes. The dog looked at him in a friendly way.

“How are we going to get them onto the raft?” Tobias asked.

“You mean the steers?”

“Yeah.”

“You have to be careful not to scare them because then they become hyper. You can’t

control them once that happens, and their fear is contagious. Scare one and you've scared them all. Then they'll spread out over the whole island and we'll never catch them."

"But won't they get scared the minute they see us land?"

"Nah, they're actually a curious bunch. We usually go out and check on them once a week or so because you never know, something could happen. They could get caught or go down. We had one with his head stuck in some branches; he'd tried to fight his way out and was completely exhausted. Carl Sigvard had to crawl up to him and try to free him. Afterwards, he was totally docile."

"Which one, Dad or the steer?"

Sabina laughed softly.

A lumber truck with logs from Viks Kvarnlunda Sawmill was in front of them. Adam grabbed Sabina's right arm.

"Pass him! Pass him!"

She slapped his face.

"I've told you not to touch me when I'm driving! Listen to me, I've told you a hundred times! It's dangerous, Adam. We could drive into the ditch!"

The overgrown man began to sob. Sabina softened.

"Don't worry. We're going to be there soon. So there's no point in trying to pass him now. What do you think, you think Hardy's there yet?"

Adam hiccupped and stopped crying. "Love me tender, love me true," rumbled out of his throat.

How does she manage, Tobias thought. Adam is nothing but a full-grown child. It's grotesque. He's never going to be normal. Sabina will never be able to stop caring for him, like other parents once their children are grown. Her responsibility will never end until one or the other of them dies.

Tobias thought back to when Adam and Sabina had moved in. When was that now? Ten years ago? Adam was seventeen, and Tobias' old man had agreed to let him move into the house with Sabina. Adam could help out with some of the chores. He was certainly strong enough and many hands were always needed on a farm, especially since Tobias had no intention of taking over.

Tobias' father had met Sabina at an outing in the village. The village community would organize dance evenings in those days, and word spread to other areas, even to some of the bigger towns, so people came from all over.

It's not like the old man didn't have other women at times, but he hadn't found one that he wanted to have in his own house, at least not until he met Sabina.

And he had to take Adam as a package deal.

They were nearing the lake, called Fagerlängen, with its many islands and coves. When he'd been a boy, Tobias had kept his own little boat there and he'd liked to row about aimlessly. In those days, there weren't life vests or any of that other safety stuff, but

he'd been just fine. Of course, he'd fallen in a few times, but he knew how to swim and so all he had to do was heave himself back up over the edge of the boat and let the sun dry his clothes.

Things were different now. He would never dare let his daughter Klara even go down to the edge of the water by herself. *You change so much after you have your own children. It's ridiculous, really*, he thought.

Finally they arrived. The water was like a mirror, totally still. The air was so cold it brought tears to their eyes. Tobias went behind one of the boat houses and took a leak before he put on his father's work clothes. They felt stiff and uncomfortable. He rubbed his hands together, making a dry crackling sound. He then blew his nose.

The raft was tied up at the dock. It was made from waste lumber and oil barrels which hadn't been detoxified, which was probably why the old man got them on the cheap. The raft was used two times a year, first, when the young animals were brought to the island and then in the fall, when they had to be brought back again. The pasture out there was excellent. The old man leased part of it. He'd offered to buy all of Shame Island, but he wasn't successful. Tobias walked toward the raft. Sabina was bending over it, filling the motor with fuel. Adam had also climbed on board and was holding the rail.

"I'm freezing," Adam said sullenly. "I forgot my mittens on the stairs."

Sabina was just about to reply, but at that moment a man appeared from behind the boathouses. They hadn't heard him. He must have just been silently waiting, perhaps spying on Tobias while he changed. Not saying a word. Tobias did not find that thought pleasant. Hardy was somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. He strode toward them, stamping on the ground, his hands deep in the pockets of his leather jacket. He had a green military backpack slung over one shoulder. Hardy Lindström, live and in person. Now Tobias recognized him—Hardy's blonde, curly hair under his hat; Hardy's short, off-yellow beard which looked dyed.

"I'm so glad you're here, Hardy," Sabina called out, and there was a pleading note in her voice. She'd finally gotten the motor started; it sputtered and coughed. Hardy nodded, and lifted one long leg over the rail, and there he was, standing on the raft with the rest of them. The dog slinked over and sniffed him. He didn't howl, hadn't howled. Hardy pushed him aside with his foot. Hardy's laced black boots reached up around his lower legs, and his pants were stuffed into them.

"Hi there, Adam," Hardy said. "How're things going?"

A tiny nerve started twitching in Adam's left cheek, right under his eye. Adam grinned, spit flying from the corners of his mouth.

"How're things going?" Adam echoed.

"Great, kid, just great. Never better."

Only then did Hardy appear to notice Tobias. Sabina was busy steering the raft, maneuvering between the piers.

"Thanks for coming to help us," she called as her hands slipped on the rudder.

“I see you already got reinforcements. A professional from Stockholm, huh? You think he knows how to do the job?”

“You’ve got eyes. You know that’s Tobias. And I know you’ve met before,” Sabina replied.

Hardy turned to the side, cupped his hand as a shield and lit a cigarette. He didn’t offer one to anyone else. His spent match bobbed on the surface of the water for a while before it disappeared. Hardy took a few greedy drags. Then he walked over to Adam and gave him the same kind of thump on the back that Adam had given Tobias. Adam shook himself; his glance slid to one side.

“How are you doing these days?” Sabina asked Hardy.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, how is everything?”

“Everything’s all right.”

“What about your mom?”

“Nothing wrong with her far as I know.”

Tobias tried to catch Sabina’s eye, but she was busy steering the boat, setting its course toward Shame Island. It was the largest island in the lake, but no one lived there. No one had even built a summer cabin there.

“Shame Island, what a hell of a name,” he burst out, mostly to change the subject and make things easier for Sabina. His own voice disgusted him at once. He heard the sound of his old man’s voice in his own, a tone he wanted nothing to do with.

A glimmer of light came into Hardy’s eye.

“Do you have any idea why they call it Shame Island?” Hardy asked.

Tobias didn’t answer.

“They used to leave the women there, the ones that were married and did the deed with other men. They rowed them out there like we bring the animals. And they left the women there as naked as the day God made them. They probably wished then that they really were animals with pelts on, those old whores.”

“Those old whores,” repeated Adam. The nerve under his eye twitched more strongly.

“Cut it out,” said Sabina.

“Well, it’s true. They starved to death out there, that is, if they didn’t drown themselves or freeze to death instead. No food, no clothes.”

“I’m sure that’s nothing but a legend,” said Tobias. “Do you really believe that old tale?”

Hardy stuck out his chin and his yellow beard bobbed.

“Let me tell you, people found stuff out there, in the crevices. I’ve found some stuff, too. You can come to my place and take a look.”

“Oh, come on, that’s just an old wives’ tale!”

The sound of the motor sputtered away as they neared Shame Island. Some grebes, untouched and secure, were settled in the clumps of reeds. Tobias could see their shiny amber eyes. Their mating season was over, they had nothing to protect any longer. Soon they would lose their characteristic chin-beard and have their winter feathers.

Thinking about the coming of winter made his stomach hurt. He would have to get started on his new book to make some money. His two-year grant from the Swedish Authors Union would end when the year was up. Now he would have to prove that they were right to give him the money. He’d have to accomplish something.

“Hang on tight now!” Sabina said. “We’re about to land.”

With a great bump, the raft’s momentum carried them right onto the sand. Sabina sucked in her lower lip. Her face was flaming red, her braid stuck out of her kerchief.

“Now you know what to do,” she whispered. “Quietly, nicely, and then everything will go smoothly.”

IF HIS GOD-DAMNED LEG HADN'T BROKEN ...

Carl Sigvard had been in the loft with his pitchfork. He'd been climbing around like a mountain goat, sometimes standing up, sometimes on all fours, his old limbs as flexible as they'd ever been.

And then when he least expected it, he fell.

It had been a rainy day, but not at all chilly. Late in August, yes, but not one of those Augusts with so much cold and rain that the entire harvest ran the risk of going straight to hell. Still, there had been rain for four weeks in a row, and maybe he was worrying all his hard work would go for nothing: the seed would rot in the fields, too heavy with mud to be saved. Perhaps those were the thoughts which distracted him that morning, because all at once there was nothing under his feet, nothing holding him up, and he fell. The last thing he heard was the cracking sound his own skull made when it hit the cement.

Sabina's face had not been in focus. She'd been leaning over him, her swollen lips open. Through the pain, he noticed how she was shaking. Behind her was the boy, Adam. He noticed Adam's stiff, straight neck and heard the boy repeating *mamma*, dull sounds calling for his mother. Sabina was not listening. For once, she was not entirely focused on the boy. She was on her knees in the manure, her fingertips hovering over him, but it seemed as if she didn't dare touch him, fearing he would break if she laid a finger on him. His mind drifted off again, but he must not have been completely unconscious because later certain details came back: how he floated above the stalls as if he were resting on a waterbed. He was floating a bit above Sabina, saw her rounded shoulders, her hunched back, her hair hidden under the kerchief she always wore when she went out to the animals. And he remembered other things too: how she'd stood in the hallway in front of the mirror, how she twisted and tied up her hair, the kerchief's pattern of flowers. Her glancing at herself in the mirror, the way she did when she thought no one was watching. Her glance of fulfillment and desire.

He could still do the deed.

It would be many more years before he no longer could do the deed.

This was what he usually thought.

From far away, the harsh sound of sirens. Carl Sigvard had opened his eyes, and Sabina still sat there. The boy, Adam, had gone down on his knees in the manure, too, his bloated cheeks sagging.

He wanted to ask Sabina something, or else blame her: "You haven't gone and done anything unnecessary, have you? Called the ambulance when you didn't have to? And here they're coming with sirens on and everything."

Something like that. But not one sound came from his lips. That was when he felt the first touch of confusion.

Two girls came in, wearing red overalls. Two girls whom he thought had to be from town, their feet so small and neat that they risked slipping in the animal dung. There was

the clinical smell of lotion, that sweet clinical smell of city.

They had a little trouble getting him up on the stretcher. For the most part he'd been worrying about his head, but now he realized that other parts of his body had been broken. One of his legs, the left one, seemed loose and strange underneath the blanket.

“What is your name? Can you tell me your name?”

That little girl had a blonde pony tail. And she was acting like he didn't even know his own name!

“His name is Carl Sigvard Elmkvist,” Sabina rushed to answer and as she saw him lying there in the stretcher in all his brittleness, she no longer could keep her tears from flowing.

The girl raised an eyebrow.

“I want to hear it from him, please. Carl Sigvard, do you know what day it is?”

So stupid! So goddamn stupid. And then there was the boy like a lump in the doorway. He was making howling hoarse sounds. Sabina ought to comfort him right away, or he would break out into a fit of rage she would not be able to stop.

He no longer remembered the trip to the hospital, just waiting on a narrow, unsteady cot. Out in the hallway, there were folks sitting on chairs, and there was a ray of sunshine on the bright but somewhat dusty floor.

Finally a doctor appeared. Good Lord, was he ever young. There he stood in a white coat and he had pink cheeks.

“You can thank your strong physique that you're still alive.”

He remembered he felt obstinate as if everything were someone else's fault, not because of his own clumsiness up in the loft.

He had stayed in the hospital for more than a week, and he had various operations on his back and his one leg. There were cracks and breaks throughout his skeleton. He'd never before been the kind who hurt himself, and he'd only been in the hospital once before, the day that Tobias was born.

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