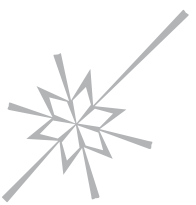
Dear Reader,

My own journey to the land that lies east of the sun and west of the moon began when I was a little girl. I loved reading, especially fairy tales, and one day inside a battered book with a blue cover I discovered a tale that cast a spell on me.

I loved everything about it from the title to the magnificent white bear to the enchanted castle to the powerful North, South, East and West Winds. But mainly I loved the unnamed heroine, who against near-impossible odds, saves her family, her white bear prince, and ultimately herself.

I grew up to be a teller of tales and one day, while writing something else entirely, I stumbled across that unnamed heroine who had lodged herself in my heart all those years ago. I knew at once I had to tell her story.

The first thing she needed was a name – Rose, for the compass rose. As I began writing I discovered she had a dear brother named Neddy, a superstitious mother, an adoring father, and of course, that enormous and mysterious white bear who carries her on his back to a castle carved into a mountain.



I also came across a vengeful Troll Queen, a red ball, an uncrossable ice bridge, a gown the colour of the moon, and so much more.

The journey of writing North Child was a long and winding one which included gliding through fjords in Norway, delving into the treacherous beauty of the Arctic and becoming an expert on the intricacies of weaving and mapmaking. But it was always a journey of love. Because I loved Rose and her white bear. And what an indescribable joy it has been for me over the years to have so many others love them too.

I am thrilled to be able to introduce readers to this beautiful new edition of North Child. I hope it takes you on the most wonderful journey.

Once upon a time there was a poor farmer with many chidren…

Edith

NORTH CHILD

EDITH PATTOU

USBORNE

To my father, for his love of stories –
from *Harold and the Purple Crayon* to *Doctor No*

And to my mother,
for her unwavering support

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Prologue

I FOUND THE BOX IN THE ATTIC of an old farmhouse in Norway. It was large, the size of a footlocker, and there were markings on it; runes, I learned later.

When I opened the lid, it looked like the box contained mostly papers, a jumbled mass of them, in several different languages and written in different styles of handwriting. There were diaries, maps, even ships' logs.

As I dug deeper, under the papers, I found more: skeins of wool; small boots made of soft leather; sheaves of music tied with faded ribbon; long, thin pieces of wood with maplike markings on them; dried-up mushrooms; woven belts; even a dress the colour of the moon.

Then I came upon what looked to be the mouthpiece of a very old reed instrument. I held it up towards the light coming through the small attic window. As the late afternoon sun caught it, a most extraordinary thing happened. I heard the clear, high note of a flute.

And it was coming from inside the trunk.

Other sounds came then – whispering, muttering,

swirling around inside my head. Dogs barking, sleigh bells, the cracking of ice. Voices. *Hearing voices – this isn't good,* I thought.

Still holding the ancient mouthpiece in the palm of my hand, I lifted the top piece of paper out of the trunk. It was a handwritten note.

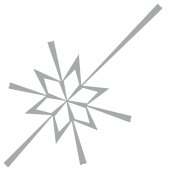
They want me to write it all down, though I'm not sure why.

It seems enough that Father and Neddy wrote down their parts. Especially Neddy; he was always the storyteller in the family. I am not a storyteller, not really. It takes more patience than I've got – or rather, than I used to have. I guess I did learn a little bit about patience in the course of the journey. But even so, I'd much rather set the story down in cloth. Well, actually I have. Hangs on the north wall in the great room, and the whole story is there. But words are easier to understand for most people. So I will try.

It isn't easy for me to walk the path back to the beginning of the story, even to know where the true beginning is. And telling a story, I suppose, is like winding a skein of spun yarn – you sometimes lose track of the beginning.

All I intended to do, when I began the journey, was to set things right. They say losing someone you love is like losing a part of your own body. An eye or a leg. But it is far worse – especially when it is your fault.

But already I'm getting ahead of myself. It all began with a pair of soft boots.



Book One

East

Once on a time there was a poor farmer with many children.

FATHER

EBBA ROSE WAS THE NAME of our last-born child. Except it was a lie. Her name should have been Nyamh Rose. But everyone called her Rose rather than Ebba, so the lie didn't matter. At least, that is what I told myself.

The Rose part of her name came from the symbol that lies at the centre of the wind rose – which is fitting because she was lodged at the very centre of my heart.

I loved each of her seven brothers and sisters, but I will admit there was always something that set Rose apart from the others. And it wasn't just the way she looked.

She was the hardest to know of my children, and that was because she would not stay still. Every time I held her as a babe, she would look up at me, intent, smiling with her bright purple eyes. But soon, and always, those eyes would stray past my shoulder, seeking the window and what lay beyond.

Rose's first gift was a small pair of soft boots made of reindeer hide. They were brought by Torsk, a neighbour, and as he fastened them on Rose's tiny feet with his large

calloused hands, I saw my wife, Eugenia, frown. She tried to hide it, turning her face away.

Torsk did not see the frown but looked up at us, beaming. He was a widower with grown sons and a gift for leatherwork. Eager to show off his handiwork and unmindful of the difficult circumstances of Eugenia's recent birthing, he had been the first to show up on our doorstep.

Most of our neighbours were well aware of how superstitious Eugenia was. They also knew that a baby's first gift was laden with meaning. But cheerful, large-handed Torsk paid no heed to this. He just gazed down at the small soft boots on Rose's feet and looked ready to burst with pride.

"The fit is good," he observed with a wide smile.

I nodded and then said, with a vague thought of warning him, "'Tis Rose's first gift."

His smile grew even wider. "Ah, this is good." Then a thought penetrated his head. "She will be a traveller, an explorer!" he said with enthusiasm. So he did know of the first-gift superstition after all.

This time Eugenia did not attempt to hide the frown that creased her face, and I tensed, fearing what she might say. Instead she reached down and straightened one of the boot ties. "Thank you, neighbour Torsk," she said through stiff lips. Her voice was cold, and a puzzled look passed over the big man's face.

I stepped forwards and, muttering something about Eugenia still being weak, ushered Torsk to the door.

"Was there something wrong with the boots?" he asked, bewildered.

"No, no," I reassured him. "They are wonderful. Eugenia is tired, that is all. And you know mothers – they like to keep their babes close. She's not quite ready for the notion of little Rose wandering the countryside."

Nor would she ever be. Though I did not say that to neighbour Torsk.

That night after we had pried Neddy from Rose's basket and gotten all the children to sleep, Eugenia said to me, "Didn't Widow Hautzig bring over a crock of butter for the baby?"

"She was only returning what you loaned her," I said.

"No, it was for Ebba Rose. Her first gift, I'm quite sure." Her voice was definite.

Eugenia did like to keep her children close, but it turned out she wanted to keep Rose closest of all. And that had everything to do with the circumstances of Rose's birth.

Neddy

OUR FAMILY WASN'T ALWAYS POOR. My grandfather Esbjorn Lavrans had a well-respected mapmaking business, and my father's father was a prosperous farmer. But Father had a falling-out with his family when he went to Bergen to be an apprentice to the mapmaker Esbjorn. My mother, Eugenia, was Esbjorn's daughter, which is how Father met her.

Father and Mother had eight children. Rose was the last-born and I was second to last, four years old when they brought Rose home from Askoy Forest. Some would say four is too young to remember, but I definitely have memories. Lots of them. I remember her smell, like warm milk and soft green moss. I remember the noises she'd make – gurgling like the creek we later took to calling Rosie's Creek because she fell into it so often; the clicking she made with her tongue, like a wren pecking at our chimney; the howls of frustration when she kept toppling over while learning to walk. Not that it took her long. She was running around on her short legs at just five months.

I also remember clearly the evening Mother and Father came home from an afternoon of herb hunting, and instead of herbs they were carrying a lumpy bundle that made funny noises.

My older brothers and sisters had been worried about Mother and Father because there had been a storm and they were much later than usual returning. I told everyone not to worry, that they had gone out to bring home the baby and that's why they were so late getting home.

My older sister Selme laughed. "Mother is still more than a month away from her lying-in time," she said. "And besides, everyone knows you can't just go pluck babies out of Askoy Forest," she added with a superior look.

But it turned out I was right after all.

When they finally came through the door, Mother looked very pale and sat down as soon as she could, holding the noisy thing on her lap. The others crowded around, but I hung back, waiting. When they'd all looked long enough, Father led me to Mother's side. When I gazed at the little scrunched-up face, I felt a peculiar glow of pride. Like I'd done something good. I knew it was Mother who'd brought this baby into the world (and she certainly looked worn out from doing it), but from that moment I felt like the wild little brown-haired baby was my very own gift – and that it would be my job to watch over her.

If I had known just how wild a thing she would turn out to be, I might have thought twice about taking her on. It's a funny thing. I think it was Mother and I who had the hardest

time with Rose's wandering ways. But we both had different ways of living with it. Mother tried always to reel her in. To keep her close by. But for me, I knew it couldn't be done, so I just ached and felt sorry for myself when she'd disappear. That's the trouble with loving a wild thing: you're always left watching the door.

But you also get kind of used to it.

Rose

I COULD SAY THAT I felt guilty and ashamed about the trouble I was always getting into when I was a child, driving my mother to her wit's end on a daily basis. But the truth is I never did feel either of those things.

I don't think it's because I was selfish or unfeeling. I just couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. What was a little spilled blood or a broken bone now and then?

I never set out to be disobedient. I just couldn't keep my thoughts, and then my feet, still. I'd see something – the azure flash of a butterfly's wing, a formation of clouds like a ship's mast and sails, a ripe yellow apple perched high in a tree – and I'd be off after it without a second thought.

Exploring ran in my blood. My grandfather Esbjorn was a mapmaker as well as an explorer. And my great-great-grandfather was one of the first Njordens to travel to Constantinople.

The only thing that gave me the slightest twinge of sadness was Neddy, with his exasperated, sorry-for-himself

look when he found me after yet another time I'd run off without telling anyone.

"But I saw this rabbit with a tail so white it glowed," I'd try to explain (when I was old enough to put words to my feelings).

Neddy would just sigh and say that Mother wanted me in the kitchen straight away.

"I'm sorry, Neddy," I'd say, wrapping my arms around his legs, watching the corners of his mouth for the smile I always managed to squeeze out of him. And then I'd go to the kitchen and Mother would scold me yet again.

NEDDY

TO SAY THAT MY MOTHER was superstitious would be like saying the great blizzard of 1539 was naught but a light snowfall.

Every single thing a body did in our house was charged with meaning. To sweep dust out the front door was to sweep away all your good luck. To sing while baking bread was to guarantee the arrival of ill fortune. To have an itch on the left side of your body meant certain disaster. And if you sneezed on a Wednesday, you would surely receive a letter – good news if you were facing east and bad if facing north.

Father liked to tell the story of how he first learned of Mother's "birth-direction" superstition.

When Father and Mother announced their engagement to her family, the first words to come out of his future mother-in-law's mouth were "But Arne, we don't even know what your birth direction is!"

Father said that he gaped at her, totally bewildered.

"Yes, Arne, we must know right away, before you and Eugenia make any more plans."

"Oh, I'm quite certain he's a south, or a southeast," Mother said reassuringly.

"But we must know for sure," said her mother.

Father said he started to laugh then, thinking they were having some elaborate joke with him. But they weren't.

And Father would have us all doubled over with laughter as he described the pilgrimage to my grandparents' farm to interrogate them regarding the direction my father's mother was facing when she gave birth to him. It turned out that the direction his mother was facing when Father was born was southeast, which was a good thing according to Mother.

What wasn't such a good thing is that this turned out to be the last time Father saw his family. There had already been ill feeling between them that Father had hoped to heal during the visit. But if anything, the strange line of questioning from the "city folk" Father was marrying into seemed to make matters worse, and they parted with bad blood.

Father

MY EUGENIA'S FERVENT BELIEF in the birth-direction superstition was unusual to say the least. I have never come across anything like it during the course of my life, but it had apparently been handed down through many generations of Eugenia's family.

They believed that birth direction was of overwhelming importance. Not the alignment of the stars, nor the position of the moon, nor the movement of the tides, nor even the traits handed down from parent to child.

My theory was that this strange notion sprang from their preoccupation with mapmaking.

"And every child born in our family," Eugenia explained to me, "is given a name that begins with the first letter of their birth direction. So a north-facing baby might be called Nathaniel; a southwest-facing child, Sarah Wilhelmina; and so on. I myself was an east-facing baby."

"And what are the attributes of an east-facing baby?" I asked.

"Well, among other things, that I am tidy, a sound

sleeper, and somewhat superstitious."

"Somewhat?" I countered with a grin.

It turned out that Eugenia went a little further with the birth-direction superstition than any of her forebears. On the night after we were wed, she announced to me that she wanted to have seven children.

"Seven is a good number," I replied. "But why seven? Is that a particularly lucky number?" I said with a teasing smile.

"No, it is that I want one child for each point of the compass," she replied.

Puzzled, I said, "But that would be four, or eight perhaps…"

"I have left out north, of course."

"Why not north?" I asked.

"Surely you know about pure northern children?" she responded in surprise.

"No," I said, refraining from reminding her that no one outside her family would even be engaged in such a conversation.

"Oh, they are terrible! Wandering and wild and very ill behaved. Northern people in general are that way. My own sister – surely I've told you this? – married a north-born (against the advice of our mother, needless to say), and he took off on a sailing ship when she was pregnant with their third child and has not been heard of since. I refuse to have a child I cannot keep my eye on."

I felt a sliver of worry at those words. "I hope you are not going to be an overprotective mother, Eugenia."

"Oh no, Arne," she reassured me. "It's just that norths are particularly wild. Always into trouble. But that is not the only reason I will not have a north bairn. There is another, of much more importance."

"And what is that?"

"Some years ago I went with my sister to a *skjebne-soke*."

Though *skjebne-sokes* were scarce in our region, I was not surprised that someone as superstitious as Eugenia had managed to find one.

"She was very gifted, this *skjebne-soke*. Why, she predicted to the day when Karin Tessel would have her first bairn! And she told my sister that she would lose her husband to the sea…" Eugenia trailed off, then fell silent.

I studied her face. "The *skjebne-soke* said something about you having a north bairn?"

She nodded, then said in a low voice, "She said that if I were to have a north-born, that child would grow up to die a cold, horrible death, suffocating under ice and snow." She shuddered and instinctively I drew her close to me. Because avalanches were not uncommon during the winter in our country, especially on the seven mountains that surrounded Bergen, I could see that Eugenia took this ominous prediction quite seriously.

I myself considered such prophecy and superstition to be nonsense, and perhaps if I had tried to reason with Eugenia, taken a stronger stand against her many superstitions right from the beginning, I might have averted much of the ill fortune that later befell us. But I did not. I saw her ideas

as harmlessly eccentric, even charming at the outset, and I indulged her. I, too, wanted a large family, and seven seemed as good a number as any…

But even Eugenia's own mother thought that methodically *planning* the birth directions of each of her children was ill advised. Before she died she had cautioned Eugenia against it.

"'Tis meddling in the affairs of God and fate, and only disaster can come of it," she had said.

Eugenia herself had been born due east. Her mother went into labour unexpectedly on a boat that was travelling down the Rauma River, which was notoriously twisty. Fortunately, Eugenia's mother had had a *leidarstein* and needle with her (she carried both with her at all times during her pregnancy), and the owner of the boat brought a pail of water. While his wife laboured, Esbjorn magnetized the needle and floated it in the water, so it turned out that they were able to calculate the birth direction without much difficulty. "To think I might have been a north, had the boat taken a sudden turn!" Eugenia would mutter darkly.

Eugenia began our family with northeast, Nils Erlend. Her reasoning was that she would tackle the most difficult direction first, when she was youngest and most vigorous; and the next most difficult (Neddy Wilfrid) at the end, when she was at her wisest and most experienced as a parent.

It all went just as Eugenia had planned, from northeast to northwest.

Nils Erlend, who liked to roam but had a frugal, organized side.

Elise, the quiet, perfect east; practical and obedient.

Selme Eva, who was comfortable and kind.

Sara, a strong-willed, passionate girl.

Sonja Wende, who was good with animals and a little bit prescient, farseeing.

Willem, capable and decisive, who also had an easy hand with the farm animals.

And Neddy Wilfrid, the only one with dark hair, though his eyes were as blue as his brothers' and sisters'. Neddy had been Eugenia's easiest birth yet, and he was a dear, quiet babe, smiling far more than he cried, which was seldom.

Seven children in seven years. With a sigh of relief, Eugenia put away her supply of the herb feverfew (which eased morning sickness and the pains of childbirth), as well as her voluminous childbearing shift, which had seen her through the seven pregnancies.

But then Elise, who at eight was our second-eldest child, died suddenly.

Elise had never been a strong child, but Eugenia had had a special fondness for her, partly because she was an east-born like herself.

There is no pain deeper than that of a parent losing a child, but there were still six children who needed our care, and slowly, time healed the sharpest of our grief. Yet even as it did, the empty space at the east point of the compass began to gnaw at Eugenia.