



WE DO NOT SPEAK OF THE TROLLS

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AUNT RUNA TAUGHT ME HOW to spit. It was the Fourth of July, 1963, the summer I turned six. She was fifty-nine years old, technically my grandaunt, younger sister of my maternal grandmother, and she was the only adult I knew who acted more like a kid than any kid I had ever met.

Four generations of my mother's family had come together to celebrate the Fourth at "the farm," the Gunnarsson homestead in Kripplebush, New York, not far from Kingston. Aunt Runa found me curled up in a ball behind the barn, sulking, my face streaked with tears, my lower lip thrust out in petulant annoyance.

"*Vilket ansikte!* What happened, kiddo? You're sporting the mug of a puffer fish," she said as she squatted down in front of me, resting her crossed arms on her knees. "Come on, let's have it. What chased that smile I love off your face?"

I wiped my wet face with the palm of my hand and looked up into her sparkling, sky-blue eyes before the words came spewing out, "Kyle and Scott had a spitting contest, and when it was my turn, I couldn't do it right, and the spit drooled down my chin and they called me a 'drooling baby' and said I had to go eat my baby food and take a baby nap in my baby crib." As I think of it now, I don't know how she didn't laugh, but Aunt Runa shook her head and frowned. Then she gazed off into the field and spat an incredible distance.

I must have looked at her like she had lightning bolts for hair. "Put your eyes back in your head, champ. We've got work to do." She always referred to my brothers and me as kiddo or champ or pal. "How 'bout I teach you the Runa Method? Then, before the fireworks tonight, you can challenge those wisecrack brothers of yours to a rematch. Whaddaya say to that,

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huh?” That evening, Kyle and Scott stood gobsmacked as their baby sister out-spat them both in three straight contests. Best Fourth of July—ever.

Aunt Runa also taught me how to skip stones across a pond, how to cross my eyes, and how to bait a hook. She exuded energy, laughed loudly without inhibition, and she could put

York City and later by operating her own dance school. Her siblings and their spouses referred to her as “Crazy Runa,” “the oldest living tomboy,” “an odd duck,” and “nutty as a fruitcake.” They dismissed her as foolish and criticized her as unladylike. I idolized her. She always made me feel seen, heard, understood, and important.



two fingers in her mouth and produce the most piercing whistle imaginable. She tried to teach me that, too, but I never could make a sound like hers. Unlike any other Gunnarsson female of her generation, Aunt Runa preferred dungarees to dresses, drove a car, never married, and made her own living, first as a dancer in New

Gunnarsson gatherings at the farm became a tradition when my mother was a baby. For as long as I can remember, we drove to the farm two or three times a year from our home in New Jersey. I think I was four when we started playing a game we called Who Lives There? to amuse ourselves on the two-hour drive. My mother

inadvertently invented the pastime by musing, “I wonder who lives there,” as we passed a quaint farmhouse, one of the many tossed along the rolling hills of the Hudson Valley. My father responded by creating a lengthy and absurdly comical story about a family of circus performers who traded two trained lions, a dancing bear, and a unicycle for that quaint farmhouse and the surrounding property. The family of three clowns, a stilt-walking fire-eater, and a lion tamer sought to exchange the bright lights of the big top for a simpler rural existence. We all laughed until our sides hurt and spent the rest of the trip pointing at houses and shouting, “Who lives there?” Each time, Dad obliged by fabricating a new farcical fairy tale filled with eccentric characters and slapstick hijinks.

The next time we drove to Kripplebush, Dad decided to add some variety to the game by altering the format. He dropped his trademark comedic style and instead told an eerie ghost story. When he finished, he pointed to an ivy-covered cottage and said, “Hey, Beverly, who lives there?” catching Mom by surprise and forcing her to improvise the next yarn. From then on, the storyteller chose the next home and dictated who would tell its tale. Over time we generated a multitude of stories and characters across a spectrum of genres. I tried to imagine another family traveling

the same road and making up a story about the Gunnarsson farmhouse and the characters who lived there. Could anyone create a character as zany and lovable as Aunt Runa? I doubted it.

The real history behind the Gunnarsson household was typical of many in the region. In 1899, my great-grandparents, Stellan and Anika Gunnarsson, immigrated to New York City from Sweden with their three young sons, Magnus, Anders, and Victor. Soon my grandmother, Lovisa, was born, followed by Aunt Runa and Aunt Elin, and finally, Uncle Samuel. In 1922 Stellan purchased the farm as a gift for Anika, who missed the quieter country life she’d grown up with in Sweden. By that time, Magnus, Anders, Lovisa, and Elin had married and lived in Albany, Poughkeepsie, Queens, and Kingston, respectively. Uncle Victor had moved away after a falling out with the family. No one ever discussed what happened, and as far as anyone knew, Victor never contacted anyone in the family again. That left Aunt Runa and Uncle Samuel to move upstate with their parents. Soon the farm became a meeting place for weekend getaways, holidays, and special occasions.

The farmhouse, a two-story clapboard dwelling built on a stone foundation, dated back to the American Revolution. The property also included a barn, a large creek-fed pond, and a field once used for farming, but long

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since overgrown with wildflowers, all set on several acres of undulating countryside dotted with sugar maple, American beech, eastern hemlock, and two varieties of apple trees. An idyllic location, worthy of a Norman Rockwell illustration.

Aunt Runa almost single-handedly transformed the property from its functional but neglected state at the time of purchase to an attractive and modern, for the time, homestead. She repaired and painted the farmhouse inside and out, made curtains, dug a well, landscaped, planted flower and vegetable gardens, converted the barn into a workshop, built a chicken coop, and with the help of a friend, installed indoor plumbing.

Gunnarsson family get-togethers at the farm were enormous affairs routinely numbering forty or more attendees. Held outdoors if the weather permitted, the events overflowed with laughter, lively conversation, and abundant food and drink. Each meal featured a massive buffet atop a makeshift table constructed of wood planks traversing sawhorses and covered with plain white cloth. An equally massive dining table, or rather a train of several tables, stood nearby, handsomely set with “Nana” Anika’s blue and white Gustavsberg tableware carefully arranged on embroidered table linens. A series of mismatched chairs, including every four-legged chair from the cellar to the attic of the

farmhouse and some folding chairs brought by various aunts and uncles, surrounded the chain of tables. Vases of wildflowers from the field and cultivated blossoms from the garden provided an appealing bouquet of fragrances. From a distance, the entire set up looked like a giant colorful caterpillar.

When we weren’t eating, the adults amused themselves with small talk, card games, chess, and horseshoes, while groups of children could be found playing in the barn, bounding through the field, splashing in the pond, or climbing trees. All my relationships with family members, other than my parents and brothers, took root and blossomed at these festive celebrations.

When the crowd began to tire or overwhelm me, I would slip away to explore the nearly 200-year-old farmhouse, the inside of which was as still and silent as the outside was chaotic. Crossing the threshold was like stepping back in time. Although neither ornate nor extravagant, the walls, furniture, light fixtures, everything evoked a more formal and refined era. Even the air felt antique. I wandered reverently, listening to the polished wood floors groan and creak, articulating age-old secrets. Often I envisioned myself as one of those little girls with ringlets and bows, wearing a lace-trimmed dress, a girl with a name like Emmeline or Millicent, a girl

like the ones whose portraits hang in museums. I fantasized about having lavish parties with scores of finely dressed girls, all of us giggling and enjoying cookies and lemonade served on fancy china plates. My imagination soared in that old house.

Great-Grandpa Stellan died at the farmhouse eighteen years before I was born, and Nana Anika passed away

don’t remember anyone telling stories about Great-Grandpa Stellan. The mere mention of him elicited an exchange of icy looks among my aunts and uncles, and a quick headshake or raised hand as if to say, “Don’t go there.” I once asked Uncle Magnus why no one talked about his father. He leaned down to my level, held me by the shoulders, and said, “*Vi talar inte*



there the winter following my Fourth of July spitting triumph. I remember Nana’s hugs felt like being wrapped in a warm pillow, and her whole body shook when she laughed. The rest of what I know of her comes from the many stories family members told of her early life in Sweden, her quiet strength, and her love of cooking. I

om trolle.” His deep, kind, baritone voice was solemn as he repeated his answer in English, “We do not speak of the trolls.” I did not mention my great-grandfather again for years.

By the time Nana died, families within the family were already scattered across the country, and fewer members of the clan made the

trip to Kripplebush with each ensuing get-together. Aunt Runa hosted family gatherings at the farm through Labor Day weekend 1967, at which time the tradition abruptly ended.

That Labor Day we drove to the farm unaware it would be the last time we did so as a family. After a couple of rounds of “Who Lives There?” my brother Kyle brought our road trip storytelling ritual full circle with a circus-themed tale. His take on the theme bore no resemblance to the uproarious comedy with which Dad had begun the tradition. Kyle, then a teenager and thus preferring the macabre to anything merry or mirthful, wove a dark sci-fi account of a lonely and despondent man living in a world of perpetually cheerful circus performers. The man was forced to dress in bright baggy clothes, paint a smile on his face, and pretend to be a jovial clown, to gain acceptance and avoid banishment. We hung on Kyle’s every word, waiting to discover if the man could possibly overcome his miserable situation. None of us was prepared for the story’s heartbreaking and disturbing ending. Several minutes of stunned silence followed until Mom suggested it might be time for us to find a new travel pastime.

The final Gunnarsson family weekend at the farm began much like the others. The meals were, as always, events in themselves. Sunday dinners had suffered a bit since Nana’s death;

her recipe for Swedish meatballs having accompanied her to the great beyond. She never wrote down her recipes, and we all regretted that no one had thought to try to get that one on paper until it was too late. Labor Day morning featured a softball game in which my generation bested Mom and Dad’s generation, mostly thanks to the athletic prowess of some of my older cousins and the fact that we were all faster than the adults. My brother Scott was named MVC, Most Valuable Cousin, for scoring the winning run by stealing home in the bottom of the ninth.

Following the game, I made my way into the farmhouse for some quiet time before we had to leave for home. After so many excursions to Kripplebush, every inch of the Gunnarsson homestead was as familiar to me as my own bedroom, or so I thought. I strolled through the first floor without a destination in mind and paused at the foot of the staircase to run my fingers over the intricate carving in the newel post before deciding to start up the stairs. That’s when I caught sight of something new, something I had never noticed on the countless occasions I had climbed and descended that staircase. There, halfway up the stairs, on the landing, I could make out the outline of a door. Upon closer inspection, I could see how I had missed it. The angle of the light made the door’s thin outline

nearly invisible on the wood plank wall. Instead of a doorknob or handle, a recessed latch blended seamlessly into the wood grain. My heart danced in my chest as I reached for the latch and pushed the door open.

Soft streaks of sunlight spilled through a lace-curtained window, illuminating the otherwise dim area. I had stumbled upon an oddly shaped room tucked between the first and

a small side table with several books on it. A daybed with rectangular head and foot boards, pale green linens, and an assortment of pillows filled the alcove on the left, which also had a door to what I assumed was a closet. The lone, lace-curtained window was in the largest alcove, the one opposite the entryway, and looked out over the back yard. That meant the room was above the kitchen.



second floors of the farmhouse. Instead of four walls, this hideaway boasted eleven. An angled wall extended from either side of the entry hall expanding into a space with a trio of three-sided alcoves. The alcove on the right was furnished with an overstuffed armchair and matching ottoman in a faded floral pattern, a brass floor lamp with a cream-colored glass shade, and

The air in the space was cool and crisp and smelled like sheets dried on a clothesline in early fall. Next to the window, a dark wooden, drop-leaf secretary desk sat between two bookshelves with beautiful beveled-glass doors. The drop-leaf that formed the desk’s writing surface lay open, revealing more than a dozen cubbyholes and drawers. Each cubby contained

a small item on display, among them a silver bell, a miniature spinning wheel, a coral-colored cameo, a tiny doll in a blue dress, and a Swedish Dala horse—a traditional carved wooden statue of a horse, painted with bright colors. Other cubbies held porcelain figurines of a cat with a ball of string, a goose, a mouse on a piece of cheese, and a beautiful Dutch clog painted gold.



As I picked up the little gold shoe to admire it more closely, I heard the kitchen door open and shut followed by voices engaged in a tense conversation. The sound came from the door I believed was a closet. I placed the shoe back in its cubby and cracked open the door to discover a dark, narrow staircase winding down

to the kitchen. The voices belonged to Aunt Runa and Aunt Elin and her husband Max, but I could only make out fragments of their conversation.

Aunt Elin tried to reason with Aunt Runa about “townspeople talking.” Aunt Runa angrily shot back with something about “busybodies wagging their tongues” and accused Elin and Max of being “gossipmongers,”

a word I did not know. Several garbled sentences followed as the fury intensified until Uncle Max exploded in an attack on Aunt Runa. He spat a series of words at her, the meanings of which I did not understand, words like “repugnant,” “abhorrent,” and “perversion.” Then, he called her a “stain on the family name.”

Aunt Runa and Aunt Elin must have moved closer to the door at the bottom of the hidden stairwell because I could clearly hear every word from then on, starting with Aunt Runa roaring, “*Dra åt helvete, Max!*”

Aunt Elin gasped, “Runa!”

“If you’re going to defend him, sister o’ mine, then you can go to hell with him. And if you happen to run into that *skit-stövel* of a father of ours, you can tell him I said . . .”

“Enough!” Aunt Elin cried out. “Just stop, Runa.”

I could hear my heart pounding in the silence before Aunt Runa ended the conversation.

“Get out of my home. Both of you.” The ice in her voice stung my eyes. I don’t know how long it took me to summon the will to creep back to the secret room’s entrance and escape on to the landing and down the stairs.

The moment I stepped off the last stair Aunt Runa rounded the corner and jolted when she saw me. “*Jösses!* You startled me there, pal. What are you doing inside all by your lonesome?” I stood paralyzed, unable to speak, motionless except for the tears surging down my cheeks. Aunt Runa’s gaze shifted from my face up to the landing where the door to the hidden room remained ajar.

“Ah, I see,” she said. “You found my secret hideaway, eh?” I lowered my head. “And maybe you overheard my little chat with Elin and Max?”

“Some of it,” I mumbled. “I didn’t understand a lot of it, but I know Uncle Max was being mean.”

“*Jag är ledsen, lilla barn.*” She brushed back some hair that had fallen in my face and continued, “You know, I don’t think your Uncle Max and I have ever agreed on anything. Hey, what do you think of my secret hideaway?”

“I like it,” I said, still sniffing, but beginning to recover. “There’s a lot of neat stuff in there.”

We sat on the stairs and Aunt Runa explained that the room served as the housekeeper’s apartment long before her parents purchased the property. It had been bolted up and forgotten until she discovered it while renovating the house. Over time, she filled it with furniture and some of her favorite things and used it as a quiet retreat for thinking, writing, and reading.

“And sometimes,” she said, “I went there to hide when my father was on a rampage.”

“Was your father a troll?” I asked.

“Ha! That’s one way to put it. You’re not the first person to refer to him that way,” she said.

Outside, my mother called for me and my brothers. “Sounds like it’s time for you to skedaddle back to New Jersey, kiddo.” I threw my arms around her and buried my head in her shoulder. She held me and whispered, “*Du är en duktig flicka.*”

That was the end of the Gunnars-

son family gatherings at the farm. The following year Dad was transferred to Charlotte, further limiting the amount of time we spent with our grandparents, Aunt Runa, and others in the family. Rumors and conjecture about Aunt Runa, Great-Grandpa Stellan, Uncle Victor's departure from the family, and Uncle Max's contempt for his sister-in-law sometimes floated in and out of conversation whenever several Gunnarssons gathered. The stories varied, but facts remained unknowable to all but those involved. I never told anyone about the argument I overheard between Aunt Runa and Uncle Max, nor did I mention the secret hideaway concealed between the first and second floors of the farmhouse.

Aunt Runa died at the farmhouse at the age of eighty-five. Several months later, I received a box from a law firm in Kingston. The accompanying letter stipulated that Runa had bequeathed the enclosed items to me. Inside the box I found the gold-painted Dutch shoe, the Swedish Dala horse, and several other trinkets from the desk in the hidden room along with an early edition of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a well-worn copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and two envelopes.

The first envelope contained old photographs of Runa, including one of her behind the wheel of her 1923 Gardner Model S sedan. In others she was in costume backstage after dancing in a musical revue, or

pushing an old, wooden single-wheel cultivator plow in the garden at the farm, or sitting with her feet up on a porch swing with a scruffy little dog curled up next to her, and my favorite, holding me in her lap and looking at a picture book with me when I was not yet a year old. In each black-and-white image, her colorful personality shined through in her carefree smile and twinkling eyes.

On the front of the second envelope was a simple "R," written in ink with the leg of the R extended to form a circle around the letter. That envelope held a hand-written letter from Runa's brother Victor, dated July 1918:

Runa,

How appropriate that your name in Old Norse means "secret lore."

I fear if I remain any longer the repercussions would be ruinous. Know that I will land on my feet and perhaps even prosper. Wouldn't that be the sweetest revenge? As for you, my dear sister, you are stronger than you know and deserve better than you've been dealt.

Do not allow the troll to diminish your light.

Forever your champion,
Victor



Others in the family have drawn their own conclusions about Runa, Victor, and Great-Grandpa Stellan, but I choose not to dabble in such foolishness. There is no need. I've known everything I need to know about Runa Gunnarsson since the Fourth of July when I was six and she taught me how to spit. ⚡

Swedish words and phrases:

Vilket ansikte! | What a face!

Vi talar inte om trollen. | We do not speak of the trolls.

Dra åt helvete | Go to hell

Skit stövel | Shit boot

Jösses | Geez

Jag är ledsen, lilla barn. | I'm sorry, little one.

Du är en duktig flicka. | You're a good girl.

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