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WHEN THE CRANES FLY SOUTH

A Novel

LISA RIDZÉN

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New York Times bestselling author of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Ridzén is a doctoral student in sociology, researching masculinity norms in the rural communities of the Swedish far north, where she herself was raised and now lives in a small village outside Östersund. The idea for her debut novel came from the discovery of notes her grandfather's care team had left the family as he neared the end of his life.

A NOTE ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Alice Menzies holds a master of art in Translation Theory and Practice from University College London, specializing in the Scandinavian languages. Her translations include works by Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Fredrik Backman, Tove Alsterdal, and Jens Liljestrand. She lives in London.

When the Cranes Fly South

A NOVEL

Lisa Ridzén

Translated from the Swedish by Alice Menzies

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For Cameron

How lucky we are to have each other

Thursday,
May 18

I FANTASIZE about cutting him out of my will, making sure he doesn't get a penny.

He claims it's as much for my sake as Sixten's that he wants to take him away. That old men like me shouldn't be trudging about in the woods and that dogs like Sixten need longer walks than a quick stroll to the road and back.

I look down at Sixten, who is curled up beside me on the daybed. He lets out a big yawn and gets himself comfortable with his head on my belly. I dig my swollen fingers into his coat and shake my head. What does that idiot know, anyway? There's no chance in hell I'm going to let him get his own way.

At the kitchen table, Ingrid sighs.

"I can't promise anything, Bo, but I'll do my best. Because this isn't okay," she says, scribbling away in the carers' logbook.

I nod and give her a faint smile. If there's anyone who can help me with Sixten, it's Ingrid.

The fire crackles, and I struggle to tear my eyes away from the flames dancing around the birch logs. My thoughts drift back to the conversation I had with Hans this morning, and I feel myself getting worked up again. Who does he think he is, our son? It's not up to him to decide where Sixten should live.

I close my eyes for a moment, tired from all the anger. I listen to Ingrid's movements, and my breathing slowly grows heavier as the rage subsides.

In its wake, I'm left with the same niggling feeling I've had quite often lately. A clawing that comes and goes in my chest. A sense that I should be doing things differently.

"God, you've become a real brooder," Ture said on the phone one day recently, when I tried to explain.

He's probably right, I think now, lying here beside Sixten and listening to Ingrid pottering about.

Because in the void you left behind, Fredrika, I've started thinking about things I never paid much notice to. I've never been one to doubt myself, always known what I want and been able to tell right from wrong. I still can, but I've also started to wonder.

I've started to wonder why things worked out the way they did. To think about my mother and my old man in a way I never have before. But more than anything, I've been thinking about Hans. I don't want things between us to end up the way they did with my old man.

It's just that all his nagging about Sixten makes me so angry I don't know what to do with myself. I won't be able to fix a single bloody thing if he takes Sixten away.

"I'll go for a quick walk with him at lunch," Ingrid says as she firmly closes the logbook.

Her eyes flash. She has a dog of her own, and just the thought of them taking Sixten away upsets her. She runs a hand through her short gray hair and picks up my pill organizer. Checks that everything is right. For my heart, and all the rest of it.

"Thank you," I say, taking a sip of my tea.

If we'd had a daughter, I would have liked her to be Ingrid. She was in the same year as Hans, and her grandfather worked at the sawmill in Ranviken at the same time as my old man.

She wasn't wearing a jacket when she arrived today, just the navy fleece with the home-help company's logo on the chest, and I can't believe she's not cold. That sort of thing always surprises me nowadays, that no one ever seems to feel the cold. I used to go without socks for half the year, and I'd be in shorts from the start of May, but these days I'm freezing all the time. The doctors and carers tell me that's just what happens. That it's normal. It doesn't matter that the weather is getting warmer—I'm going to keep lighting the fire.

You've always been a delicate soul, Fredrika, shivering at the slightest chill. They usually have you wearing one of your old woolen cardigans

whenever we come to visit.

Ingrid frowns, and I think I hear her mutter something about the prepackaged pills. One day, she'll start shivering like an emaciated snipe, too.

She double-checks the organizer one last time, then takes out her phone to see if anyone has called. It strikes me that I don't know whether she has a family of her own—or have I just forgotten? I've noticed from the way people reply to my questions that I'm getting forgetful. It really seems to bother Hans.

"You just asked that," he always snaps.

Ingrid never makes me feel silly like that.

I study her as I shift my legs, stretched out on one of your old patchwork quilts. I'm sure she has beautiful children. Friendly and well raised.

I reach for the glass of rose-hip soup she left on the table earlier and drink a big mouthful of the cool, thick liquid. Rose-hip soup is one of the few flavors I still enjoy. So many other things taste different nowadays. I can't eat cream cakes anymore, for example, because they taste like mold, but Hans still insists on buying them.

"You're getting so thin," he says. As though it's my fault my muscles are wasting away. As though I invented the aging, useless body.

I set the glass back down on the table and use my lower lip to suck the soup from my mustache.

Ingrid goes over to the stove and adds a couple of logs. She knows what she's doing. She and that brother of hers actually have a firewood processor, the kind that can cut and split the wood. Twelve tons it weighs. I didn't know her parents, but I know who they were. Both died early, and Ingrid took over the family farm.

Some of the other carers have no idea how to light a fire, and they always put the birch bark at the bottom rather than building a stack and lighting it from the top. I used to correct them, but after a while I got sick of doing that. The young ones in particular feel like a lost cause. There's plenty I could say about my old man, but at least he taught me how to light

a fire properly. Young people today, they don't think any further than tomorrow. They get everything served up to them, and they can't do any of the things we learned as kids. What would they do if something big happened? If the power went out, or the water supply failed? They'd collapse like a house of cards, the lot of them.

My gaze comes to rest on the fire again. I think I'd probably be able to last a good while on water from the stream, burning logs in the stove and eating the food in the basement. The flames nibble tentatively at the birch bark and quickly grow into a raging blaze. The flickering yellow glow makes me think of Hans and the way he used to sit transfixed in front of the fire as a boy. Back when he still looked up to me and pricked his ears at everything I said.

"Hans says I should stop using the stove, too. He doesn't just want to take Sixten away; he wants to take my wood as well." I chuckle, though the familiar clawing feeling in my chest is back. "He thinks I should just turn the radiators up instead, that I can afford it."

"I know," Ingrid replies, rinsing off a plate. "But it's from a place of concern, you know that. He's worried you might forget the damper or fall while you're bringing the wood in, while you're out with Sixten."

Or maybe it's just selfishness and pigheaded idiocy, I think, though I bite my tongue.

"Just forget about the wood, Bo. We're here so often that if you need anything, we'll realize soon enough."

I reach up and touch my beard, mutter that Hans doesn't give two hoots that they're here to help, but Ingrid doesn't seem to hear.

"It'll be Eva-Lena this evening," she says after a while.

I feel a rush of anger and nod with my eyes closed, but I know sleep will have me in its relaxing grip before long.

Eva-Lena started coming over when Ingrid slipped on the first ice and broke her foot. She was off work for weeks, which meant I had to put up with that battle-ax instead—and as if that weren't enough, she's from Frösön.

They visit me four times a day, the home help. When Hans first broached the idea, about six months after you left, I thought it was ridiculous. I laughed in his face, in fact, though I did feel bad afterward. He meant well, I suppose.

This was back when I was still in control of my own life.

It's lucky I have Ture. He's been dealing with the carers for much longer than me. One of the doctors forced them on him when he went to the hospital after a fall. Some young know-it-all who said he was worried that Ture lived alone and didn't have anyone to help with his shopping. It didn't matter that he'd spent most of his life living alone; Ture soon found himself with people running about the house every few hours.

The shower is one part of it he doesn't like. I don't really care about them seeing me naked, but Ture finds it uncomfortable. Says he feels sorry for anyone who has to look at his rickety old body.

No, what bothers me most is my bad balance. If it were a bit better, taking Sixten for longer walks would be a piece of cake. There wouldn't be any fuss over him, and I wouldn't have to be so angry with Hans.

Aside from Ingrid, Johanna is my favorite. She's around Ellinor's age, from over Bölviken way. Big and loud, just like that mother of hers. You never know what might come out of her mouth, and she makes me laugh, even though I don't have much to laugh about now. Ture seems to have different temps every other day, but if that were me, I'd be straight on the damn phone to the head of the council. Is it too much to ask not to have complete strangers marching in and out of your house?

"I'll add a couple of logs before I go, so you can doze off if you want," Ingrid tells me as she gets up from the kitchen table. I hadn't even noticed her sit down.

She clears away the plate and the knife she used to cut my sandwich into bite-size pieces. I have only two teeth left at the bottom, and it takes me a long time to eat unless she cuts things up. Hans has been nagging me to get a dental bridge fitted, but I don't see the point. A waste of money for such a short period of time. Besides, the soft cheese they give me isn't too bad. Not quite as good as the firmer stuff, but we can't have everything.

Sixten presses up against my leg, and I feel an ache in my chest. A sudden urge to talk to you. Not that we were ever people who talked a lot. You would say that of course I'm still capable of bringing the wood in and taking the dog for a walk, that it's enough to go over to the edge of the trees and let him do his business.

It's been more than three years since you moved, since you gave me that look of such complete confusion when our son came to get you. He said it was time to go and that you'd be better off there.

I could tell you didn't believe him. That you would rather stay here with me, where everything was familiar. I let you rest in my gaze for a moment, and I wanted nothing more than for you to stay. But I took your hand, gave it a gentle squeeze and said:

"Hans is right—you'll be much happier there."

Every single fiber of me disagreed, but I knew I couldn't take care of you.

I cast a quick glance at the jar on the table and then at Ingrid. Can't open it myself; my fingers are too stiff and weak to grip the top. My hands are still the size of toilet lids, but the strength is gone and I can't bend my fingers properly.

"Sausage fingers are normal for someone of your age and with your medical history," the doctor told me last time I was there.

Ingrid tried to find a jar that would be easier to open but still tight enough to stop your scent from disappearing, but I couldn't manage that, either.

"Do you need help with the jar?" she asks with her back to me.

I quickly lower my eyes. She has helped me with it so many times, but it's still embarrassing. Keeping your dementia-addled wife's scarf in a jar just to be able to remember her scent is fundamentally pathetic, after all. That's why Ingrid is the only one who knows about it. I'd be embarrassed even in front of you. We weren't the kind of people who whispered sweet nothings in each other's ear. We never needed that sort of thing.

Ingrid opens the lid and hands the jar to me, then turns around and continues to wipe the worktop.

I take a deep breath through the fabric. Close my eyes and let my eyelids trap the burning sensation. No one has ever told me that it's normal for a person's eyes to well up as they age, for the tears to find a foothold in virtually every memory.

You bought the scarf at a spring market in town, back when Hans was still too young to walk on his own. He was in the stroller we'd inherited from the neighbors on the other side of the road. I remember its big wheels. Perfect for gravel, you said. The scarf was dark red to begin with, but you mended it with lots of little multicolored patches over the years. Whenever it was cold, you would wrap it around your neck, and if it was warm, you would tie it around your shoulders.

"Don't you want to take this?" I asked as you were leaving the house for the last time. After Hans had helped you pack a bag for Brunkullagården.

You turned around, and for a split second I thought you were back with me, that you would say thank you and smile the way you always did when I remembered something you'd forgotten. But you just stared at me with a blank look on your face, as though I were holding a foreign object in my hand.

I don't dare keep the scarf out of the jar for too long, because I want the scent to last. You smell so different now that they've swapped your soaps and creams. Your brain isn't the only thing the dementia has changed.

I shove the scarf into the jar and manage to screw the lid back into place. That's much easier than taking it off. I then set it down on the table so that Ingrid can tighten it and lean my head against the pillow.

The sound of her doing the dishes is like a lullaby, and I get lost in the fire, barely notice when she says goodbye and closes the door behind her.

The summer nights are starting to get brighter, but the kitchen is dark. There are only a couple of small windows in here, and the brown ceiling swallows any light that does manage to get in.

The fire is still crackling, Sixten breathing heavily. I scratch him behind the ear and on his neck. His fur there is as soft and downy as he was all over when he was a pup. You were skeptical when the Fredrikssons asked if we

wanted a new puppy. He was the seventh dog we got from them. They must have bred at least a hundred elkhounds for helping with the hunt. You thought we were too old for another one, and Hans agreed. I thought the pair of you were ridiculous and called you both pessimists.

At dinner one day, I snapped and asked what the hell the point of life was if I was too old for a dog. Were we just supposed to sit around, waiting to die? A few days later, Hans gave us a ride over to the Fredrikssons' place in Fåker, and when I lifted Sixten from the front seat and put him into your arms, you changed your mind, too. You even went down to the Larssons' and got a bit of liver to dry, so we'd have something to train him with. That was almost exactly a year before we noticed the first symptoms.

I loosely grip Sixten's ear, and he snores softly. The movement makes me think about just how stiff my fingers are. I had to stop taking my rheumatism medication when I first started taking the pills for my heart.

"When it really comes down to it, it's not a hard choice between your heart and your joints, is it?" the backup doctor asked with a smile.

Dying of a heart attack probably wouldn't be a bad way to go, I had time to think before he interrupted my thoughts.

"Unless you have any other questions, I think we're done for today," he said, turning to his screen.

The intensity of his fingers on the keyboard made it sound like he was in a hurry, like he had somewhere better to be. His thin gray hair was like an ugly shower cap on his round head. Had to be approaching retirement, I thought. I've heard that backup doctors earn as much in one month as I did in a year at the sawmill. When I asked where my usual doctor was, this new bloke started telling me about himself, that his mother came from Jämtland. As though I cared.

I wanted to get up, to bring my cane down on the desk and ask how the hell it could be normal to have hands that can't even open the lid of a herring jar. To have to choose between that and dropping down dead. But the words I was looking for floated away and out of reach.

I wished that Hans would get up and say we refused to accept this. That he could take me by the arm and fix everything—the way I did when the

neighbor’s lad was throwing pine cones at him by the bus stop. Grabbed the boy’s sweater and shoved him in the ditch. But Hans just passed me my jacket and got to his feet, and then we drove home.

Sixten snores loudly, and I squeeze his ear again. I can still manage a pretty good grip between my thumb and fingers. Ingrid tells me I have a harder nip than most eighty-nine-year-olds, but your hands are tougher, Fredrika. The staff at Brunkullagården told me that. I should probably be ashamed, but it makes me happy to hear that you pinch them so hard your knuckles turn white.

1:30 p.m.

Bo wanted fish gratin for lunch, plus coffee with lots of sugar. Blew into the bottle to loosen the phlegm and talked about Sixten. Wants me to write that he's upset because certain people think he should be rehomed. Fire okay.

Ingrid