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The Mothers

My maternal grandmother, Berta, died of breast cancer several years before I was born. Yet she was a very definite presence throughout my childhood. My mother told me a good deal, and Berta's background was the part of my family history that affected me most. As a child and teenager, I was fascinated by life in the forests of Värmland and the powerful influence of music and poetry.

Berta Gottfriedz, née Turesson, came from Arvika but worked throughout her adult life as an infant school teacher in Tullinge, at that time a small industrial town south of Stockholm, which was dominated by Alfa Laval's separator factory. She was married for a short time, had a daughter, but divorced early on and lived as a single mother in a small flat above the school where she worked. As a child, she had such fiery red hair that she was teased and called names. In later life, her hair was thick, glossy and more coppery than red. At any rate, that is what I've been told; I've only seen black-and-white photos myself. Throughout her life she struggled with surplus weight to some extent, and photos show her in roomy dresses.

'Cheerful' and 'kind' are the words that crop up most often when people describe her, along with the phrase 'she took everyone by storm'. She was always ready to lend others a helping hand. Not long ago I became acquainted with a lady called Dagmar who was 102 when I met her, but still had a crystal-clear memory. As a teenager, Dagmar lived under harsh conditions with unkind relatives in the north of the country. Berta got to hear about this. She intervened, sent money for a train ticket and let Dagmar live with her for a long period of time.

The tears well up in my eyes when Dagmar describes the scene 85 years ago, when my sunny-natured grandmother

met her at Stockholm Central Station. What touches me especially are the mentions of constant outbursts of hearty laughter that Dagmar and others come back to when describing my grandmother. My own mother rarely laughed.

Botkyrka Church was full to capacity for my grandmother's funeral. In the address he gave at her graveside, the minister recalled how she was always prepared to offer support to others, be they children in need of help or poor artists.

There wasn't often money for fancy food in my mother's childhood home. Berta preferred to invest in books and original paintings. Several of those paintings are in my possession today.

She was a local councillor in Tullinge for a while. But issues like drains and other practical matters weren't really her style. Her interests ran more to art, literature and poetry. One of her sisters was married to the artist from whom she bought most paintings. Another went out with the singer Ruben Nilsson for a while. And her eldest sister, Olga, was married to the poet Dan Andersson. He died when my grandmother was only 22, but left an impression that lasted for the rest of her life. Dagmar, the 102-year-old, told me how Berta, when she was married and lived in a house, turned a whole room into a Dan Andersson museum.

My grandmother and her sisters were very close. They rang each other every day. And they met in summer at the home of my maternal great-grandmother, Karolina, who lived in Brunskog near Arvika. As a child, my mother spent several summer holidays in Brunskog. Sadly, I could never get her to tell me very much about Karolina.

Going back one generation further to my grandmother's grandmother, Kajsa Gullbrandsdotter, two letters have been preserved. Kajsa wrote them to her granddaughter Berta – my grandmother – when Berta was training to be a teacher in Stockholm. Her handwriting is clear and neat. The spelling and grammar are almost faultless, although Kajsa only attended primary school for a few years. In her letters, she wrote that the winter had been hard, with a great deal

of snow. Though Kajsa's husband had managed to reach the village and get to the post office on snowshoes, he had suffered from serious back pain for a long time. However, the two old people had not been completely cut off, as they had had some woodcutters lodging in their cottage for a while.

I find out a little more about my grandmother's grandmother, Kajsa Gullbrandsdotter, in a book by my grandmother's brother, Gunnar. Gunnar Turesson was a ballad singer. One of the poets whose work he performed was his late brother-in-law, Dan Andersson. Gunnar was very popular in the twenties, thirties and early forties. He played the lute, sang and set to music many of the most popular songs of the time, such as '*Jag väntar vid min mila*', '*Flicka från Backafall*' and '*En ballad om franske kungens spelmän*'. But after the Second World War, the Swedes' interest in folk songs cooled off. Gunnar moved back to Värmland and researched folk traditions for a while. He travelled around from village to village with a tape recorder and recorded people singing ancient folk songs and yodelling to call the cows home and keep trolls away. Unfortunately, he wiped the tape clean as soon as he had noted the melodies down, so there are no longer any recordings, they tell me at the Swedish Folksong Archives.

In his autobiography *Visor och skaldeminnen* ('Folksongs and the Memories of a Poet') Gunnar Turesson recounts how he and my grandmother Berta – at the thoughtful Berta's behest, of course – walked several dozen kilometres to help their grandmother Kajsa for a few weeks in the summer of 1917. She had just been widowed, but still had some cows and sheep that she would call home every morning and evening. One day, several years later, Kajsa was so stiff with rheumatism that she was unable to take her birch-bark backpack off in the evening, but had to sleep with it strapped to her back all night. At that point, my grandmother's mother, Karolina, decided to take Kajsa home to Brunskog. She was bedridden for three years before her

death. The hearse came to fetch the body, and that was the first time Kajsa ever went anywhere by car.

Gunnar Turesson told of how, as a child, he learned Finnish words and expressions from his grandmother. In the book, he describes how she taught him where 'our Finnish forebears with rye in their mittens had settled after making their way on foot from Savolaks (Savonia) to Gunnarskog'. My mother, too, said we were supposed to be descended from Forest Finns – a group of people who migrated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from Savolaks and the forests of Karelia to Sweden, to practise swiddening, or slash-and-burn farming. 'Your grandmother had a lot of Finnish blood in her veins. That's where you get your high cheekbones from,' I was told on more than one occasion.

But is that really true? At the Gothenburg Book Fair a few years ago, I came across a stand where some genealogy researchers were exhibiting. Perhaps it was there and then that the whole book project started. I asked them to look up my maternal grandmother and great-grandmother. The lightning speed with which they clicked through the register, using my vague information, was impressive. In just a few seconds they managed to find my maternal grandmother Berta, my great-grandmother Karolina, my grandmother's grandmother Kajsa, and her mother, Karin Svensdotter. And that was it. The register had no information about the place of birth of Karin Svensdotter, the mother of my grandmother's grandmother.

But now my curiosity was aroused. A few months later, I consulted the fellow student from my journalism course, the prominent genealogy researcher Håkan Skogsjö. He sat down and took another look. And, in a roundabout way, Håkan managed to discover what the researchers at the book fair had failed to find. He was able to show that Karin Svensdotter was the illegitimate daughter of a woman called Annika Svensdotter, who was born at Hillringsberg Manor, south of Arvika. Sadly, this Annika Svensdotter

died at the early age of 45, and by that time she was 'penniless' according to the note in the church records. Annika, in her turn, was the daughter of another woman called Karin, just like me.

One summer day in 2012 I travelled to Hillringsberg to find out more about Karin Gudmundsdotter, the mother of my grandmother's grandmother's grandmother, born in 1735. Hillringsberg lies on Glafs fjorden, an oval lake that derives its name from the beauty of its glittering waters. They glitter as much as ever. The large white manor house has an exceptional setting, with its broad veranda looking out over the water.

In the eighteenth century Hillringsberg was an iron foundry producing mainly malleable iron and nails. There were also mills and saws, and Karin Gudmundsdotter is supposed to have lived in a place called Nedre sågen ('Lower Saw'). This lay next to the waterfall, very close to the manor house and the lake. I wandered about in the area for a while, trying to picture how it would have been in the eighteenth century, when Karin Gudmundsdotter lived here. The booming of the waterfall went right through me, sounding just as it must have back then. The old workers' cottages have burned down and the smithy is gone. It has been replaced by a plant producing solar panels for roofs – one of Scandinavia's largest.

My family history expert, Håkan Skogsjö, thinks it quite possible that my maternal lineage may go back to the Forest Finns who came to Sweden some centuries ago. Glava, as this parish was called, was one of the areas where Finns settled in the seventeenth century. That is why I have arranged to meet K.-G. Lindgren, a local historian and family history researcher who has written several books about Forest Finns. The most recent, called *Där finnar bröt och röjde* ('Where Finns Broke and Cleared the Soil'), explores old crofts and farms in the Arvika area that were once home to Forest Finns.

But K.-G. Lindgren cannot find any evidence at all that Karin Gudmundsdotter might have been the daughter of

Forest Finns. On the contrary, he explains that Swedes and Finns lived totally separate lives: the Finns up in the forests and the Swedes down in the valleys, where there was arable land.

What he has found is that Karin Gudmundsdotter was married to a miller who worked at Hillringsberg. Before that marriage, she had been married to another miller at another industrial settlement, but he died of pneumonia after only one and a half years of marriage, when Karin was 26. Karin's father, Gudmund, from whom she inherited the patronymic 'Gudmundsdotter', was a soldier from nearby Fors farm. He went to war with Karl XII's army in Norway, and after the king's death, Gudmund was appointed parish clerk and organist in Stavnäs, on the other side of Glafs fjorden. That shows he must have been literate and that he must have had a good singing voice. There are only a few kilometres between Stavnäs and Hillringsberg if you take the direct route over the water or the ice. But the usual way to travel was probably to take the ferry over the water a few kilometres further south, where Glafs fjorden is at its narrowest.

On my return from Värmland, I ask Håkan Skogsjö to double-check K.-G. Lindgren's findings. And everything seems to be right. Karin Gudmundsdotter was a miller's wife at Hillringsberg, and she was born at the home of the Stavnäs parish clerk, the daughter of Gudmund and his wife Märta. There is little information about Märta, but she seems to have been born in 1698. Håkan also finds a brief note in church records about the 'mother-in-law' who also lived in the Stavnäs homestead towards the end of her life. She must have been Märta's mother, though she is not mentioned by name.

There is not a word to suggest that any of them might have been Forest Finns. So I go back to my DNA results. I turn to the leader of a Norway-based DNA project for family history researchers with Forest Finns among their ancestors. But the project has no record of anyone with mitochondrial DNA anything like my own rare group,

U5b1b. Some participants belong to the special subgroup that is so common among Sami people, U5b1ba. However, most of the people in the Forest Finns group whose DNA has been tested belong to haplogroups that spread through Europe in connection with farming, such as H, J and T. That tells us something about the origins of the Forest Finns, but it adds nothing to my personal family history.

So there is absolutely no indication that I might be descended in the maternal line from Forest Finns. I suspect that the singer Gunnar Turesson may have embroidered on real life a little in his book, particular as regards the background of his maternal grandmother, Kajsa Gullbrandsdotter. He probably thought it was more exotic and interesting to be a Forest Finn in Värmland. It's clear he was fascinated by Finnish cultural traditions. In his autobiography, he writes vividly of how the Forest Finns in Värmland worshipped the forest god Tapio, and how they nailed bears' skulls to fir trees after the hunt. Gunnar Turesson was very probably right in thinking there were Forest Finns among our Värmland ancestors – but they were not part of the matrilineal ancestry I am investigating now.

I am still curious about where Karin Gudmundsdotter's mother Märta, the wife of the Stavnäs parish clerk, came from, and who the 'mother-in-law' was. But Håkan Skogsjö can find no further information. He advises me to contact Peter Olausson, a family historian friend of his who is now a professional historian at Karlstad University, specialising in local Värmland history.

A few days after emailing Peter Olausson, I receive a friendly response. He agrees to look in the archives and see if he can find any more clues about Karin Gudmundsdotter's mother Märta, and her mother, the 'mother-in-law' who lived at Stavnäs.

This was in the autumn of 2012. Silence ensued. Nearly two years later, in June 2014, I received another email from Peter Olausson, which began: 'You've probably abandoned all hope of hearing from me, and justifiably so. There simply hasn't been any time to look for information about your ancestor. I hope you've got some help from someone else.'

But I don't give up that easily. I reply, asking if I can meet Peter in Värmland anyway, even if it's only to ask him some more general questions about life around Glafs fjorden in the eighteenth century. Fortunately, he agrees.

A few weeks later, one oppressively hot day in August, I get off the train at Arvika station. Peter Olausson fetches me by car, and our meeting exceeds all my expectations. He is on leave from his job at Karlstad University, but spends a whole afternoon driving me round to various places around Glafs fjorden that are linked in some way with my family. We visit the beautiful church at Stavnäs, where my forefather Gudmund Erlandsson once worked as clerk, and the place on the nearby shore where his homestead once stood and Karin Gudmundsdotter was born.

By way of a bonus, Peter tells me a good deal about the author Selma Lagerlöf. I didn't realise she had such close links with this area; her childhood home, Mårbacka, was in Östra Ämtervik, several dozen kilometres away. However, she had several relatives around Glafs fjorden. One of them was a pastor in Stavnäs at the same time as my forefather Gudmund Erlandsson was the parish clerk there. Another of her relatives was the pastor of a nearby church, which is now in ruins. He was one of the models for the protagonist of *Gösta Berling's Saga*, Peter tells me. We pass by, and I stand on the spot where the best-known opening in the whole of Swedish literature is set: 'The pastor was mounting the pulpit steps. The bowed heads of the congregation rose – he was there, then, after all, and there would be service that Sunday, though for many Sundays there had been none.' It is true that the pastor was a drunkard, that he was involved in major scandals and that he was dismissed, Peter says. But

the rest of Gösta Berling's tale was Selma Lagerlöf's own creation.

We take a look at Hillringsberg Manor, which I visited two years previously, and Fors, the large farm where Gudmund Erlandsson lived as a soldier and met Märta, his future wife. A real major's wife who ruled the roost at Fors was the inspiration for the wife of the major at Ekeby in *Gösta Berling's Saga*, Peter Olausson tells me. It occurs to me that the unusual name Gudmund Erlandsson crops up in another of Selma Lagerlöf's books, *Girl from the Marsh Croft and Other Stories*. An elegant young man by that name is the protagonist and hero of the short story that gives its name to the collection. The story was also turned into a silent film directed by Victor Sjöström. The film had its premiere at Stockholm's 'Röda Kvarn' cinema in 1917, the same year in which my maternal grandmother, Berta, passed her teacher's examination at the teacher training college there. The real-life model for the girl from the marsh croft may have been Gudmund Erlandsson's first wife. My foremother Märta was his second wife, according to church records.

At the linen factory in Klässbol, famous for weaving the tablecloths for the Nobel banquet, we stop for a coffee in an old mill. Peter Olausson has a cup of coffee and a cake, and I buy a bottle of apple juice. The apples were grown and pressed just a few kilometres away. It is so oppressively hot that we choose to sit indoors in the shade.

When we take our seats at the table, Peter suddenly says, 'Oh, there was something else, by the way. I've found the mother-in-law.'

'What?' I reply. After all, it's only a few weeks since he emailed me to say it was impossible to find Märta's mother.

'Yes, but then I did find her after all. Her name was Annika. She was from Stockholm.'

So I've been over to Värmland twice and searched for my ancestors among Forest Finns and other ancient Värmland families, and now the trail leads back to

Stockholm. To the capital, where my parents lived as young medical students, and where I myself have been living for some years now.

‘It’s quite common for genealogy researchers to suddenly stumble across unexpected coincidences,’ says Peter. ‘There are times when it seems as if you’re going round in circles.’

The document he happened to leaf through before our get-together is a little book called *Anteckningar om Glafva socken i Värmland* (‘Notes on the Parish of Glava in Värmland’). It was written by a local historian in the nineteenth century, but the whole edition was bought up and destroyed by a local family who felt they had been misrepresented in some way. It was not until the 1970s that the little book was republished by a genealogy researcher and county librarian. It contains all kinds of notes about people who lived in Glava, and for some reason Peter Olausson noticed the obituary of a church caretaker called Jean Pettersson. Somehow or other – I still don’t understand how – he realised that this caretaker was the brother of my grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother, Märta Pettersdotter.

According to the obituary Jean was born in Stockholm, where his father, Petter Jonsson, worked as a gardener. Some time after his son’s birth, the gardener and his wife, Annika Jeansdotter, moved first to Västergötland, then to Jösse in Värmland, and finally to Hillringsberg. This was at the end of the seventeenth century, when Sweden was a great power and it had just become fashionable for the country’s wealthy elite to create elaborate gardens in the French Renaissance style. Clearly this also applied to the largest estates in Värmland.

After our coffee, Peter Olausson and I visit the open-air museum of traditional buildings in Glava, where we look at some more documents that confirm Peter’s findings. Annika Jeansdotter was the wife of a gardener at Hillringsberg, who had moved from Stockholm with her husband. Her daughter Märta grew up there and was later employed as a maid at nearby Fors farm. It was there she met Gudmund Erlandsson,

the soldier who was later appointed parish clerk at Stavnäs, and they moved a few hundred metres away to the other side of Glafs fjorden. A generation later, Märta's daughter, Karin Gudmundsdotter, moved back over Glafs fjorden to Hillringsberg and became the wife of a miller there. For five subsequent generations, women moved no more than a few kilometres within the area that is now the municipality of Arvika. When my grandmother Berta started studying at the teacher training college in Stockholm during the First World War, she returned to the city her foremother had left about 240 years previously.

But where did Annika Jeansdotter, the gardener's wife, come from originally? She is very likely to have been a relative newcomer to Stockholm. When Sweden was a great power, the rapidly expanding capital was a magnet, attracting large numbers of people from other places – just as it does today. I am one of those who have moved to Stockholm for work reasons.

Was Annika Jeansdotter originally from Värmland after all? Written sources are probably never going to take me any further back. What remains are the DNA results. One day I receive an email that ends with the words: 'Best wishes from your very distant relative Tomas.' The man who wrote the letter is the nearest match to me so far on that branch of my family tree. Our mitochondrial DNA sets differ only on two points. His earliest female forebear also lived in Värmland in the eighteenth century, but in the parish of Norra Råda, which lies further north, in the municipality of Hagfors. She was also called Annika, and her daughter's name was Karin.

My own mother was not called Annika, but Anita. She, too, lived in Stockholm for a few years while she was studying medicine at the Karolinska Institute. There is a black-and-white photograph taken in the flat where she and my father lived as newlyweds.

The little one-roomed flat is full of paintings and beautiful furniture, most of it inherited from my grandmother, who had died a few years previously. She spent much of her income on paintings by artist friends and on other beautiful objects. The photo shows my mother playing an old square piano, an old-fashioned form of the instrument. Above the piano hang a violin and a guitar. There is a writing desk in masur birchwood and a substantial table of solid pine. All the furnishings were chosen with the help of relatives in Värmland – my grandmother's musician brother, Gunnar, and her father, who built organs for a living.

The photograph shows my mother as a slim young woman with fashionably styled hair. She is recently married and a student on one of the country's most prestigious university courses. The picture must have been taken around 1957, which was a great time for our maternal line. Only 150 years had passed since my grandmother's grandmother's grandmother in the maternal line, Annika Svensdotter, died at 45 as the penniless widow of a blacksmith. During these 150 years, Swedish society underwent unprecedented development from poverty to prosperity. The same was true of my family.

About 10 years after the photo was taken, the problems began to pile up for my mother as well. Illness and other problems destroyed our family. The riches of her genetic make-up were beyond money; she was very gifted and full of energy. But there was a dark side to that heritage. Humanity pays for artistic gifts and creativity, and the toll is mental illness.

That is the way it has been throughout European history, ever since the Ice Age people created their cave paintings and carved figures from ivory. And I firmly believe that that dual heritage was in our baggage a long time before some of us left Africa to people Europe and the rest of the world.

I have been lucky in the genetic lottery. I have been spared serious mental illness, but have nonetheless inherited a generous portion of creativity and energy. That's a winning ticket to be grateful for. Rather than fret over the impact that

illness and other problems had on my childhood, I can be thankful for the strength and the abilities I was born with. The different sides of my biological heritage are interconnected. The bad comes with the good, the good with the bad.

That's the nature of genetics. You can't say that certain genetic variants are 'better' than others. Inherited traits can be advantageous for some individuals in particular circumstances but represent a drawback in others. The British author Richard Dawkins made a big splash in the 1970s with his popular science book *The Selfish Gene*. He has subsequently tried to alter the concept somewhat and tone it down. But the damage has already been done. The punchy title gave a whole generation a simplified, indeed erroneous idea of how DNA works. This prolonged the political polarisation of the 1930s and 1940s, when Nazis were keen to stress blood, earth and heredity, while Joseph Stalin and his followers in the Soviet Union regarded heredity as 'bourgeois' and 'counter-revolutionary'.

Genes are not selfish, nor do they exist in isolation. They work together in large, complex constellations of DNA. DNA is passed on to each new generation, not in the form of individual genes, but in large bundles.

Rather than 'selfish genes', I would prefer to use the term 'two-faced genes'. Genes can be good or bad, depending on the environment in which they occur. They can result in mental illness or great creativity; in a well-filled physique, which enables the individual to survive in harsh surroundings, but also causes overweight if there are ample amounts of food available. Hypersensitivity to sensory impressions helps the hunter to locate his quarry, but can be disastrous in a classroom or an office. What is good or bad depends on the combination and the context.

And inherited traits are just the beginning. We are also formed by all our experiences, from the time we are in the womb, and throughout our lives. Our DNA is also affected to some extent by the experiences of previous generations

through mechanisms known as epigenetics, which scientists are only just beginning to understand.

Together, nature and nurture condition our identity and our health. They belong together. Only the very ill-informed now believe there is a contradiction between these two poles; the very ill-informed, and those who are blinded by ideology.