

Searching for Nora: After the Doll's House
By Wendy Swallow

Excerpt

NORA

December 26, 1879

Kristiania, Norway

I left late one frigid night. Torvald, too stunned to stop me, stood gaping in the parlor as I clattered down the apartment stairs and slammed the big front door. I wanted to shake the gossips from their beds, to send them to the window to glimpse the unthinkable: Nora Helmer, walking away in her traveling coat, with a satchel!

I did it to leave Torvald in a stew of scandalous talk because it was what he feared most, more than he feared losing me.

Outside, the cold knocked the air from my lungs. I grabbed the railing to steady myself and hesitated for a long moment, suspended between two worlds. Inside the lamps still flickered, and all that had been my world shimmered in the firelight—the chairs pulled up beside the stove, my embroidery hoop waiting on the footstool, my darling children asleep in the nursery. It would be so easy to slip back in and say I was sorry. To beg his forgiveness. To sink back into the suffocating eiderdown of my life.

But I was not sorry. Sorry would come later, pulling me down like grass in a mountain lake, but not now. Instead, a surge of exhilaration swept up from my feet. I was free, as if all the constraints and rules of my marriage had fallen away with the slamming of the door. I was just Nora—no longer Torvald's squirrel, no longer his wife!

I took a deep breath, then plunged into the icy street.

My boots skidded on the frozen ruts, so I hurried as best I could, skirting the gaslights and sucking in the electric air. Afraid that Torvald would come after me, I ducked down an alley, stumbling past ash cans in the knee-deep snow. I took other alleys and soon lost my way, but it didn't matter. I only needed to disappear.

I walked and walked, slipping past stately houses and darkened apartment buildings. I barely felt the weight of my bag, as I had taken so little, just a few clothes, my lotions, my pearls. But there were other burdens. Everything that had happened flickered through my mind. Torvald's words, in particular, cut like fragments of glass.

How had it come to this fevered flight? I knew, and I didn't know.

It happened at the sad end of Christmas. The overwrought children were finally asleep, and Torvald and I, limp with brandy, had lingered in the drawing room. And then he found the letter, delivered earlier. The letter from my blackmailer.

“What’s this?” he said as he opened it and began to read. Then he gasped. “Is this true?” His eyes bugged out at me in disbelief, as if he’d never seen me before. “Did you do this thing he says, forge your father’s signature, for a loan?” He looked at the letter again, then back at me, his face going scarlet. “And the man who loaned you the money is blackmailing you?”

“Yes. I did it to save your life.”

“How could you!” he thundered. “And against my wishes!” He paced, breathing hard. “Do you have any idea what you have blundered into?”

“I loved you more than all the world, Torvald.”

But he couldn’t hear that. “None of your slippery tricks, Nora!”

He shouted, he called up my father’s “flimsy values,” and then said he should have known I would be no better. Hypocrite and liar, he called me, his accusing finger shaking with anger. Then, when he thought he was ruined, criminal, disgusting, shameful. And the final wound—that he could never trust me with the children again.

And so our marriage cracked open, and the life I’d known spilled away.

The cold finally caught up with me. I stopped, lost in a jumble of weathered cottages, and slumped against a wall to breathe. And as I did, my circumstances settled gently on my shoulders, like snow. I had left home to wander the city alone at night, and I had left my children behind. I thought of them sleeping in their rumpled beds—Ivar with his long legs sticking out from the sheets, Bobby curled like a forest creature, Emma snuffling in her crib. She had a cold; would Nurse summon the doctor tomorrow? She could sicken and die, and I might never know.

I couldn’t bear the thought of that, so I stamped my feet to make sure they weren’t frozen and looked about. In the distance I could see the warehouses along the harbor.

After everything that had happened, I had come down to the fjord after all.

I walked toward the water. The big port was unusually quiet, emptied by the holiday. Darkened ships lined the bulkhead, and stacks of lumber loomed in the shadows. Snatches of fiddle music echoed across the bay from the drinking houses of Vika, the slum on the other side. Life went on, apparently, but so far away it didn’t seem to include me anymore.

Instead, there was the sea, the beckoning sea. As I stepped out onto the dock, the thick cold of the fjord reached for me, like ghostly arms. Maybe this was how it should be. Throughout this awful Christmas, as my blackmailer circled in, there seemed to be just one way out: down, into this dark water.

At the farthest end I inched my toes out over the last plank. This would be Torvald’s punishment, then, for all of it—marrying me, belittling me, accusing me. But it would also be a gift, as I would take my shame with me into the depths.

I gazed south down the fjord. The deeper water was quiet and forgiving, heaving gently under the crystalline sky. I could solve it all with one small step, no more than stepping off the stoop outside our apartment. I wouldn't have to crawl home to my aunt or beg for work. The children would grieve, yes, but in time they would recover and go on with their lives.

And Torvald? His honor would be restored, but at night guilt would climb into bed to lie with him.

I swayed, dizzy with possibility.

Then I looked down. Trash and flotsam pulsed against the dock; the water was the color of coal. My blackmailer was right—it would be an ugly death, sordid and final.

Not heroic, as it might seem onstage.

I stepped back and shook myself, as if waking from a tangled dream. What was I doing? I was young, strong. I could have a whole life ahead of me. Why must the heroine die to redeem the man?

Then, as clear as if an angel spoke: because men write the plays, Nora, just as they write our lives.

And with that, the refusal that drove me out the door coursed through me again. I stumbled away from the edge.

I needed warmth and a bed. I picked up my bag and headed to Kristine's.

A constable found me crossing the promenade near the Parliament building and insisted on guiding me through the dark streets to the apartment of my only friend. When we got there, it took several pulls on the bell before Kristine appeared, disheveled from bed and speechless to find me at her door with a police escort.

"Make sure she stays in at night," the constable said. "She was wandering down by the harbor."

Kristine pulled me up the stairs to her small flat. My knees gave out; she helped me to a chair.

"Nora, my goodness, you poor thing . . ."

I was shivering now, my teeth rattling in my mouth.

Kristine threw a blanket around my shoulders, stirred the fire, and filled the kettle. When she turned back to me her face was wary. "What have you done, Nora?"

"I've left home, Kristine," I stammered. "I've left Torvald."

Her mouth dropped open. "You've left Torvald? You can't do that!"

"I have, Kristine. I told him everything, as you said I should, but it came to ashes." I clenched my teeth to stop their chattering. "My miracle didn't happen, Kristine. Torvald will never forgive me, so I'm going back to Hamar. My aunt will take me in, and I'll get a job. I'll work, as you have."

"I never suggested you leave your husband!"

"He called me terrible things, Kristine, unforgivable things."

She stared at me for a long moment, then turned to prepare the teapot. "This is unthinkable! You have no idea how difficult it will be, what it's like to be poor. You're such a child—." Her voice caught, and she spun back around. "Your children, Nora! How could you leave your children?"

The thought of my children felt like a stone on my chest. "Perhaps they're better off with their nurse right now, Kristine. I'm no kind of mother. I need to figure out how to live in the world before I can be their mother again."

"Nonsense, Nora! They'd only be better off with their nurse if you were dead!"

There it was again, the appropriate solution. I just looked at her, speechless.

She softened, taking my bone cold hands and rubbing them. "Nora, Torvald will not let them send you to jail for your forgery, and in time he'll forgive you. Go back. He loves you; he'll take pity on you. Don't be so selfish."

My cheek twitched. I was giving up everything. My future would probably be a cramped apartment like hers, with handed-down furniture and stained wallpaper. "How is this selfish, Kristine?"

"Because you're acting only on feelings," she cried, losing her patience. "You're being impulsive, as you always are!"

"Is it impulsive to do the only thing I can do? I cannot live with someone who considers me a criminal and a child. I can no longer be his wife."

Kristine poured my tea, and then tightened her robe across her spinster shoulders. I could feel her distancing herself.

"Go back to bed, Kristine," I said. "And thank you for taking me in. I had no one else."

"Do you need anything?"

"Yes. Could you please go to Torvald's tomorrow and collect my things? Have them sent to my father's house in Hamar."

"Of course."

I handed her a card with the address and a handful of coins. "I told Torvald I would take only what's mine. If he argues, let him have his way."

She lingered, unsettled. "In the morning things might look different. Perhaps you should pray on it, Nora."

"Perhaps I should," I said.

She sighed, then left me to God.

I did not pray. I waited for sleep, but instead sadness seeped in like the tide. Sometimes a rift opened in one's life, a crack that snaked through everything, dividing before from after. But until the crack widened into a chasm, you could still see the other side, the life that was safe, the life that you knew. I had stumbled into territory that felt as barren as the moon, yet when I closed my eyes, all I could see was home—my piano stacked high with music, the boys playing with their tin soldiers on the rug, Cook calling us to dinner. Precious, known, and now lost. Fading already into nothing but memory...

SOLVI

November, 1918

Bergen, Norway

Solvi slipped away before dawn, stealing out the servants' entrance while her mother slept. It was so easy it scared her, like stepping off a cliff. Simple but cataclysmic. She ran down the alley, her bag banging against her knees.

At the main street she caught a tram filled with housemaids bound for the sculleries of the gentry. She dropped into a seat and tried to catch her breath. The maids watched her with drowsy eyes, this fine young girl with her fur-trimmed cape and heavy case.

She turned to the window. The tram rattled past rows of elegant town houses still shuttered in the morning dusk, then headed to the harbor where the city was coming to life. Skiffs and small boats crowded the wharf, unloading goods as fishmongers filled their market stands. All so familiar to this Bergen girl, so beloved. Sadness wrapped around Solvi's heart like a weed.

At the station the early train to Kristiania rumbled with impatience. There was no time for her to reconsider, even if she wanted to; she jumped aboard just as it pulled away. By the time she was settled, the city lay behind her. She turned and, for a moment, caught a glimpse of the rooftops and steeples, with the islands and harbor and the gray Norwegian Sea beyond; then it was gone.

Tears welled in her eyes. Her mother would be rising, would find the note. *Please don't come after me. You're not strong enough, and it will do no good. I'm sorry to leave like this, Mama, but I'm drowning.*

Solvi tried to compose herself. She would not become her mother, weeping whenever life got hard. She was leaving so that she would not become her.

She took out a book, but it did little good.

The train swung east, beginning the long climb up the massif between Bergen and Kristiania. Solvi set her book aside and watched the wind-gnarled trees pass by. Snow soon appeared, a tattered lace flung across the landscape.

When her father was alive, Solvi often hiked these mountains with him, helping collect the alpine plants he studied in his laboratory. Because she was young, he would warn her about the huldra—the beautiful fairy women of the mountains who snatched children. But Solvi would just laugh and run over the next rise. She didn't believe in fairies; she believed in the good green earth.

Even as a child, she was unusually observant and soon developed an eye for rare mountain flowers. When she grew older she fancied herself his assistant, taking notes and photographing specimens with his field camera.

Sometimes her father would cup her face with his gardener's hands. "You have a rare mind, Solveig. Don't waste it embroidering pillows." How she missed tramping these hills with him, talking about the wide and luminous world.

Today, however, the clouds hung low and flurries blew past, scattering, lifting, then dropping again. When her father died just as the Great War started, Solvi felt like this—as if a winter wind howled through her. If only she could open the train window and let the snow swirl around her again, let it strip her clean and return her to grief. Because grief would be easier than what she felt now.

She could just imagine her mother's dramatics—dropping the note to the floor and stumbling back to bed, humiliated and wounded that Solvi would do such a thing. The maids would hover, applying compresses and salts but saying little. Solvi felt like a bird that had wriggled out of the snare, astonished to be free.

She gazed out at the blowing snow. But what if this escape cost too much? What if her mother never forgave her? *I'm sorry, Papa. Please understand.*

A porter brought tea. Solvi wrapped her cold hands around the cup. How did she get here, on this train, leaving all that was familiar? She knew, and she didn't know.

Solvi's father had always wanted her to attend university, but when he died, that dream seemed to die with him. Her mother also changed. After his death, she grew anxious and took charge of Solvi in a way she hadn't before.

"Time to work on your trousseau, Solveig," her mother would say. "No more gallivanting about." When she discovered Solvi studying instead of sewing, she called it unseemly. When Solvi asked for an exam tutor, her mother bought her a fine silk dress instead.

But it didn't work. Her mother's hounding only stiffened Solvi's resolve to fulfill her father's ambitions. Besides, he'd left Solvi with a mission. A few days before his death, he gave her his field camera. "Go record this war, darling; whatever comes, take pictures," he said. "Someone should do it."

After his funeral, Solvi started carrying the camera everywhere. It was the size of a small book, with accordion sides that expanded when the front was snapped open. All Solvi had to do was slip a glass plate in the back, adjust the lens, and then press the shutter. It wasn't long before the camera became her refuge.

But finding evidence of a war happening far away wasn't easy. There was plenty to fear—that the Germans might invade, that Bolsheviks were infiltrating the shipyards—but little to photograph.

She tried capturing the subtle signs—empty market shelves, sailors smoking nervously on the wharf, cannons perched on the breakwater. Then, two years in, the

war escalated, and German submarines began sinking Norwegian merchant ships. Solvi prowled the waterfront, hoping to spot a crippled steamer or perhaps even an enemy periscope. But the ships sank out at sea, and the drowned sailors left no mark, just holes in their mothers' hearts. Grief was private, difficult to catch.

Then Solvi thought of a way. In seafaring Bergen, the U-boat war had grown into a sorrow past imagining—half the fleet and two thousand Norwegian men buried in the cold ocean. One day Solvi found a knot of anxious mothers gathered at the newspaper stands, squinting at the lists of the dead, their faces grim. The photograph was even more powerful than she had hoped. This was what her father had meant.

But when Solvi showed it to her mother, she gasped. "How could you invade their privacy this way, Solveig?"

"This is history, Mama! It's my job to capture this strange time we're living through."

"I don't know what your father was thinking, giving you that camera." Solvi's mother straightened the frill at her throat and scowled. She didn't like her daughter roving about the city and worried incessantly. *Don't wander by the harbor*, she would say, or *Don't sit with boys in coffeehouses; people will think you're cheap*. And whenever Solvi put on her cape, *Don't go out in the cold and wet! You'll catch pneumonia!*

"It's always cold and wet in Bergen," Solvi would fume, stomping back up to her room.

And so Solvi started telling little fibs, just to relieve her mother's mind. That she was only going to Lisanne's house, that she always avoided the harbor, that she never sat with boys.

And in that way, a gap opened between them.

By midday, the Kristiania train had reached the bleak Hardangervidda plateau, which it had to cross to reach the Oslofjord to the east. Solvi ate a roll with salmon paste and watched the tundra slide by.

In truth, Solvi and her mother had always been at odds. They were so different, Solvi asked her father once if she was adopted. He just laughed. *You are your mother's daughter, darling. She just had a different sort of father.*

He meant Solvi's grandfather, a retired banker who still dressed and went to the office every day to make sure they weren't giving away all the money, as he put it. He had a bearish way about him, affectionate but domineering. Solvi and her parents had always lived with him, as if there were no alternative.

Grandfather adored Solvi when she was young, spoiling her with treats and calling her *little squirrel*. But when she matured, he became protective and critical. Was it just his age? Solvi tried not to resent his ready disapproval, his concern over her *rebellious spirit* and *tramping about*, but her temper often flared as much as his.

By the time Solvi graduated from her ladies' academy, he had become fixated on finding her a husband.

No one spoke of university anymore.

One afternoon, on a cool September evening, her grandfather handed her a letter as they gathered in the parlor before dinner. Solvi opened it, puzzled.

Dear Solveig: Our parents agree you and I would make uncommonly successful helpmates for the vicissitudes of life. Therefore, would you accept my hand in marriage? Someday the war will end; it's time to think about our future. I'll call on you tomorrow.

It was from Stefan Vinter, a rich young man from one of the best families. Solvi scarcely knew him.

Her mother stepped into the parlor. "The Vinters, darling. How exciting!"

Solvi turned to her grandfather. "I'll have sherry tonight, as I'm apparently a grown-up now."

Her grandfather raised his eyebrows but poured her a glass. She drank it down and handed it back for more.

"Really, Solveig," her mother said. "There's no need to make a scene."

"I'm sorry. But I don't understand why you have to arrange a marriage for me."

"Solvi, it's a great honor," said her mother, rubbing her hands. "The Vinters have done well with their shipyard during the war, thanks to the Germans sinking all those ships, and Stefan's so handsome and intelligent. He talks about all the things you like: art, literature, politics."

Solvi remembered talking with him once; he spoke only of his hiking and rifle club. "But I want to go to university, like Papa wanted."

"Well, I'm sure your father would not advise that now, not with this wretched war," her mother said. "There are few good men left in Norway, between those leaving for America and those who've drowned. Your friends will be snatching husbands as soon as an armistice is signed, mark my words."

"You don't know what Papa would advise," Solvi said. She hated it when her mother spoke for him.

Her grandfather cleared his throat. "I can't imagine why you think you would enjoy university, Solveig. It's dreary work—all that Greek and Latin. I took little pleasure in my education."

"But I loved school, and Papa said I have a rare mind," she said. "Besides, I want to work, to contribute in some way."

Her grandfather grumbled. "Your contribution—and it is no small thing—is to raise children and care for your husband and aging parents. Why aren't you young ladies content with that? Frankly, it seems ungrateful."

Her mother took her hand. “Darling, you don’t seem to understand. The Vinters are very well off. You would have nannies, even a lady’s maid. You could still take baskets to the poor.”

“I don’t want a lady’s maid,” Solvi said. “I’m not sure we should have maids at all!”

“Whatever do you mean?” Her mother’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I mean that it’s wrong to hide in this . . . this luxurious cocoon!” Solvi said, sweeping her hand around the elegant parlor—the green damask walls, the brocade drapes, the glowing rosewood furniture. “Haven’t we learned that from this awful war?”

Her mother’s mouth grew tight. “Once you’re living in a dank little room doing your own washing, you will sorely miss your cocoon, Solveig.”

Solvi looked at her. It was maddening how elegant she was, with her silks and high-collared lace. As if her perfection absolved her from wrong thinking.

“I just don’t understand why you won’t let me find my own husband.”

“Because you don’t seem interested in husbands,” her mother cried. “You’re too busy taking those awful pictures!”

“You’re the one who told me not to talk to boys, Mama!”

“There’s no need to shout, Solveig,” Grandfather said, patting her shoulder. “I understand that love is confusing. When you’re young, you don’t know whom to love, so you either love everyone or you love no one. We’re offering guidance.”

Solvi tried to swallow her anger, so they would stop looking at her as if she were mad. She finished her second glass of sherry, then turned to her mother. “Mama, how did you know you wanted to marry Papa?”

Her mother relaxed; this was the kind of discussion she preferred. “Well, Solveig, to be honest, I didn’t know. But your grandfather did, and I knew to trust him.”

“But I want a modern marriage—a marriage I pick for myself, to someone who’ll treat me as his equal,” Solvi said. “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“Of course we do,” said her mother, “but marriage is not just about what you want. It’s about security and position. We live in unstable times, Solvi; we’re trying to provide for you.” She gave Solvi a sly glance. “Besides, you could have a modern marriage with Stefan. We’ll get you one of those adorable short wedding dresses, all flounces around the knees and sheer up top. And once you’re married, all you need do is use your feminine wiles, and you can have it any way you want.”

Solvi blushed, suddenly ashamed for her.

“All we ask is that you try to like Stefan,” her grandfather said.

“And be polite when he comes tomorrow,” her mother said.

“I’m always polite, Mama.”

Her mother pulled the bell for dinner. “If you say so, darling.”

The next morning Stefan Vinter came for coffee. Solvi's mother left them alone, so he could declare his love in private. Instead, he chatted about his father's shipyard. Solvi watched him, trying to make out what she meant to him. Then she saw it; it was as if she'd already said yes.

Arrogance. It was what she disliked most about her kind.

When her mother asked later how it went, Solvi just smiled. She needed to buy herself time.

The train to Kristiania finally started its descent toward the Oslofjord. Solvi stood to stretch, then pulled her photo album from her satchel. She had to stop thinking of home. Perhaps this would help.

Before she left, she had put all her photographs in chronological order, so that she could see how her technique was developing. She flipped the album open to the beginning. Her early pictures were blurry shots of plants and flowers, including one of her father crouching beside a mountain stream examining a fern. Then several photographs of her parents and grandfather, beside a blazing Christmas tree, lunching in the garden. Then a shot in through a door ajar—her father in his sickbed. It was her first good photograph, she could see that now, but when she took it she felt only despair.

Then she turned to her pictures of the housemaids. Solvi had started with Mathilde, her family's maid. When Mathilde asked Solvi for a portrait to give her young man, Solvi told Mathilde to put on her Sunday best, then she seated her in the parlor. And there was Mathilde, the woman she could be if she wasn't a maid.

Soon, Solvi was photographing other young maids in parlors. But the more time she spent with them, the more she wanted pictures of them at work, cracking gourds with cleavers and starching shirts in brimming kettles. Before long the maids let her shoot whatever she liked.

Solvi paged through the pictures that captured the world of these young servants. Some were filled with movement and light, like the picture of several laughing girls pulling sheets off a clothesline in a windstorm, the linens flying like jibs. Others were dark and sad—a maid leaning wearily against a door with a heavy basket on her hip, a scullery girl with her head and shoulders in an oven, a bucket of dingy water at her knee.

One particular image always made Solvi feel like crying—a picture shot from below of a young maid lugging coal scuttles up a narrow stair, holes in her stockings. It felt like a statement of some kind, notice of a wrong that should be corrected. The maids she met worked ungodly hours, often to exhaustion; it didn't seem right.

But when she showed the pictures to Lianne, her friend just shook her head and teased her for turning Bolshevik. After that, Solvi kept the album under her bed...