

Ingeborg Ek was one of the most industrious, most thorough people on earth. She had been cook at the Lindh home for four years time. She had harassed the kitchen maid, terrified the butcher, and never made a hollandaise sauce with fewer than ten yolks. Then she married Assar Ek who preferred boiled and mashed root vegetables with knuckle of ham to vol au vent. She had intended to work one or two evenings a week catering for dinner parties, but Assar Ek said:

‘No wife of mine is going out to work. I am the breadwinner in this family.’

So she became a devoted housewife. She was most devoted of all at Christmas time, when she regularly wore herself out. But by the new year she was always resurrected, and she was her old self by Twelfth Night when relations came to visit day after day. Afterward there were pine needles on the rugs and cigar ash between the cushions of her sofa with its pedestal armrests. The Christmas tree was thrown out and it was time to clean, to scrape away candle wax and polish off the rings on the tabletops in the sitting room. The candle smoke had blackened the insulation between the window panes and dirtied the curtains. The doors on the tile stove had already lost their sheen, and the cutlery was tarnished from the lutefisk. Then the sewing machine would thunder and the loom would bang all the way until Lent, when she would bring in birch branches to force the leaves, and bake Mardi Gras buns to be eaten after a meal of brown beans. As soon as the first spring sun peeped forth, the windows had to be washed.

She had arranged for the washerwoman to come at the end of March, and when she arrived they did all the winter laundry, saving a bit of lye for the coloured things as well. The scrubbing boards clanged, and afterwards she was left alone with a mountain of clothes to iron. It took two to run the mangle. They would carry the baskets of clean wash to the mangling shed and back, and she spread the sheets on the wooden settee in the sitting room to finish drying. She sat down to pleat the pillowcase edging with a table knife, quite exhausted. But who cared? The linen cupboard was more sacred than virtue itself, and if she was ever concerned about the meaning of life, all she had to do to feel restored was to open those brown oak doors and gaze at the fragrant piles of clean linens and the fluttering pillowcase edging on the shelves.

She baked for Easter. In addition to coffee buns and cakes, there were jam wafers, sand biscuits, almond forms, vanilla crescents, meringues, dreams and brandy rings. Thank heavens the war was over and there were cream and butter again.

Then it was time for spring cleaning. She'd bring everything up from the basement and down from the attic, out of the closets and back in again, clean all the cupboards and shine all the prisms on the crystal chandelier, and give all the furniture cushions a good airing out. She rolled up the winter rugs, changed the curtains, polished the copper, removed the window insulation and cleaned the kitchen paint with a rag, swept the wooden walls, scouted out the cobwebs in the corners of the ceilings with a mop and a flannel, and polished the floors. There was the scent of Lux soap flakes and the sizzle of scouring powder, the lather from soft soap in the bucket and the bubbling of caustic soda in the drains.

The larks had returned long ago, the starlings had begun to quarrel about the nesting boxes on the outbuilding wall, and the wagtails were promenading between the puddles in the gravel yard

where the spring sun was reflected, but she saw none of it. Star-of-Bethlehem protruded through the grass, breaking off when she lay out the big cowhide rug from the sitting room. But when the spring cleaning was done she went out and picked bouquets of blue anemones, cowslips and, later, lilies of the valley.

Yes, summer is a lovely time. For midsummer she washed the windows again and buffed all the white shoes, made meatballs and marinated herring. They made a trip to their relations in Oxelösund, and while the others swam in the sea she would sit on the cliff top in the sun crocheting lacy shelf edging for her cupboards.

When the first berries ripened she made jellyrolls and compotes. When the berry picking began in earnest she started to make jams and syrups so she'd have time to pickle the cucumbers and ginger the pears later on. The kitchen was steamy and sweaty, her hands were red and blue and her face shiny with steam. With every year that passed she found it more and more difficult to use up all the old preserves, from last year and the year before. There was too much to eat. Her arch enemy, green mould, spread silently in her dark food cellar, attacking the corks on her syrup bottles. Still, the new berries had to be picked – you couldn't just leave them to rot on the bushes or be gobbled up by the fieldfare thrushes. But why did there have to be so many gardens in the family? Her relations would arrive with laundry baskets full of apples she would slice and put in lemon water, and slice and core and slice. She made lots of applesauce – enough, she guessed, to cover the marketplace if she spread it out, but she didn't. She made compote from the best apples. That was for after Sunday dinners. But God save her if any relation of hers found a hard little sliver of seedpod from a core in their compote! Well, of course that depended on who got it. If it was Uncle Manne he might not notice.

‘I do believe you’ve got a bit of core in your mouth,’ said Aunt Hedvig. ‘Don’t let it go down your throat.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Uncle Manne, swallowing with the same diabolic grin he wore when swallowing a raspberry worm. ‘Good for the digestion.’

After which he would hold forth on the intestines, punctuated with apologies from Ingeborg about not being able to imagine how it could have happened, until Aunt Hedvig said:

‘Well, it really doesn’t matter Ingeborg, dear. As long as it doesn’t go down the wrong pipe. It’s all right, honestly. We’re just a bit fussy about what we eat, that’s all.’

They finished, and when they’d said goodbye and thank you Ingeborg had a headache and had to take a powder, pull the shade and lie down. She spent a lot of time this way and once a month she’d spend a day in bed with the top of a pot warmed up and covering her stomach, her brow sticky. She’d ask engineer Ek to be quiet going in and out, but he often forgot, so she took to closing the bedroom door.

Then it was time for the lingonberries. She usually picked fifty litres. The new jam was light and luminous. Last year’s was dark as clotted blood, and they’d eat like mad to empty the brown stoneware jars. Late in the season they had it for afters every single day: a bowlful with chunks of crispbread crumbled in and milk on top. But she still ended up having to buy some new jars.

After the lingonberries came the elk hunting season, when Uncle Elon from Strängsjö would arrive with elk meat in a hand basin and a stoneware crock. She cut it into pieces, scraped away the ligaments and dug out every chip of bone. Then she minced some of it to fry into meatballs, marinated some in milk for sauerbrauten, first browned and then simmered. Then she would invite the family to dinner. Before which she had to wash the

windows again now that the frost had finally put an end to the flies.

Meanwhile, the laundry accumulated in sacks, smelly and yellowing. At last the washerwoman would arrive and soak it. Six months worth of underwear and slips and sheets, all of which would have to be mangled and ironed in good time before the fall cleaning began.

At autumn cleaning time, windows slammed and rug beaters pounded. Rug ends clapped in the frosty air, the caustic soda sizzled, the root brushes growled, and the beater flew over the sofa cushions. The winter rugs were rolled out once more and the windows insulated with miniature gardens of white moss, dried flowers and cotton, and taped shut for the winter. She shook the mothballs out of engineer Ek's winter overcoat and cossack hat, and things grew dark and calm and quiet after the noise and bustle of summer. The first snow arrived, falling light and airy on the branches of the trees and the gravel paths, towering up in small, delicately balanced crystal prisms. Oh, if only it had fallen a little earlier, if it had decided to be an early winter anyway, so they could have brushed the rugs with it.

But usually the first snow was nothing but a sight for sore eyes that lasted a day or two. The heavy fogs and hopeless rains of late autumn weren't over. Sometimes their shoes dragged in mud and gravel for a good part of December as well. Now she'd start to get the silver and copper out, covering the kitchen table with newspaper. The dance of the chamois polishing rags began, the pink polishing powder was mixed to a paste with water, and the paste turned black when you had been polishing for a while. After the polish you buffed with newsprint and the paste turned back into powder that was transformed to a film of dust in the air. She shined the pot tops that stood on the hearth mantle, the muffin tins and aspic forms, the pudding pans and the coffee pot, the little

saucepan and the iron candleholders from Skultuna, as well as the brass mortar and pestle. All this had to be completed in good time before the Christmas cleaning, so she would have time to soak the lutefisk, bake the Christmas cookies and crullers, and stuff the sausage.

After this she would wipe and put new edging on the shelves, put up other curtains, lay new runners on the tables, and then it was time to marinate the herring and make the headcheese, soak the ham and bake the coffee cakes. After which she generally didn't remember a thing until she came to again when the ham had begun to look a bit the worse for wear, and all that was left in the jar from the marinated herring was bits of carrot and onion, by which point it was January.

January arrived with sun on white snow and the light shining mercilessly in through the windows showing that it was the time of year when there was candle wax on the runners, pine needles on the carpet, cigar ash on the sofa and rings on the tabletop from glasses.