

Ingrid Zellner

# Malin and the White Reindeer

A story for children and grown-ups

Translated from German by Simone Dorra



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Verlag und Druck: tredition GmbH,  
Halenreihe 42, 22359 Hamburg  
Cover: Kai S. Dorra

ISBN

Paperback: 978-3-7439-7729-7

e-Book: 978-3-7439-7730-3

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Die Originalausgabe *Malin und das weiße Rentier* erschien 2015 im Magic Buchverlag Christine Praml, [www.magicbuchverlag.de](http://www.magicbuchverlag.de)

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# 1. Northern Lights

It is completely silent outside. And frigid. Winter has come, and everything is deeply covered in snow. Tiny, bright stars are twinkling all across the dark sky of the night.

At the edge of the woods, there's a little red wooden house. Lights are burning in the windows, and smoke rises from the chimney. In this house, little Malin lives with her family.

Malin is six years old, a joyful girl, happy and light-hearted. She spends much of her time outside, even now in winter. Mostly, she's looking for reindeer in the woods. Malin lives in the north of Sweden, where you find many reindeer. Malin loves each and every one of them. Her Grandma's parents raised reindeer when Grandma was a little girl, and she has told Malin many stories about following the herds along with them. They lived in tents in the midst of nature, without electricity, running water or television. Malin can imagine everything perfectly. She would like to have a reindeer of her own, but her parents always tell her that it's impossible because animals like these want to stay free. It wouldn't be fair to try to keep one tied to your wooden house. Malin understands; but she still wishes she could.

Today, though, Malin is very sad. The whole house is sad and gloomy. Two weeks ago, they took Malin's Grandma to the hospital. Today, Malin's Mama has told

her that Grandma won't come home again. God has taken her away.

Malin loved her Grandma very much. When she visited her in the kitchen, there always was a delicious smell of cake. Grandma sang songs with Malin and told her stories – wondrous, exciting stories of elves and trolls, and of the reindeer, of course.

And now Grandma is with God. Now she'll be telling all those beautiful stories to him, and Malin will never hear them again.

Malin stands at the window in her room, sadly gazing outside. She should have gone to bed long ago, but she can't sleep. She keeps thinking of Grandma. Mama has told her that Grandma is not in pain any more, and that she's well, up there in heaven. Malin likes that, she really does; but at the same time, she's missing her Grandma terribly.

From her window, Malin can see the woods. The firs are amply wrapped in white, the snow spreading a hint of light in the darkness. Malin is always happy about snow in winter; it keeps the nights from being too black and eerie.

She looks up to the sky with its many, many stars... as if someone had just switched on some festive illumination. Perhaps they're celebrating Grandma's arrival up there with lights and music and a cake. Does God know that raspberry cake is Grandma's favourite? Certainly. God knows everything, Mama always says. Grandma is surely happy to be with God. And she's surely eating a huge piece of raspberry cake right now.

Malin lowers her head. And - right then - she spies a movement at the edge of the woods. She rubs her eyes - yes, there's actually a reindeer, coming out under the trees! A bright one... no, it's completely white! A white reindeer!

Malin holds her breath. The reindeer stands still, shaking its beautiful head with the delicate antlers. *This must be a doe*, Malin decides; Grandma explained to her once that male reindeer always shed their antlers in autumn while does do so in spring.

And suddenly, deep inside of Malin, there's the memory of Grandma's dear, warm voice.

"White reindeer are special, little Malin. Our ancestors believed that the world came into being out of a white reindeer. And if you meet one of those, see if it looks at you - because if it does, it wants to speak to you. Your great-grandfather told me that."

"Have you ever met a white reindeer?" Malin had asked her. "And did it speak to you?"

"Oh, very often," Grandma replied, smiling. "And once it told me I would have the most lovely and dear grandchild of the world. And that's exactly what happened - isn't it, little Malin?"

She had kissed Malin, and Malin had laughed and hugged Grandma very, very close.

The white reindeer still stands at the edge of the woods, looking around. Did it come to pay Grandma a visit, and to tell her something beautiful? It probably doesn't know that Grandma is gone. It must be very puzzled not to find her anywhere.

Malin is about to open the window to tell the reindeer that Grandma's in heaven now, when the reindeer raises its head. Malin's breath stutters.

The white reindeer is looking at her!

Malin is trembling with excitement. Certainly, the reindeer wants to speak to her now, just as Grandma told her. But there's nothing to be heard. Of course – the window is still closed! Malin opens it. Icy cold wind sweeps in and makes her shudder, but she doesn't care. She has to find out what the reindeer wants to tell her.

But there's no sound except the whistling of the wind. And the reindeer remains far away from her, close to the woods, intently holding her gaze.

"Reindeer?" Malin calls. "Wait, don't go away! I'm coming!"

She hastily slams the window closed, slips into her warm winter boots and into the thick anorak, pulling a woollen cap over her hair and gloves over her hands. Then she leaves the house, running out into the night.

"Reindeer?"

Nothing. The reindeer is gone. Malin stands within the light of the small lamp above the front door, staring at the woods. The world is completely silent, the wind has ebbed away, but Malin is still cold... and suddenly she bursts into tears. Grandma is gone, the white reindeer is gone, and she feels lost and terribly alone.

All of a sudden, something gently nudges her shoulder.

"Hello, little one. Why do you weep?"

Malin whirls around. The white reindeer is there, right in front of her, a gentle look in her dark eyes.

"I... I thought you were gone," Malin stammers, red with embarrassment. "Just when I couldn't wait to know what you wanted to tell me!"

"Why do you think I might want to tell you something?" the reindeer asks, her voice soft like velvet.

"Because you are white," Malin replies. "And Grandma often told me white reindeer want to tell us something when they're looking at us. It is true, isn't it?"

"Of course it is true." The reindeer gives her a kind smile. "Your Grandma is very clever."

Malin bites her lips, tearing up again.

"She's dead," she whispers. "Grandma is dead. She's in heaven now."

Everything is quiet for a while. Then the reindeer slightly leans into Malin, and Malin feels the animal's breath, warm and comforting against her skin.

"What's your name, little one?"

"Malin." Malin gives a heavy snuffle. "And yours?"

"Dálvi," the white reindeer answers.

"Dálvi," Malin slowly repeats. "That sounds strange. But I like it."

"I like Malin, too," the reindeer says. "Care for a little walk with me, Malin?"

Malin hesitates. She would love to stay with the white reindeer a while longer. But what if her parents look for her and realize that she's not there? They will be very upset.

The reindeer seems to guess Malin's thoughts.

"We'll stay at the edge of the woods," she offers, smiling. "If your parents should call for you, we'll hear them and you can head back at once. Then they'll see that you are fine, and they won't have to be afraid. So - what do you think?"

Malin mulls over it. Then she gingerly reaches out, touching the white reindeer. The coat feels warm, soft and at the same time slightly rough. The reindeer holds completely still, quietly letting Malin stroke her back. After a while, Malin nods.

"Fine. I'll come along, Dálvi!"

They walk towards the edge of the woods together. Malin realizes that all of a sudden the wind has died down completely. She feels like she has been enchanted, with the white reindeer beside her, in the snow-covered landscape of winter and under the star-studded night sky.

"Dálvi?"

"Yes?"

"You... didn't you want to tell me something? You looked at me earlier, didn't you?"

Dálvi stops under a fir with snow-laden branches.

"I could feel how sad you were," Dálvi says. "This is why I came. I thought I might be able to comfort you."

Malin stares down at the snowy ground, silently shaking her head.

"You are missing your Grandma very much, aren't you?" Dálvi gently asks.

"Yes." Malin raises her head. "When she was in hospital, it felt so strange not to have her around in the house... and now she'll never be there again. She was so kind. And

she always made such a tasty cake. And she told me great stories – about you, too. I mean... she always said white reindeer are special."

"Your Grandma was right," Dálvi nods. "Her ancestors believed that the heart of the very first white reindeer is still beating, deep down in the earth. And that – because of that heartbeat – everything in the world comes to life."

"Everything?" Malin asks, wide-eyed with amazement. "Even the trees and the stones? And the rocks, too?"

"Of course, Malin," Dálvi replies. "All of nature is alive."

For a while, Malin is silent. A tear runs down her cheek.

"Then why is Grandma dead?" she softly asks.

Dálvi comes very close, and again Malin feels the warmth of the beautiful animal like a comforting touch.

"Because this was nature's careful plan," Dálvi says. "Look, Malin – if all men and animals lived forever, one day there would be not enough room for everyone. New men and animals are born all the time. We would step on each other's toes, wouldn't we? This is why we leave when our moment has come – to keep the balance of nature."

Malin is not completely convinced. Absent-mindedly, she wipes some snow from a fir branch and forms a little snowball, pondering Dálvi's words.

"So you say Grandma has gone to make room for a new child in the world?" she hesitantly asks.

"In a certain way," Dálvi replies. "But your Grandma is not gone completely. She's still there."

"Where?" Malin inquires, looking around.

"In your memories," Dálvi says. "In the stories she told you and that live on inside of you. And even here, everywhere. In this world, nothing gets lost, Malin."

Malin hangs her head. "I don't understand."

"Then take a look at your snowball," Dálvi says gently.

Malin gazes down at her hands. The snowball isn't as big as it was, and her gloves have gotten wet.

"If you keep holding it just a little longer," Dálvi says, "it will melt completely. Then the snowball is no longer there - but the water it has turned into still is. It trickles down into the ground, and once spring comes, beautiful flowers will grow out of it. You and I, we will see those flowers, and we'll enjoy them. And perhaps we'll also remember the white, glittering snow that melted and went away, to make the flowers live and bloom."

Malin rolls the rest of the snowball between her hands. Dálvi is right, it gets smaller and smaller. In a bit, there will only be some water left. Water that will make flowers bloom when the right time comes.

"But," Malin muses, "dying is not that bad, then."

"No, of course not," Dálvi says. "We're only sad because we loved someone so very much who passed away, just as you loved your Grandma. You're missing her, and that's understandable. But perhaps it gives you some comfort to know that she's not really gone. She's still with you - in your heart, in your thoughts and all around you."

Malin looks around and sadly bites her lip. "I just wish so much I could see her."

Dálvi comes very close. Her big, dark eyes are shimmering like stars. "But you can," she gently says. "Look up to the sky, Malin."

Malin raises her gaze, and her eyes turn wide with wonder.

High above her, a light is shining. It looks like a large ribbon, gleaming green and flowing in quiet waves across the entire sky. Enchanted, Malin observes the gentle play of colours on the firmament. She can't remember she's ever seen something so beautiful.

"What is that?" she whispers.

"These are the Northern Lights," Dálvi softly replies. "You can see them on very special days; for on those days, our forebears come over to find out if we are well."

"Forebears?" Malin asks, without turning her eyes from the slightly waving ribbon of brightness.

"Our ancestors," Dálvi explains. "Members of our families who lived long before we came. Your Grandma was certain that the souls of her ancestors were watching over her from inside those lights, keeping her safe. And just like them, she's watching over you now, Malin."

"You mean... if I'll wave up to those lights now, Grandma can see me?" Malin asks.

"Of course," Dálvi replies. "Can't you see that she's waving at you?"

Malin gives a nod. The flowing movement of the green, shining ribbon actually looks like a friendly wave.

She lifts her hand, waving fervently.

"Hello, Grandma, do you see me? Are you well up there?"