

## Origin

### Monologue by Liz Bucheit

## Storyline

Espen is a 96 year old man and immigrant from Fløm, Norway in the Buskerud (Hallingdal district.) He came to America at 18 with recently wed wife, 17 year old Silje in 1942 and settled in the Little Norway area of Lanesboro, MN. Shortly after arriving and homesteading their farm Silje dies in childbirth at the age of 20. Espen never remarries and lives out his life on their farm. A polite person but a man of extremely few words, he does not attend church or receive visitors or long lost relatives researching their family trees that manage to find their way to his farm. He spends most of his time fishing on the Root River or in the woods hunting mushrooms to sell to the local restaurants.

He's heard of the phone booth in the field, even walked by it several times summoning up the courage to go inside. One night around dusk, he enters the booth and picks up the receiver.

**Espen:** "Er du der Silje?" (Are you there? He asks in Norwegian) *His voice is raspy from misuse.*

"Dette er Espen" (*'This is Espen' in Norwegian*)

"For heaven's sake Espen, speak English" (*He mutters to himself*)

"I think you are there and I think you have been waiting. I still see you sometimes running to the dairy to fetch fresh cream for our morning coffee. I know I see you at night when I close my eyes and sometimes I feel your hand on my forehead, waking me up softly during my nightmares like you used to do. You never asked me to tell you about my nightmares.....why is that? After all these years of you being gone I'm starting to realize you might have known...but I'm not sure. That's why I'm talking

to you now.

I wanted to tell you I'm sorry. I'm sorry that we had to leave Fløm....I know you didn't want to go. I told you that we would have a better chance in America and a place of our own. As a third son there was no land left for my family to give to me and the bit of money my father could spare barely paid for our voyage and food. I told you there was no other way but I knew that wasn't true. All I knew was that I had to leave- no matter what.

I hope you had at least some happiness those three sweet years I was blessed to spend with you. The farm was small but we managed those cows and chickens together enough to live comfortably. Oh, and how we loved! The hope of having children to run through these fields sparked so many lazy summer afternoons in our little bedroom, the scent of the lilac bushes on the breeze coming thru the open window. You were so beautiful Silje, your long golden hair and your graceful hands. I was so happy... which only made what I had done and hidden from you so much worse.

You remember that summer we were to marry? I had to spend it alone at the summer farm up the mountain tending the goats for several weeks before my brothers could come and spell me. Frankly it was a relief to get away from the family farm what with my brothers squabbling, father barking orders and all the chores from sunup to sundown. It was nice to be on the cool mountainside with the forest at my back and the waters of the fjord sparkling in view. I could doze in the afternoon while the goats grazed and I'd dream of the wedding we would have at summer's end. I imagined you wearing the bridal crown rented from the local church and all the silver pins borrowed from your relatives adorning your dress. I had managed to buy a silver brooch of my own to give to you but I wanted it to be a surprise. I carried it in my pocket next to my heart, checking several times a day to make sure it was still there.

I didn't see her right away. Rather, I felt her. The sun was slipping behind the mountain range and the air became suddenly crisp with a light fog playing tug of war with the warm summer grass. The goats had been penned but I noticed their attention was focused on the forest. Why I didn't think of wolves or bears and grab my rifle I'll never know. She

stepped out of the forest all golden, gliding towards the goat pen. Her bare arm reached over to stroke the nearest kid and the air hummed....like, I don't know! It sounded like the music of bees and birds singing and the tinkling of the brook. I was stunned Silje, truly I was. I hadn't spoken to a soul for so long I thought I was seeing things. And..and....she wasn't a regular maid I tell you. I hope this doesn't hurt you Silje but she was so beautiful it hurt my eyes to look at her. Her hair was so long and she was so fair. She saw me staring at her and she smiled and said my name.

Wait wait....I can't remember her moving her lips...did they move? But I could *hear* her .....in my mind! I couldn't make sense of it...all I know is I couldn't move. She walked towards me and I realized her golden hair was covering her exquisite.... nakedness. She reached out to touch my face and like a pebble dropped in a pool, the warmth of her body so close to mine spread throughout me.

I am so ashamed Silje.....so ashamed I didn't stay chaste for you. She came to me that whole time, every night. Every day I vowed her next visit would be the last and each evening I ran into her arms.

Did we talk? I don't know and I can't remember but somehow I knew that a wedding was being planned and all her kin were due to arrive at the end of the week. "Wedding?" I said. "But I am already betrothed to another". "Who?" she said. I wanted to tell her.... to scream it but for the life of me I couldn't remember your name Silje! I tried to remember what you looked like but whenever I tried to place you in my mind I only saw her! It was if every time I tried to frame a thought, that music would start, the air would hum and all the edges of my memories blurred.

The days started to blur too. The longer her visits, the weaker I became. I forgot to eat and tend the goats but somehow they were cared for and despite my own neglect the herd had doubled in size. Had it been two days, two weeks.....was something supposed to happen in three weeks..? I couldn't keep anything straight.

I could barely dress myself every day until one morning I felt something in my pocket. My hands were shaking from hunger but I managed to pull the object out and realized I was holding your wedding pin in my hand. Oh Silje! I can't tell you how your memory rushed back to me like a roaring river. The silver sparkled in the sunshine and in that moment I knew I had to break free of her spell. I dragged myself to the brook and was stunned by my reflection in the water. My hair was matted and tangled. There was dirt under my fingernails and my skin looked dusky and gray. My ribs grinned through the skin of my chest and I felt faint but determined to get my mind right. I stripped and jumped in the brook and scrubbed my skin hard. I scrubbed my clothes and laid them out on the bank to dry. I slept on the bank most of the afternoon and before I knew it the sun was at the horizon and evening was on the way.

Just as I made it back to the cabin the goats were already looking towards the forest. The air was changing and she glided out from the tree line, soft and glimmering. I steeled myself, bracing my hands against the doorframe of the cabin. "Shall we go in?" she said. My head was already becoming foggy with her warmth and I touched my pocket. With as much effort as I could muster I pulled out your bridal pin and stupidly thrust it towards her face. "I told you I am betrothed to another!" I yelled, slurring like a drunkard. She smiled and held out her hand "May I see it?" Silje, I don't know why I put it in her hand...I swear I was possessed with getting away from her. She held it up, admiring it this way and that. She met my eyes and gently put the pin back in my hand. "I am sorry you won't be meeting my family. But know this, your choice will follow you." Then she took my hand and placed it on her belly and I fainted.

I woke the next morning to the sound of my brother's voices coming up the path. Silje, I was so happy to see them I ran to embrace them. "Whoa Espen! Well, somebody has been lonely! Good thing you're getting married soon!" laughed my brother Sigurd. I can't tell you how much I wanted to get away from that place and never go back. I tried to tell myself it was all a dream until Sigurd commented on the size of the goat herd. I started to get dizzy again and thinking I was hungry, my brothers emptied knapsacks full of cheese and bread and we all sat down to eat.

Silje, I vowed to keep my secret from you forever. I pushed it down so hard it became a part of me. My folks were surprised that I was anxious to go to America with you, my new bride. But after we settled our land the nightmares started. Do you remember Silje? You were so kind and gentle to me and never asked.....WHY DIDN'T YOU ASK????? Would I have told you? Did you already know our child was coming? I should never have given you that pin on our wedding day! I should have buried it in the earth before we left but I didn't. I know you wanted to hang on to it in case we needed money. Even when you died with our little Hilde inside you, my grief still didn't force me to look at the truth.

Silje, I want you to know I love you....always will love you. And I'm so very sorry. I'm sorry for what I did and so sorry we didn't get to live the life we should have had. Do you think you can forgive me? This lodestone of sorrow around my heart has been so very heavy. I'll tell you something. I buried that silver pin under the house after you died. I dug it up today Silje, and threw it in the Root on my way here. I swear it went down in the water like an anchor. I'm hoping I don't have nightmares tonight and for once, just once, feel your soft hand on my forehead again, telling me everything is all right.

Jeg elsker deg. Alltid. (I will love you. Always.)

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