"I suspected it this afternoon, I'm sure now. You see, Martha's eighth baby was born with six fingers on each hand; a case of multiplication."

"What does that mean?" I confessed my ignorance.

"It could happen again. As a matter of fact, it has. This time it's not fingers or toes. I fear, — no I know — this baby has..." The room turned still as a morgue. The wind rattled the high narrow windows. "This baby has two heads."

A spoon clattered on the linoleum floor and skidded over the worn pattern of pink faded flowers. My hands shook as I put my mug down.

"I'll call the operating room to order special instruments. You run along and pick them up."

Before she reached the phone I'd fled; my footsteps sounded hollow in the halls. The old creaking elevator appeared to be twice as slow as usual and on the way back I used the stairs. The delivery room buzzed with the sounds of frenzied activities. Martha's ashen face had aged in the small moment we were gone. She impatiently pushed my hand away when I tried to wipe the perspiration off her forehead with a damp washcloth.

Dr. Fuller scrubbed and walked toward the table. "I'll have to bring on the baby, Martha. We'll put you to sleep and it won't be long now."

"Hurry! Do something...!" Martha groaned.

The head nurse swiftly rolled the table with instruments to the foot end of the table and while I helped Dr. Fuller with her gloves, a nurse gave Martha an injection. The doctor smoothed the soft rubber between her fingers with caressing strokes and talked softly to the anesthetists who stood behind Martha.

Martha's pains came strong and fast. The doctor gently felt for the baby inside the womb. It seemed eternity before the head appeared, covered with damp strands of dark hair, the eyes tightly closed in the creased and deathly pale face. The doctor's hands felt inside again, past the shoulders. All activity in the room ceased while she, dispassionately but unfalteringly, performed the examination. Only the quiet breathing of Martha was heard.

"Saw." The order snapped like a pistol shot, returning the blessed comfort of action to the room. I stood at Martha's side and while I held her limp hand, my eyes sought the baby table. Everything was ready for the new arrival, the bath, a kettle with hot water, a thermometer in a glass container with sky-blue fluid, and clean towels neatly folded beside the baby powder and soap.

"Nurse!"

I turned and took the few steps to Dr. Fuller's side.

"Hold the head." The three words rang out in deadly silence. My hands circled the small object awkwardly.

"Hold it tight!"

I gripped firmly, straining to keep the head motionless. The doctor held one hand over my hand to support herself. The sawing stopped, I stepped back, and looked around me in panic. A nurse held up a large white towel and I put the head on it. She folded the ends with sure and precise movements. First one side, then the other, and then she gingerly put the package on the baby table and handed me another towel. Dr. Fuller had just pulled the tiny shoulders out, and the body slid out smoothly. I held up the towel in my outstretched hands. At the baby table I wrapped the little girl baby and put it next to the other towel.

"Get some sleep. You look washed out," someone whispered behind me. I turned and walked out of the room in a daze. This was my twentieth baby; no cause for celebration.

The next morning I packed my suitcase. As I closed the door of the room I remembered how I had wished for this moment of being free to go where I pleased. In front of the hospital stood Allan, whistling a tune, his tattered beige raincoat swung open, unruly curly hair blowing in the wind. — Allan — I almost forgot.

"Hi!" he said and I ran to his open arms.

"Finally!" he gloated. "That was a long time."

"Yes," I sighed with relief. "Let's go for a walk." He locked my suitcase in his old red VW, and we walked toward the center of the city to a park where huge trunks of spreading chestnut trees rose up in the clearing sky. I picked up a bright brown chestnut, perfectly formed, and I polished it on the sleeve of my windbreaker.

"Look!" Allan held up a prickly husk and took out his pocket knife. With one swift movement he cut through the two valves, exposing the nut. On the hoary down I saw three dry grayish nuts, ensnared in thin white roots. He flipped them out, tried to disentangle them and then put them back in the husk.

"It's a freak." I'm going to keep it," he announced.

"No way!" I grabbed the husk from him and hurled it as far as I could.

"What's that all about?"

"Nothing. I'll tell you later."

I reached for his waist under his raincoat so our bodies touched. I felt the strong muscles of his arm contracting, and heard his blood rushing.

"Nature is capricious." He bit my ear playfully.

I polished my warm chestnut once more and put it in my pocket.

"I know," I answered. Together we walked through the swirling dry autumn leaves, hair flying around our faces. The Northwestern wind still blew strongly.

Johanna

A Short Story by Byrna Barclay

God help me, if that monster fish, that king-from-the-sea, wasn't here when we came to this nethermost place, swelling big with plans of building a new world.

I am poor with words, not easy of them now I have forsaken my mother tongue, nor yet fully accepted the harsh yowls of this other northland. But, I speak this after many people who saw the Turtle Lake Monster and lived to tell about it, yes.

They had *sjonhverting* — how do you say? — a deceiving of the eyes, a way of knowing what dwells behind chaos.

Arvid was like that. He was blinded in one eye by a bit of flint that flew up from the anvil, by a chink from Thor's Hammer. And my first daughter's husband, Linder, blear-eyed by cataracts. Then Eric, their first son, takes too much after Arvid and Bjorn's father, too much of a horse trader in him; he always has a wisp in his eye. These men can never turn away from the thing they see outside themselves because it stirs and thrashes also inside them.

Right from the start, I looked askew upon it all, it was like enough I had the turn sickness on the boat and never got over it, outwandering on a train across Sweden, by water, then by land again with a team of oxen. But life in Sweden was all over with me. Canada, I said, I am for that place, knowing that learning how to live

well here is to be got by task. Always, we ruin ourselves by building on the wrong plan, thirsting after land, bargaining for a lump of it, nothing so grand as we dreamed, cutting down spruce and poplar with nothing more than a chip-axe or a shoeing hammer, the men's felling calls lost and unheeded by a forsaking God.

Lost, cast-away, now undone, we kept watch on the change of the moon over our log houses, watched as it closed over the clearing in the bushland and shone on our new fields. We were too birth-proud in our Lutheran ways to heed the warnings, the old signs.

Not the hail. Icestones big as blue cabbages in my mother's garden in Hannas. Not the grasshoppers, thick as lemmings dashing headlong to the sea and devouring all that is green. Not the rust in the grain, nor the breath of the frost giant wilting the Lent-sown corn. Ah, *nej*, too much has already been said about the *pioneering spirit*, pttt! That is nothing to show under black and white a hundred years from now.

It was the lightning bugs, eyes of sleepless trolls. It was Thor, riding across his sky-bridge in his chariot, the silver flash of his eyes. And too, th enight drums of the Cree warned us, but we didn't believe in their Thirst Dance because we thought we didn't understand it. These were the signs we failed to see and hear.

We were all bereft of our senses, snowing and blowing at one time, until finally we are covered with snow: Arvid and Astrid, Bjorn and I.

To this land shy and thin of people we came. We marked our fields, our woodways, the holloways between timber lines with the old boundstones. With caragana and pinerow we hedged off our fields and farmyards. Our backs turned to the omens, we served out our God-given years, fencing ourselves in with barbed wire.

But things have a way of twisting themselves out.

I was never one to cry my love about; I put my feelings away in that far-distant mountain pasture that last winter in Sweden. God help me, after my father fell from the steeple, nothing was the same in my homeplace of Hannas. My sisters Hulda and Augusta gone to America with the miller's sons, crack-brained Carolina gone to Molltorp with the son of a horse trader who could never lie with a woman. All married, and I was left with money paid for waiting a year for Arvid. Arvid. Gone to the new land, not a word from him, but I held to my promise.

When the year of waiting was over and I still had not heard from him, I went after him. I went with a swift pace to this outland of Canada, and I ran full butt — into Astrid! That daughter of a public bath woman. He married her.

What was I to do?

I was a Lolla, a fool, a madcap. Full of the black sickness. It was like enough I had the falling disease.

I wanted to fall into the Turtle Lake and never come up again.

I couldn't go home, nothing for me there, and never could I square my shoulders long enough against Hulda's and Augusta's pity — or prattle — in Indiana.

I tell it straight by the thread, but I must break it short of the ending. I married Bjorn, Arvid's brother.

It will take others, perhaps my granddaughter Annika, to look with a light for some meaning out of this. Was I not more than a woman doomed to live her life with one man and long for another?

When I found them here, together, I was blinded. I ran away, heedless of the warnings: *Don't go near the lake.*

There were fireflies, winking in the dusk. I thought they were eyes of trolls. They warned me, but I closed my own eyes. The howling Wolf swallowed the sun; Darkness fell all around me, but on I ran. I broke through the spruce and poplar, finally, and my feet sank in muskeg. Wet cat-tails brushed my dusty skirt.

I heard the waves dashed on the sandy shore, smelled the water. The god's eyes flashed over the restless waves. I heard thunder break, near, its echo, my cracking heart. Thor's Great Hammer banged, the lake his anvil.

I climbed into the rowboat caught in the horsetail and bullrushes; and I rowed and rowed to the middle of the lake, the boat tossed about by wind and waves. The sky opened; rain fell on my wet face. The rumble of chariot wheels, that Hammer again.

And the king-from-the-sea, that old serpent, rose up shining and silver, its forked tail thrashing and beating the water white. I saw his eye, that monstrous evil eye, before his shadow fell on me.

And the jaws closed over the boat.

In the belly of a fishgod, I lived all that first summer.

When I woke up, I was lying on a bearskin, before a fire. The smoke spiralled up, disappeared through smokeflaps in a skin tent. A young woman tended me — she was called First Woman then, not Old Woman — and gave me to eat bits of fried jackfish. She spoke to me, softly, in the Woods Cree dialect, but I understood what she did with her hands. Fish inside you, they said, poking at my belly. Then she led me outside, into the bushes, where she made me squat down to rid myself of the fish.

We went berry picking together. She told me fish stories, with those brown strong hands.

Then Bjorn found me. He ducked into the tent, lifted me up, and carried me home. Without a word. For the rest of that year, I kept house for him, he true to his word never touched me. All he said was, "It was a sturgeon... A giant sturgeon. Not a god."

And so we were married in the log church in Stockholm, Saskatchewan.

But I never eat the Sunday catch when we go up to the Lake.

On the shore, I look with a safety lantern for the men out fishing.

When Bjorn went south to chop wood for one dollar a day, in this turtlegrove beside the lake, it was an easy birth.

Of course Arvid was here, the only Bjornsson who could bear the sight of blood, the one who attended to breeding and birthing horses and cattle. He was the woodsman who danced me down in the enchanted wood near Bollerup on Midsummer's Eve. He was here, when my first child was born, Bjorn's child, not Arvid's.

He laid me on a horse blanket and gave me to sip his homemade root beer, a dried apple to bite down on when the pains came close together. And Old Woman came through the light in the clearing, a wild dog bloody and dripping from her hand. They built a fire on the shore, not the Balder balefire of our midsummer long ago that we leaped over, hands held in troth. On August 13th, the warmest night of this northern summer, Old Woman boiled the dog and made a broth for me to sip. She chanted, while Arvid recited psalms and prayed aloud for an easy birth, a healthy child.

The broth took away the pain, but it made my vision blur. I thought the dogskin hanging from a tripod was a rabbit's. The bloody game, a danger to my child should she first lay eyes on it. A woman whose path is crossed by a rabbit will give birth to a child with a harelip.

But the child was born with no blemish, other than the red hair of my woodcarver father, that dear troll.

That night, as I lay suckling my first daughter, the water lay flat and smooth as glass. No wind over the lake. No stars. Only the eye of the yellow moon stared down. The fish slept.

And I called my first child Signe, so Blessed means her name.