# UNDER THE OPEN SKIES

Finding Peace and Health in Nature



MARKUS TORGEBY and FRIDA TORGEBY

Translation by Christian Gullette

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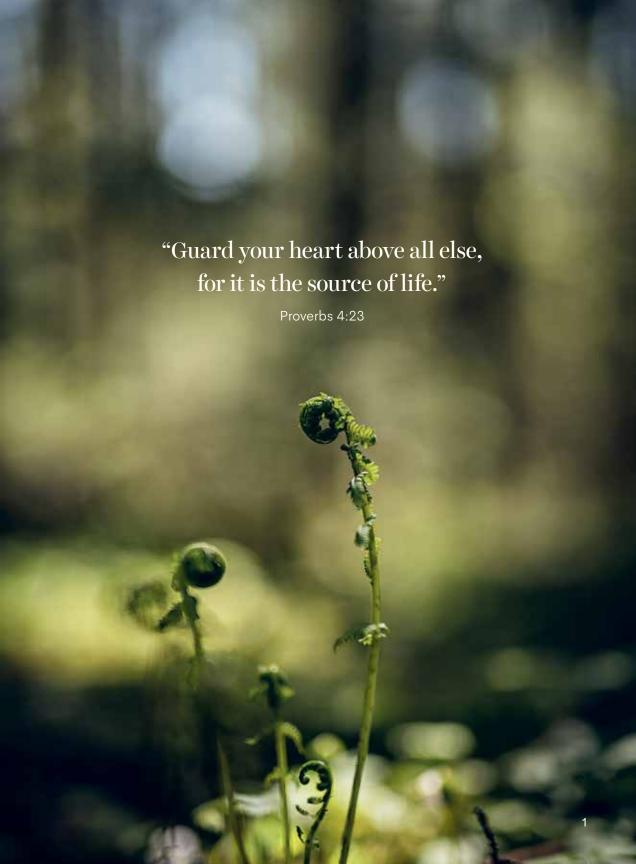
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The Manhood.



















Life during my four years in the hut was clear and concrete. The branches I used to construct it are still there. A few years ago, a friend found my old jacket there, too. There was an old ATM card in the pocket. In any case, there probably wasn't much left in that account.









# THE SPARK

Only during my years in the forest did I realize how important fire is. That it creates freedom. That a single box of matches contains the possibility of both heat and cooking just about anywhere you are.

I always carried a matchbox or a fire steel when I lived in the hut. Matches are simple to use, cost almost nothing, and can be purchased anywhere. They only have one drawback—they can't get wet. Living in the forest, you quickly learn to store the box in a plastic bag. If I had to choose, I would still choose fire steel.

Fire steel is a tool we humans have used since the early part of the Stone Age. It's not sensitive to moisture, has no loose parts that can break, and it never wears out. You can always get a spark, even if your hands are wet and the air is humid. Using fire steel requires only a little training and planning. You can't light the wick on a candle, for example. You need dry kindling against which you hold the steel. To get sparks, drag your knife with a hard, fast pull along the steel, while blowing light gusts of air to help fire get going.

There's a distinct smell when you rub the knife against the steel, like the smell of a braking train. A mixture of steel and fire.

Cigarette lighters, on the other hand, work poorly in the forest.

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They are made of components that easily break and can hardly be used when wearing gloves. If it's really cold outside, the gas is too cold, and you'll only get a small, thin blue flame closest to the hole, which then goes out as soon as you try to light something.







# **BUILDING A FIRE**

Being able to make a fire is part of general education. The only thing required is knowledge, matches, love, and a little time. But first, you have to collect combustible material.

The forest is overflowing with things to burn. The rule is to start small.

In Jämtland, where I live, there is a lot of spruce and some birches here and there. First, I go to a birch and peel off fistfuls of bark, which feels a little bit like pulling away loose skin. When I've filled my coat pocket, I have enough to start a fire. Then I break off a few thin, dry fir twigs. They always grow close to the trunk of the tree. You can tell how dry they are from the sound they make when they snap. It doesn't matter if the autumn rain has been pouring down the mountainside—the branches further up protect the thin branches at the bottom. Pick enough to fill a grocery store bag. Then find some fallen branches the same thickness as your fingers, as many as you can carry in your arms. Finally, gather an equally large pile of branches the same thickness as your forearms.

Now it's time to build the fire.

If it's windy, find as protected a place as possible. A good rule of thumb is that only a single match is needed to get the fire going.





### **BUILDING A FIRE**

That's if you've planned correctly. Otherwise, you need to prepare more carefully.

Begin by laying out some strong branches as a foundation. Use your body as a shield against the wind, add the bark, and light the match. When you've achieved a strong flame, carefully add the matchstick-thin spruce branches. Push them down against the fire, and when they catch a healthy flame, add the branches of the next thickness, and then the next. Lay the branches in different positions with some spaces between them, because they need air to burn at their best.

Once the fire is going, you can throw on anything—thin or rough, dry or wet. No need to complicate things.

When you've been tending the fire for a while, you might find your-self mesmerized: your gaze will lock on the fire, and your thoughts disappear. It is a wonderful state. It's the same feeling as running when your feet are light, or swimming underwater those first meters when your body is full of oxygen. Time flies by and you feel present. You do not want to be anywhere else.

Fir gives off a lot of sparks, so be sure to wear clothes made of wool or cotton. Synthetic materials are guaranteed to melt, resulting in small fly-like holes.







# **PORRIDGE**

Swedish cross-country skier Gunde Svan might as well throw in the towel; there's no one alive in Sweden who's eaten more porridge than me. During the four years I lived in the tent, I consumed almost 200 pounds of oatmeal per year. Oatmeal is a fantastic food and contains fats, carbohydrates, protein, and minerals. Without oatmeal I would have been dead a long time ago, lying like a crumpled piece of leather under a spruce, dehydrated and forgotten.

It is possible to live a full life for an entire summer consisting on nothing but grains and a little vitamin C in the form of fresh fruits or berries. There's a freedom and airiness in that idea, that you don't need much in order to have a good life. During periods when I had some money, I counted everything in oats. A pair of new sneakers for 1,000 Swedish crowns (\$103) or 220 pounds of oatmeal for the same price? Thinking this way can sometimes help us see what's really important in life.

When I lived in the woods, I used an old twelve-cup steel sauce-pan, blackened with soot. In the beginning, it had a Bakelite handle, but it disappeared rather quickly. It melted in the fire, and the whole tent stunk of plastic for a couple of days. Instead, I used a woolen mitt when I lifted the pot out of the fire. Today, the pot is worn-out and dented, but it has a patina and holds a lot of memories.

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### PORRIDGE

Most pots made for outdoor use are made of aluminum with a coating of Teflon, to make them easy to carry and wash. They work well with gas kitchens and plastic cutlery, though not with open fire and a steel spoon. That destroys the Teflon, and it comes off in microscopic bits that will end up in the porridge. Although steel pots are heavier, they work best if you're cooking porridge over an open fire. Steel never breaks, and you can easily remove stuck-on porridge with sand or small stones.

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I've tried most grains at least once: rye, whole buckwheat, crushed buckwheat, and bran oats that I ground in a coffee grinder. Rye requires a longer cooking time. Buckwheat really needs to be soaked overnight and easily boils over and extinguishes the fire when cooking. In short, I prefer regular oatmeal: it cooks the fastest, grows in Sweden, and feels most satisfying in my stomach. Gyllenhammar Oatmeal is the most expensive and has the thinnest and smallest grains, which makes them quicker to cook and makes a nice and sticky porridge. The cheaper varieties have larger grains and need a little more time over the fire. Often, it's the thickness of my wallet that determines the brands I've used.

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Also when it comes to porridge water, I've tried most things: stream water, lake water, muddy water, water from melted snow or icicles, even salt water. Salt water was a miss; you can probably only use that to cook potatoes. In Sweden, most lake and stream water is drinkable, but in the summer the sun warms the water and the muddy

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taste increases the warmer it gets. Porridge that tastes like pike isn't that great—a little cinnamon, however, works fine to hide the earthy taste. If you don't have access to running water in wintertime, melting snow works just fine. Just keep in mind that melted snow has a very bland taste; just a few grains of salt will make a huge difference.

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In the beginning, I went with a classic porridge of water, salt, and oatmeal, but over time I started to work with different spices like cinnamon, cardamom, oregano, and thyme, with and without salt. Eventually I discovered that the porridge tasted better without salt, and that cinnamon and cardamom worked best.

I also tried our Swedish fruits, as well as some imported ones: apples, pears (they get too mushy), plums, blueberries, lingonberries, cloudberries, bananas, figs, and raisins. I also tested some vegetables, mostly because they were cheap: carrots, parsnips, and potatoes. They weren't nearly as good, but carrots at least give a sweetness to the porridge if you add them early on.

In my opinion, you'll achieve the ultimate porridge experience by following these steps:

You'll need a steel pot, a spoon, a knife, milk, oatmeal, cinnamon, raisins, some figs, and a hard apple. Find a stream with cold running water. Make a fire that smokes a little—the smoke flavor adds extra spice to the porridge.

Pour two cups of water into the saucepan, and put in some cinnamon at the same time, along with a bunch of raisins and some figs



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that you've sliced in half with the knife. Let it boil until the water has taken on the color of the dried fruits, then toss in the diced apple. Let it cook for a minute. It can be difficult to control the heat of the fire, so you may need to pour in a little more water. Add one and a quarter cups of oatmeal, and cook until the porridge is firm. Pour in milk and eat directly from the saucepan until your stomach is full.

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Supplemental Lesson: add a few branches on the fire just before the porridge is finished. Spruce gives off sparks, and if one lands in your porridge, you've got it made. If you're outdoors in late summer, you should of course add in blueberries, raspberries, or cloudberries. In the winter, you need more energy, so you can top the milk with a little cream.

















# SLEEPING MATS

I've slept on most types of sleeping mats, from spruce beds to air mattresses. When I was a little boy, I was in the Scouts, and each summer at camp somewhere in Bohuslän, I used a regular half-inch-thick rolled foam mat. It's the world's most commonly used sleeping mat for several reasons: it's cheap and easy, takes up little space, can't get wet, and lasts a long time. The drawback is that plastic foam pads are tough to sleep on—after just one night, your body will feel as stiff as if you'd slept on a rag rug on a kitchen floor.

Nowadays, there are inflatable models that are like a mixture between an air mattress and plastic foam pads. They are both more expensive and more comfortable to lie on, but the downside is that they're a little sensitive: if it gets a hole, it's like sleeping on a plastic bag. Sure, there are repair kits, but I think your bedding should be more robust. When you're tired and ready to crawl into the sleeping bag, the last thing you want to feel under you is sticky adhesive and rubber patches.

If you know you're going to stay in the same place for an extended period of time, I would recommend spruce. It takes a little time to make a sleeping bunk out of spruce branches, but done right, it feels terrific. To lie on an eight-inch-thick bed, surrounded by the





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pungent smell of spruce and resin, is like being hugged by a tree. The trick is to look for branches that aren't too thick and extend enough to provide an intermediate layer under your upper body so that you have a soft bed that isn't too uncomfortable.

But my absolute favorite foundation is untreated reindeer skin. Reindeer is organic and always emits a pleasant warmth.

Reindeer live year-round in the forest and in the mountains. They can run in deep snow across the plains with their large hooves, they're resistant to mosquitoes, and can survive minus 49 degree temperatures. This resilient animal survives on lichen and snow and sometimes wanders out onto the road to lick salt.

The reindeer can stay warm because each hair traps air, which is why their hides are so comfortable to sleep on. The hairs aren't lean and shiny like cat or human hair, but a zigzag shape, like a thin type of sea reeds.

I slept on reindeer skins every night during the four years I lived in the forest: a reindeer bed instead of Hästens. My last spring in the forest, I woke up every morning with little hairs all over me; they fell off in the thousands. The skins became thin and stopped warming me as well. In the end, it was like lying on a piece of cardboard that smelled of dried ham. Then it was time to get new ones.

I buy my reindeer skins from Per-Erik in Järpen, a tough-as-nails Sami man from Tossåsen's Sami village with a shaved head and kind, brown eyes. The skins should be untreated—that way they're more

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resistant to moisture, and the hair lasts longer. I stretch out my hides with the skin side out and nail them to the house wall, high enough so the foxes and other four-legged animals can't get them, and then let the air and the autumn sun do their thing. During the winter, the birds peck away any last bits of fat; they cling to the skin with their sharp little claws and eat themselves fat for the winter. It takes a few weeks before the skins are ready, when they're dry and stiff and still have a faint scent of animal to them.

The Sami people slaughter reindeer from September to October, the best time to get hold of fresh skins to dry yourself. Otherwise, you can just drive north and buy ready-made ones at any gas station north of Sveg.

Reindeer skins are a bit shorter and heavier than other forms of bedding, and are sensitive to rain. But for me, it doesn't matter. The warmth and the feeling they give is superior; I wouldn't want to sleep on anything else. Two skins are sufficient for your whole body.

Keep in mind that synthetic base layers and reindeer skins make for a bad combination. Your base becomes static, the hair is pulled to the material like a magnet, and you turn into a hair ball. Wool underwear and reindeer skins, on the other hand, are like a harmonious and glitch-free marriage.









# THE AX

If I had to settle for only one tool, I would choose the ax. It can be used for everything: cutting, chopping, splitting, slicing.

With the help of a single ax, you can build a house that stands for five hundred years. You can chop the wood that allows you to cook and keep warm. In the forest you can survive for months with only an ax, some matches, and forty-four pounds of oatmeal.

I find it a dizzying thought that a piece of steel mounted on a wooden shaft holds that potential.

For an ax to do its job, it must be sharp. All that could slip poses a danger. The edge is sufficiently sharp if you can use it to cut off a little of your fingernail. To maintain it, you need a whetstone, as well as a file to remove notches.

When working with the ax, you should have it close to your body. That way, you maintain control and don't hurt yourself. Spend several hours getting to know your ax: a good exercise is to try to hit the same mark on the chopping block time after time. Try to hit the mark even after you move a few inches or go off to drink water. Look directly at the spot you want the ax to meet.

If you've cut down a tree and want to remove the branches, stand on one side of the tree and chop the other side, with the trunk protecting your legs. Don't stand like a curved cheese puff when you chop, but try to engage your abdominal muscles. Think of your torso as a cylinder that needs an internal pressure to stay strong. That way you protect your back.

When I chop wood without a chopping block, I always sit on my knees with a log laid out horizontally on the ground in front of me. If it's cold, I rest my knees on my gloves to protect the joints from the cold. With one hand I hold the piece I want to split against the log, and with the other I chop. This is a foolproof way to split firewood: you can't cut yourself in the leg and don't risk planting the ax in the ground. Perfect for when you're chopping firewood into smaller pieces that are easier to light.

When buying an ax, choose a medium-size one with an eighteento twenty-inch-long wooden handle and a five- or six-inch-wide steel blade. A handy ax is easy to pack in your backpack and can still be used for most things: chopping down small trees, cutting off branches, and splitting firewood up to six inches in diameter.

You'll be able to use a handmade ax with a wooden handle for your whole life and then pass it on to your children when you are old. In turn, they can pass it on to theirs. An old ax holds many memories, so treat it with respect.

















# **KNIVES**

During my childhood, I saw my grandfather's folding knife every day. He kept it in his right pocket so that it was always at his hand's reach. A splinter in your finger? Out came the knife. A branch needs trimming in the garden? Out came the knife. Straggly eyebrows? Out came the knife as Grandma shook her head, saying, "Rune, what are you doing?" Sunday pants too long? Out came the knife, making Grandma really upset.

Grandpa used the folding knife as cutlery when he ate. It came out when he peeled potatoes, when he carved my first slingshot, and when he mended with yarn. There he sat, down in the basement, in a green apron over his shirt, sleeves rolled up, and with the sea report at maximum volume: Norra Kvarken, Bottenviken, Gotska Sandön. Thin nylon rope and fifty-five yards of yarn in a pile on the floor.

I think Grandpa loved his knife. It was like an extension of his rough hands. If I ever asked if he had his knife on him, he'd shake his head and mutter: "A fisherman without a knife?"

He even had it in his dress pants for the Sunday meetings, in case there was something you'd need to cut down. He'd just have to reach into his pocket and out came the black folding knife ready for anything. It was always sharp, but nothing to be afraid of.

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#### KNIVES

Personally, I'm more attached to my ax. An ax is something I can't do without, whereas a knife is just good to have. I have a knife for cutting cords, chipping wood, or lighting fire steel. Above all, it's mostly just a treat. A knife can transform a piece of wood into anything from a porridge ladle to a child's toy.

Carving wood requires real attention. Always keep the knife close to your body when carving: it gives you more control. Carve with bent arms, and use your chest muscles if you need to cut away something particularly hard.

When choosing a knife, think less is more. It's easier to control something that is handy and closer to your hand. If you don't live in a rain forest, big adventure knives are just awkward and get in the way.

Look for a soft wooden handle that is comfortable in your fist, preferably with a stop between the handle and the knife blade so you don't slip out over the edge if you lose your grip. Or buy a regular plastic-handle MoraKniv, which costs less than a hundred kronor (\$11). They're found almost everywhere for a reason: they can be used for almost anything.



















# FOG When I was around twelve years old, I got my first boat, an orange Crescent with a black Mercury engine. It could reach twenty-two knots, and my friends and I often went out joyriding in our boats. One spring day, when the sun began to warm up the sea, I wanted to go to the harbor at Björkö. The fog was thick and it was a stupid idea to go out, but it was just a few kilometers the fog no landmarks could be made out. It's easy to get lost in one big circle. brothers once went to Iceland to fish, they saw neither the sun nor the stars for seven whole days. Despite the conditions, they managed with the help of a compass and plumb line. That's what it takes when the fog is thick. For me, the forest is a reference point that I can always trust. It helps me find my way when my mind is overrun by thoughts and emotions and when I don't know which direction to take.















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# TAPPING SAP

In the spring, when the birch begins to bud, it's time to drain a few liters of water from them. This doesn't damage the tree and leaves only a small wound that soon heals with a fine scar. For the birch, it's like a nosebleed.

You need a drill, a small tube, a string, and a bottle of some kind. Drill a hole as big as your little finger in the trunk, at an upwards angle and about three-quarters of an inch deep. Insert the tube into the bottle that you tie against the tree. A few hours later, it will be full.

The sweet birch sap contains nourishing amino acids, enzymes, and micro nutrients such as calcium, potassium, magnesium, and manganese. They are pulled from the earth when the sun and buds make the tree thirsty, and water begins to flow up through the trunk and out towards the branches, like a small stream defying gravity. After a few weeks, when the leaves are out, the rush is over and so is the sap.

In the springtime during my years in the hut, I used birches like a well. Not because I had to, but as a morning routine. To walk in the last snow still left between the firs and feel the warm, bright rays of the spring sun. To start the day with a mug of fresh, cold sap with the faint taste of trees and soil.







# **FDIBLE PLANTS**

Despite my years in the forest, I'm certainly no expert on edible plants. I pick berries and the most common edible mushrooms, but when it comes to green things, I have only a few favorites that arrive when the snow has just disappeared.

- 1. Lady's mantle. I pick a fistful that I boil in water for a few minutes. It makes a tea that tastes like grass, but it's good with a little honey. You can also let it cool and use as a cold drink.
- **2. Birch leaves.** When the leaves are small, I pick and eat them until my tongue turns green. They taste a little strong, but really sit well with my stomach.
- **3. Nettles.** I fill a pot with nettles and then pour in water—barely half the pot—then gently boil a little. When the nettles start to fall apart, it's time to season with salt and white pepper. This soup can be eaten as is, but if you have a hand mixer, use it.
- **4. Spruce shoots.** I eat them as they are. They taste like the forest and oil and have a strange aftertaste that lingers for a long time on the palate. Frida makes a syrup out of them by adding water, sugar, and lemon and then leaving them to soak for a few days, like you would elderflower syrup. Very refreshing.





# DOING YOUR BUSINESS OUTDOORS

During the years I lived outdoors, I had the world's best toilet: grand views, fresh air, peace of mind, and constant change. Toilet paper is just a waste of resources that 80 percent of the world's population does without. You use what nature has to offer, or the left hand and water, and wash thoroughly afterwards.

Practice makes perfect, and for the last twenty years I've done most of my business outdoors. Here's some advice from my experience bank.

Autumn is the absolute best time to do your business outdoors. There's a lot of soft materials with which to wipe: withered leaves, green moss, and peat moss. The peat moss is like an antiseptic washing sponge, not to mention soft against your butt. Try to get as far from the nearest fir as possible: spruce needles are prickly and they have a habit of finding their way inside moss. Nobody wants the surprise of a stinging needle in their behind. Just pull down your pants and get started. However, you'll find that a brook can serve as a giant bidet out in the woods. It's fantastic! The disadvantage is that relieving and washing yourself in running water may spread bacteria downstream, where someone might be refilling their water bottle. However, if you're far out in the middle of nowhere and know that no one is nearby, your best bet is the creek.

### DOING YOUR BUSINESS OUTDOORS

The late fall, before the snow has come, is the worst time for going outdoors. Everything is rock solid and stuck in the ground. You can give spruce cones a try, but pinecones are scratchier, if you ask me.

Then comes the first snow, and it's brilliant. The snow is wet and you don't need anything else.

This is followed by the really cold periods with powder snow. So, I have an observation about this: it seems like one's behind isn't very sensitive to cold temperatures. I don't mean the cheeks, but the area where the sun never shines. It can handle most temperatures. Drying yourself under these conditions would be a breeze if it weren't for frozen hands. When it's minus 31 degrees, it's easy to get a little frostbitten, so it's important to be quick about it.

After that, when there are warm days and freezing nights, that's when a thin ice forms over the snow. It's difficult to dry yourself with something rock hard and glossy. You will have to punch a hole through the ice with your foot and hope there is a softer layer of snow underneath.

Then comes spring and summer, a wonderful time for doing your business outdoors. The streams start flowing again, the moss makes a comeback, the trees bloom, and green beautiful grass begins to germinate. These seasons give your butt time to recover. But there are certain types of grass you should avoid: round meadow grasses that are difficult to clean with, and that broad, flat grass that is like razor blades and leaves small cuts on your behind. Go for the short and soft grasses. Ferns also work well.







# THE OUTDOOR BED

You can build an outdoor bed anywhere—in a garden, in a forest glade. The most important thing is that the place is accessible and that it's not difficult to walk there. If you decide to sleep outdoors, you should be able to do so without having to plan two hours in advance.

I built our family's outdoor bed a bit away from our house. We need just walk down the hill, across a road, and then for a minute along an unpaved trail through the forest, and then we're there.

I built it for two people. The main end where you rest your head is to the west, so that the evening sun shines on your face. A few meters away, there's a small ring with stones for a fire.

We go there year-round, especially if any of the girls need extra quality time. It's easier to talk about certain things when lying down next to each other in sleeping bags, the heat of the fire or the evening sun on the children's faces.

You're close to each other, but there's also room for silence.





















