



CHAPTER 1

In which I tell of my misunderstood childhood, of the first Experience in my life and the tremendous night of my escape, and of my historic meeting with Hodgkins.



Early one cold and windy evening many years ago, a simple shopping bag was found on the doorstep of the Moomin Foundling Home. In the bag lay none other than I, rather carelessly wrapped in newspaper.

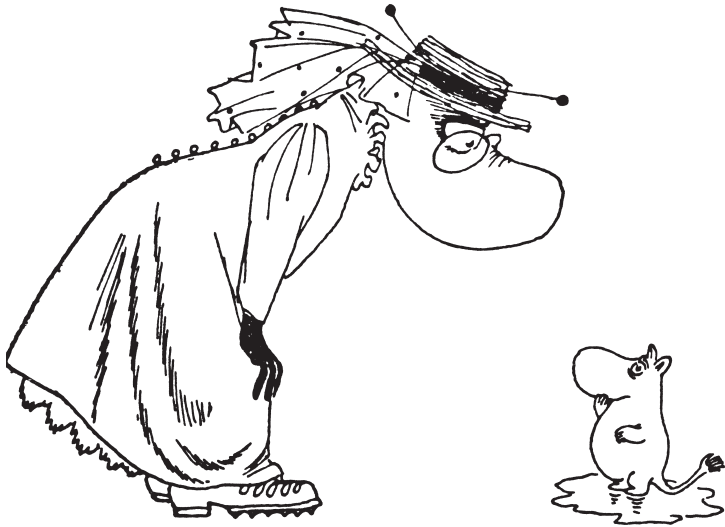
How much more romantic it would have been had I been placed instead on green moss in a small, pretty basket!

However, the Hemulen who had built the Foundling Home was interested in astrology (somewhat), and wisely enough she observed the dominant stars at the time of my coming into the world. They indicated the birth of a very unusual and talented Moomin, and the Hemulen accordingly worried about the trouble awaiting her (geniuses are often regarded as being disagreeable, but I must confess that this has never disturbed me).

The position of the stars is a remarkable matter! Had I been born a couple of hours earlier, I would have become a keen poker player, and everyone born twenty minutes after me felt compelled to join the Hemulic Voluntary Brass Band (fathers and mothers cannot be careful enough when starting a family, and I recommend making minute calculations).

Anyhow, when I was lifted out of the shopping bag I sneezed three times in a very peculiar way. It might have signified something or other.

The Hemulen tied a tag to my tail and stamped it with the magical number 13, because she already had twelve foundlings. All of them were grave, tidy, and obedient, because unfortunately the Hemulen washed them more often than she kissed them (she owned the sort of solid character that lacks all the finer nuances). Dear reader, imagine a Moomin-house where all the rooms are placed strictly in a row, foursquare and painted in the same beer-brown color! You don't believe me? Moominhouses, you say, should have plenty of the most surprising nooks



and secret chambers, stairs, balconies, and turrets? Not this one! And worse: in the night none of us was allowed to get out of bed, to eat, chat, or walk about. (We were barely permitted to pee!)

I was never allowed to take any funny little bugs home with me to keep under my bed. I had to eat and wash at fixed times. I had to carry my tail at an angle of forty-five degrees when saying good morning. Oh, who can talk about such matters without shedding a tear!

I used to stand before the tiny mirror in the hall and look deep into my unhappy blue eyes, trying to penetrate the secret of my life. With my nose in my paws, I heaved sighs such as “Alone!” “Cruel World!” “Fate is my Lot!” and other sad words, until I felt a little better.

I was a very lonely Moominchild, as is often the case with original talents. No one understood me or could make me out, least of all I myself. Of course, I was aware of the difference between me and the other Moomin children. It lay mainly in their deplorable incapacity for wondering and marvelling.

For example, I would ask the Hemulen why everything was just as it was and not the other way round.

“Wouldn’t that be pretty indeed,” said the Hemulen to this. “What’s wrong with things as they are?” She never explained anything, and I felt more and more strongly that she was trying to shrug the whole matter off. “What, when?” and “Who, how?” have no meaning to Hemulens.

Or I asked her why I was I and not someone else.

“Bad luck for both of us! Have you washed your face?” was the Hemulen’s reply to this important question.

I continued: “But why are you a Hemulen and not a Moomin?”

“My father and mother were Hemulens, praise be,” she replied.

“And their fathers and mothers?” I asked.

“Hemulens!” the Hemulen cried. “And also their fathers and mothers, and all theirs, and so forth and so forth, and now go and wash or I’ll be getting nervous!”

“How dreary. Do they never end?” I asked. “Sometime there must have been a *first* father and mother, mustn’t there?”

“That’s so long ago that nobody cares,” said the Hemulen. “And anyhow, why should we end?” (A dim but unavoidable notion told me that the line of fathers and mothers that had to do with myself was something rather exceptional. I wouldn’t be surprised if my swaddling-clothes had been embroidered with a royal crown. But alas! old newspapers tell nothing!)

One night I dreamed that I was holding my tail at a wrong angle, namely, seventy degrees, when I said good morning to the Hemulen. I described this nice dream to her and asked if it made her angry.

“Dreams are trash,” said the Hemulen.

“How does one know?” I objected. “Perhaps the Moomin in my dream is the real one, and the Moomin who stands here is only something you are dreaming?”

“I’m afraid not! You are very real!” said the Hemulen dejectedly. “I haven’t time for you now! You give me headaches! What’ll become of you in this un-Hemulic world?”

“I’m going to be famous,” I declared earnestly. “And among other things, I’ll build a house for little Hemulen foundlings. And I’ll let them eat treacle sandwiches in bed and keep grass snakes and skunks under it!”

“They’ll never care for that,” said the Hemulen.

I’m afraid she was right.

So passed my early childhood in quiet and constant wonderment. I was permanently astonished, always

repeating my questions of “What, when?” and “Who, how?” The Hemulen and her obedient foundlings avoided me as best they could; the word “why” seemed to make them uneasy. So I wandered alone in the bleak, treeless landscape by the sea near the Hemulen’s house, musing over spiders’ webs and stars, over the Little Creeps with curled tails that scuttled around in the water pools, and over the wind that blew from different quarters and always smelled different. (I have later learned that a talented Moomin always wonders about things that seem self-evident but finds nothing strange in things that an ordinary Moomin thinks are curious.) It was a melancholy time.

But by and by a change came: I started to muse about the shape of my nose. I put my trivial surroundings aside and mused more and more about myself, and I found this to be a bewitching occupation. I stopped asking and longed instead to speak of my thoughts and feelings. Alas, there was no one besides myself who found me interesting.

Then came the spring that was so important for my development. At first I didn’t understand that it was directed toward myself. I heard the usual chirping, whirring, and humming from all who awoke from the winter and now were in a hurry for something. I saw the Hemulen’s symmetrical vegetable garden get its start, and everything that came up was crumpled from impatience. New winds were singing at night.

The smells were different. They were the smells of change. I sniffed at everything and got growing pains in my legs, but I still had no idea that it was all intended for me.

Finally, one windy morning, I had a feeling that . . . well, I simply had a feeling. And I walked straight down to the sea that the Hemulen didn't like and consequently had forbidden us.

An important experience awaited me. For the first time I saw myself full-length. The bright and shiny ice was much wider than the Hemulen's hall mirror. I could see the clouds of the spring sky sailing past my small, pretty, upright ears. At last I could view the whole of my nose and the firm, well-rounded rest of myself all the way down to my paws. The paws were really my only disappointment: they had a look of helplessness and childishness that bewildered me. "However," I thought, "perhaps it will pass with time. Doubtless my strength is in my head. Whatever I do, I will never bore people. I'll never give them *time* to look as far down as my paws." Enchanted, I gazed at my reflection. In order to see it still better, I lay down on the ice on my stomach.

But now I disappeared. Now there was only a green dimness that dwindled deeper and deeper. Vague shadows were moving about in the unknown world that led its secret life under the ice. They looked threatening and very attractive. A giddiness came over me and I thought, "To fall down there. Down among the strange shadows . . ."



The thought was so terrifying that I thought it once again: “Deeper, deeper down . . . Nevermore! Only down and down and down.”

It made me extremely upset. I rose up and stamped my feet to see if the ice would hold. It did. I walked a bit farther out to see if it would hold there, too. It didn't.

Suddenly I hung up to my ears in the cold green sea with my paws helplessly dangling over a bottomless and dangerous darkness. In the meantime the clouds were sailing along in the sky quite calmly, as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps one of the threatening shadows would devour me! It was not impossible that he would take one of my ears along to his children and tell them, “Now, eat up before it goes cold! This is genuine

Moomin and not to be had every day!” Or I would float ashore with a tragical clump of seaweed behind one ear, and the Hemulen would weep regretfully and tell everyone she knew, “Oh, he was such a singular Moomin! What a pity I didn’t understand it in time . . .”

I was just starting on my funeral when I felt something very cautiously nipping my tail. Everyone who owns a tail knows how careful one is of this special ornament and how instantly one reacts if it is threatened by danger or affront. I laid my enticing dreams aside and was filled with energy. Determinedly I crawled up onto the ice, and then ashore. There I told myself, “Now I have had an Experience. This is the first Experience of my life. I can’t possibly stay with the Hemulen any longer. I shall take my fate in my own paws!”

I felt cold all day, but no one asked me why. This fortified me in my resolution. At dusk I tore my bedsheet in long strips and tied them into a rope. I made it fast to the windowsill. The twelve obedient foundlings looked on but didn’t say a word, and this hurt me. After evening tea I wrote a farewell letter, taking great care over it. Simply, but with dignity, it said:

Dear Hemulen,

I feel that great events await me, and that a Moomin’s life is short. So I leave this place. Good-bye. Do not grieve: I shall return one day crowned with laurel wreaths!

*Cheerio, and with best wishes,
A Moomin who is unlike others
P.S. I am taking a pot of pumpkin mash along.*

The die was cast! Led by the stars of my fate, I went on my way, with never an inkling of the strange events that lay in wait for me. I was simply a very young Moomin, gloomily wandering over the heath, sighing in desolate gorges, my loneliness increased by the terrifying sounds of the night.

At exactly this point in his Memoirs, Moominpappa became very deeply moved by the tale of his unhappy childhood, and he felt that he needed a break. He screwed the top on his memoir-pen and went over to the window. All was silent in Moominvalley.

A light breeze was whispering in the garden and gently swinging Moomintroll's rope ladder to and fro. "I'm sure I could still manage an escape," Moominpappa thought. "I'm really not so very old!"

He chuckled to himself. Then he lowered his legs over the windowsill and reached for the rope ladder.

"Hello, Pappa," said Moomintroll at the next window. "What are you up to?"

"Exercises, my boy," answered Moominpappa. "Keeping fit! One step down, two up, one down, two up. Good for the muscles!"

"Better be careful," said Moomintroll. "How are the Memoirs going?"

"Quite well," answered Moominpappa and hauled his

trembling legs to safety over the windowsill. "I've just run away. The Hemulen cries with grief. I think it will all be very moving."

"When are you going to read it to us?"

"Soon. As soon as I've come to the riverboat," said Moominpappa. "It's great fun to read your own book aloud!"

"I'm sure it is," said Moomintroll and stifled a yawn. "Well, good night, Pappa."

"Good night, Moomintroll," said Moominpappa, already unscrewing the top of his memoir-pen.

"Well. Where was I . . . ? Oh, yes, I had run away, and then in the morning—no, that'll come later. I must enlarge upon the night of escape . . ."

All night I wandered through unknown, bleak landscapes. How I pity myself now, afterward! I didn't dare stop, I didn't dare look around me. Who knows what you may suddenly see in the darkness! I tried to sing "How Un-Hemulic Is This World," the morning march of the foundlings, but my voice trembled so much that it only frightened me all the

