

Sigrid Undset has Kristin Lavransdatter thinking near the end of her life as she looks at a river:

The river seemed to be showing her a picture of her own life: She too had restlessly rushed through the wilderness of her earthly days, rising up with an agitated roar at every rock she had to pass over. Faint and scattered and pale was the only way the eternal light had been mirrored in her life. But it dimly occurred to the mother that in her anguish and sorrow and love, each time the fruit of sin had ripened to sorrow, that was when her earthbound and willful soul managed to capture a trace of the heavenly light.¹

Kristin Lavransdatter is the life of a Norwegian woman in the early fourteenth century as she emerges from her childhood innocence, delves deep into sin, experiences the thongs of pain resulting from her disobedience, and finally comes to an inner peace as she lies dying of the Black Death. For Undset, the life of Kristin Lavransdatter is paradigmatic of the tale we are all in. She experiences suffering and travails, but in the end Kristin is able to accept herself and her life, recognizing that God had always been with her, acknowledging her as his servant. The ending is heart-rending, but not without hope. Kristin has finally found the peace she so desperately sought throughout her life and those who were with her when she died continue on; Kristin's life has ended, but the tale of earthly struggle and humanity's search for stillness endures.

Kristin's sin is not that she, the daughter of an honorable man of a most noble lineage, surrendered her virtue to a man of questionable repute. Rather, Kristin's sin is her disobedience. She turned against the commands of her father, of all those who counseled her, and of God. As Mary Ellen Evans states, "Kristin becomes the eternal human being who asserts her will in defiance of all pleas of prudence, who turns her back on God."² But unlike Fru Aashild, an enigmatic woman who taught Kristin healing, in the end Kristin scorns Fru Aashild's proverb: "I call him a true idiot and fool only if he regrets his actions afterwards."³ Kristin does learn to regret her sin, although she bears the consequences of it and never considers that her life could

¹ *The Cross*, pp. 367-368.

² Mary Ellen Evans. "Contemporary Catholic Authors: Sigrid Undset and the Saga of Salvation." *The Catholic Library World*. January 1942. Pg. 4

³ *The Wreath*, pg. 49.

have been otherwise. Evans continues, “Kristin is also the eternal human being who assesses the enormity of her act, and lives out her life to expiate the burden of her sin.”⁴

Kristin’s descent into willfulness begins early, despite much advice given her to the contrary. As Kristin’s younger sister, Ulvhild, lies crippled in a bed, her mother implores Brother Edvin, a wandering Franciscan with whom Kristin forms a close relationship, to heal the child. Brother Edvin admonishes Kristin’s mother not to try and bend God’s will to hers – “You want nothing more from all your prayers and fasting than to force your will on God. Does it surprise you, then, that it has accomplished so little good?”⁵ – and offers an example of a destitute woman who earnestly “only asked that God give her a fearless heart so that she might have faith that He would let happen whatever was best for the boy.”⁶ There are many more examples of Brother Edvin, Kristin’s pious father, and others that served to educate Kristin about the right relationship to God, yet she struggled throughout her life to place God’s will above her own.

Soon Kristin comes to experience passion through various men in her life and afterwards “it had become clear that she herself and everyone else had a sinful, fleshy body encompassing the soul, biting into it with harsh bands.”⁷ And yet, knowing full well the rules that were in place, she delivers herself into the arms of the man who would later become her husband. After she chooses this course of action, Erlend can rightly claim that “Now no one in the world has power over me except you. Oh, I thought about so many things last night as you lay asleep in my lap, my fair one. The Devil cannot have so much power over a man that I would ever cause you sorrow or harm, you who are the most precious thing in my life.”⁸ Indeed she acquired such great power over him, and he over her, but despite his best intentions this power causes her the greatest sorrow throughout all the days of her life. Although she did not know the consequences to come, “She merely had the odd feeling of being a stranger to everything to which she had previously felt herself bound.”⁹ And “now she had ventured onto new paths; and no matter how difficult they might be to follow, she was certain that in the end they would lead her to Erlend.”¹⁰ Having bound herself to him and subjected her will to his, “She was separated from everything

⁴ Evans, pg. 4.

⁵ *The Wreath*, pg. 44.

⁶ *The Wreath*, pg. 71.

⁷ *The Wreath*, pg. 82.

⁸ *The Wreath*, pg. 139.

⁹ *The Wreath*, pg. 141.

¹⁰ *The Wreath*, pg. 151.

she had been bound to in the past, and the bond between them was such a fragile one”¹¹ and this “aroused in Kristin a strong yearning for peace and reconciliation with everything from which she had come to feel herself cut off.”¹² This yearning would drive Kristin for years to come.

Kristin tries to come to grips with an action she knows was not upright and in a conversation with Brother Edvin says, “I have now seen that other people have sinned as we have. When I was back home I couldn’t understand how anything could have such power over the souls of people that they would forget all fear of sin, but now I have seen so much that if one cannot rectify the sins one has committed out of desire or anger, then heaven must be a desolate place.”¹³ Brother Edvin acknowledges, and speaks of his sins and then says, “Yes, I see that you’re smiling, Kristin. But don’t you realize how badly things stand with you now? For you would rather hear about other people’s frailties than about deeds of decent people, which might serve as an example for you.”¹⁴ Kristin’s sin had caused her to look for the worst in people, to try and discover where they are vulnerable, rather than looking for the reflection of the divine light in each person. Moreover, Kristin began to feel the consequences of their sin and cries out, “I didn’t realize then that the consequence of sin is that you have to trample on other people.”¹⁵ She had disobeyed her father and wrenched his heart open, she had seen the look of grief in Brother Edvin’s eyes, she had been an accomplice in a murder, all because she was going to follow her will, whatever the cost. Brother Edvin sees that Kristin too is torn apart by the sin she has committed and comments, “It’s been weighing so heavy on my heart, Kristin, that you had strayed from the path of peace.”¹⁶ Kristin thinks, “I have followed forbidden paths and acted falsely toward those who have trusted me most”¹⁷ and recognizes that she cannot undo the events of her past; she resolves to be obedient to her new vow, her wedding vow.

Kristin takes charge of her husband’s estates and manages them as best she can, which is much better than her husband had ever been able to do. This work, for her, is the expiation of her sin. She continues to feel the weight of her sin, and is overly aware of her faults. In a conversation with Gunnulf, Erlend’s brother and a learned priest, he reminds her that “just as

¹¹ *The Wreath*, pg. 152.

¹² *The Wreath*, pg. 155.

¹³ *The Wreath*, pg. 159.

¹⁴ *The Wreath*, pg. 160.

¹⁵ *The Wreath*, pg. 236.

¹⁶ *The Wreath*, pg. 256.

¹⁷ *The Wife*, pg. 25.

God can cleanse a person's flesh of leprosy, He can also cleanse your soul of sin."¹⁸ She agrees, but continues to lament her sin and seeks not only to be forgiven but to be pure again.

Recognizing that Kristin's contrition is for her own sake, Gunnulf chastises her with a question Kristin cannot bear to answer: "Are you so arrogant that you think yourself capable of sinning so badly that God's mercy is not great enough?"¹⁹ Kristin then sets off on a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Saint Olav in Nidaros, taking her newborn son. As Erlend watches his noble wife leave on foot and wearing rags, Gunnulf says to his brother,

The harm you did to the woman who is now your wife when you dragged her down, first into impure living and then into blood guilt—you cannot absolve her of that, only God can do so. Pray that he holds His hand over her during this journey when you can neither follow her nor protect her. And do not forget, brother, for as long as you both shall live, that you watched your wife leave your estate in this manner—for the sake of your sins more than for her own...you drove her into sinful defiance against everyone God has put in charge of this child.²⁰

As Kristin knelt before the altar in Nidaros, she felt as though "she had wandered to the very edge of Hell's abyss."²¹ This sense of despair and the nearness of death she experienced when she gave birth to her son all gave Kristin the ability to see her life purpose – she was going to rule her estates and make them productive for the sake of her children.

Kristin had changed the orientation of her will, but it was still her will. No longer was she bent on being with Erlend, she was now going to be the perfect mistress of Husaby. As she went about her life and confessed her sins, it is clear that Kristin had not been changed by her life project. For now their house priest, "Sira Eiliv, admonished her because she brooded so much over her everyday sins—he said this was the temptation of pride."²² Kristin was still convinced that she could do everything on her own. Her priest however encouraged her to be courageous, and realize that "nothing in this world is worthy of desire except His mercy."²³ But Kristin was going to have to submit her will to God's. God was not going to force her, as Gunnulf reminded her: "since He loves us the way the bridegroom loves the bride, He will not force her; if she won't embrace Him willingly, then He must allow her to flee and to shun Him. I have also thought that perhaps no soul is lost for all eternity. For I think every soul must desire this love,

¹⁸ *The Wife*, pg. 67.

¹⁹ *The Wife*, pg. 67.

²⁰ *The Wife*, pp. 92-93.

²¹ *The Wife*, pg. 111.

²² *The Wife*, pg. 139.

²³ *The Wife*, pg. 154.

but it seems too dearly bought to let go of every other precious for the sake of this love alone.”²⁴ Gunnulf’s admonition did not turn Kristin toward God, but rather realizing her own willfulness and defiance, she stated, “I realize I’ll never be able to find my way to peace.”²⁵

Kristin continued to manage the estate as the situation between her and her husband deteriorated. Erlend eventually left on many journeys, leaving Kristin alone with their children for great lengths of time. Finally, upon one return Erlend “saw what she needed: to encounter something that would not give way when she reached for help, something that would not lead her astray when she came, ready to follow.”²⁶ When she was young Kristin had leaned on her father, Lavrans, a most noble and loving man. He had cared for her and only wished the best for her. Kristin, however, had spurned him and rejected his counsel by refusing the one whom he had betrothed to her. From the night she had given herself over to Erlend she had placed her faith in him. But despite her intense love for Erlend, he was weak and he could not give her the sturdy foundation against which she so desperately needed to lean. Now as her father lie in bed dying, Kristin came to realize that she was about to be left without support. Kristin had felt so grounded in her father and longed for the return to that tranquility. As he parted, Lavrans uttered words that were to come to have great meaning for Kristin later in her life. He said, “There is no worthier work for the person who has been graced with the ability to see even a small part of God’s mercy than to serve Him and to keep vigil and to pray for those people whose sight is still clouded by the shadow of worldly matters.”²⁷ Everyone sins and the unconditional reconciliation offered by God is open to those who will accept it. Those who have felt this mercy, who know what it is to be under the weight of sin and mercifully unburdened from it, exude a love that causes them to be God’s servant. Although she did not know it, this would be Kristin’s ultimate life project.

The emotions wrapped up in the passing of her father and her mother shortly after, the emptiness resulting from the escapades in which Erlend took part and his disinterest in their children, and the exhaustion she felt in managing the estates brought Kristin to the brink of collapse. But as she sat one summer day stitching, she recollected her emotions. “Now that everything had become memories, she seemed to see so much that she hadn’t noticed when she

²⁴ *The Wife*, pg. 155

²⁵ *The Wife*, pg. 156.

²⁶ *The Wife*, pp. 200-201.

²⁷ *The Wife*, pg. 248.

was in the midst of it all—when she took for granted her father’s tenderness and protection, as well as the steady, quiet care and toil of her silent, melancholy mother.”²⁸ In the tranquility of being apart from the storm, Kristin was able to see how it had all fit together, how far she had come, and Kristin finally understood a part of her story.

The affection that had once existed between Erlend and Kristin continued to wither into decay. Upon a brief return at one point, he noticed her melancholy more than usual and reminded Kristin of what so many had reminded her before: “It’s a sin to brood over and dwell on the sins we have confessed to the priest and repented before God, receiving His forgiveness through the hand and words of the priest. And it’s not out of piety, Kristin, that you’re constantly tearing open these old sins of ours—you want to hold the knife to my throat every time I oppose you in some way.”²⁹ Even the very man for whom she had given everything noticed that Kristin’s willfulness prevented her from true contrition. Feeling sorry for his outburst, Erlend begged her forgiveness, but Kristin said to him with great malice what was true, “The day will never come when you will stand up and take the blame for what you have done. You should turn to God and seek redemption from Him. You need to ask His forgiveness more than you need to ask mine.”³⁰ In the midst of this battle Kristin cried out her need for Erlend, her need for a sure support, the very need that Erlend knew before that she had: “you’re supposed to be my lord; I’m supposed to obey and honor you, bow to you and *lean on you*, next to God, in accordance with God’s laws, Erlend!”³¹ Despite their tensions, even when their marriage bond was stretched to the brink by Erlend’s adulterous act and her husband being tortured for charges of high treason, Kristin could still say, “No matter how things go, no matter what happens, he is still my husband—my husband, whom I love.”³² Even if Kristin was not able to submit her will to the will of God, she was able to unconditionally love this man whom she had chosen as her own. She was able to follow him to the deepest depths and be ever by his side. “Now things were once again the way they had been in her youth, when she had put her faith in Erlend, defying everyone and everything.”³³

²⁸ *The Wife*, pg. 296.

²⁹ *The Wife*, pg. 317.

³⁰ *The Wife*, pg. 324.

³¹ *The Wife*, pg. 317. *Emphasis mine.*

³² *The Wife*, pg. 347.

³³ *The Wife*, pg. 354.

Kristin continued to place her faith in Erlend once he was released, although his failed plan had cost him all his lands and his title. Her sons rallied behind their father and Kristin wept pitifully when her son Gaute, on whom she would come to lean in coming years, swore his unconditional faith to his father on the hilt of Erlend's sword. Kristin prayed in earnest, "May he never see the day when he realizes that he has placed his trust in a hand that lets everything run through its fingers like cold water and dry sand."³⁴ Even in light of his lamentable present condition, Erlend was able to say, "Many a man is given what was intended for another, but no one is given another man's fate."³⁵ Erlend may have suffered greatly while the other conspirators had not, but Erlend accepted this as his own. Much like Dag Hammarskjöld, Erlend said thanks for what had been and embraced what would come to be.

Kristin, however, was still unable to find peace. She worried over her sons and the inheritance of their now dwindled property. She had many dreams, which were representative of her fears and the turmoil raging in her heart. She was being torn apart by "the unbearable anguish of her dream as she stood powerless and watched her little son's pitiful, hopeless flight from the strong, ruthlessly swift, and hideous beast."³⁶ Kristin also brooded over the fate of her husband's soul, and loved Erlend only out of pity for him. She felt that "with these outbursts of his unruly spirit he had sinned more against himself and the well-being of his own soul than he had against her."³⁷ But this did not lead her to forgive Erlend, but rather lead her to be hardened toward him. She became sorrowful not because they no longer shared the love they once bore for one another, but for all the bonds she had broken to be with him. She was constantly reminding herself, "You trampled on everyone, defied everyone in order to be together."³⁸ And now Kristin felt as though she was "not young enough to have the strength to live with him; not old enough to have patience with him. She had become a miserable woman."³⁹ She began to think of those whom she had crushed in order to gain herself this miserable condition: "Simon . . . and her father. They had held on to their loyal love for her, even as she trampled on them for the sake of this man whom she no longer had the strength to endure."⁴⁰

³⁴ *The Cross*, pg. 31-32.

³⁵ *The Cross*, pg. 88.

³⁶ *The Cross*, pg. 152.

³⁷ *The Cross*, pg. 165.

³⁸ *The Cross*, pg. 204.

³⁹ *The Cross*, pg. 215.

⁴⁰ *The Cross*, pg. 215.

Erlend and Kristin's inability to live with one another finally reached some resolution when Erlend moved to a small, dilapidated estate he had inherited from his recently deceased aunt, Fru Aashild. On this farm Erlend had been able to find peace. When Kristin finally came to him and begged him to return to their estate at Jørundgaard, he replied, "Here on this little farm I'm a free man; no one glares at my footprints or talks behind my back."⁴¹ The two remained at Haugen for some time and enjoyed the affection of one another. But Kristin felt called to return for the sake of her sons and her duty. Erlend felt called to remain at peace. The two parted, each hoping that the other would give in and move to where they each felt called. Several years passed, Kristin was beleaguered by rumors, and her seven sons retreated further and further from their mother. Again, Kristin had placed her will above that of others and in the process trampled the heads of those she now held most dear, her sons. Her son Bjørgulf cried, "You and Father thought of nothing else but your quarrel. Not about the fact that we had grown up to be men in the meantime. You never paid any heed to anyone who happened to come between your weapons and was dealt bloody wounds."⁴² Kristin continued to harbor rancor towards her husband. She felt that "it was easy for someone [like Erlend] to stay young if he refused to learn, refused to adapt to his lot in life, and refused to fight to change his circumstances in accordance with his will."⁴³ But when he died shortly thereafter, defending her honor against rumors that crept up in the valley from which he had fled, she finally began to experience some of the peace Erlend had exuded since his crushing defeat and torture. Kristin admitted that "all that had happened and would happen was meant to be. Everything happens as it is meant to be."⁴⁴

She continued to live on the farm, although she gradually did less and less of the managing of the estate, the position being taken up by her son Gaute and his new wife Jofrid. As she became an old woman and watched the lives of her six remaining sons diverge in so many directions "she felt as if their lives and well-being had now slipped beyond her view."⁴⁵ The children, whose well-being had been the impetus for her to live and work, were no longer dependant upon their mother. Then she reflected back on her mother and her melancholy statement that Kristin would only understand when she had children of her own. Understand what, she had thought for years, but now it was clear. "Her mother's heart had been deeply etched with memories of her

⁴¹ *The Cross*, pg. 225.

⁴² *The Cross*, pg. 252.

⁴³ *The Cross*, pg. 287.

⁴⁴ *The Cross*, pg. 289.

⁴⁵ *The Cross*, pg. 346.

daughter, memories of her thoughts about the child from before she was born and from all the years the child could not remember, memories of fears and hopes and dreams that children would never know had been dreamed on their behalf, before it was their own turn to fear and hope and dream in secret.”⁴⁶ Now Kristin realized that all the dreams she had had for her children were shattered and that her sons did not understand the love she bore in her heart for them.

Collecting the few possessions that were now hers, Kristin set off on a pilgrimage to Nidaros, as she had done so many years before. On the pilgrimage she had been able to care for and console a fellow pilgrim. She felt that “in spite of everything, in spite of her willfulness, her restless heart had managed to capture a pale glimpse of the love that she had seen mirrored in her father’s soul, clear and still, just as the bright sky now shimmered in the great mountain lake in the distance.”⁴⁷ She had been graced to see a small part of God’s mercy at work in her and she now was God’s servant. She thought about how she had gone against her father’s will and how he had permitted her to do so. And thinking about her Father, she realized that “surely she had never asked God for anything except that He should let her have her will. And every time she had been granted what she asked for—for the most part. Now here she sat with a contrite heart—not because she had sinned against God but because she was unhappy that she had been allowed to follow her will to the road’s end.”⁴⁸ God had given Kristin the free-will to do as she wished and she reveled in it, rather than willingly submitting herself to God. As she pondered these things

she had come to view her life in a new way: like a person who clammers up to a ridge overlooking his home parish, to a place where he has never been before, and gazes down on his own valley. Each farm and fence, each thicket and creek bed are familiar to him, but he seems to see for the first time how everything is laid out on the surface of the earth that bears the lands. And with this new view she suddenly found words to release both her bitterness toward Erlend and her anguish for his soul, which had departed life so abruptly. He had never known rancor; she saw that now, and God had seen it always.⁴⁹

On this pilgrimage, Kristin had found some of the peace for which she had always yearned.

Kristin entered the cloister in Nidaros, where she was surprised to find her former house priest, Sira Eiliv, attending to the sisters. When Kristin was sharing with the priest her concerns over her sons who had entered the monastery, as her sons were her sole remaining anxiety, he

⁴⁶ *The Cross*, pg. 347.

⁴⁷ *The Cross*, pg. 369.

⁴⁸ *The Cross*, pg. 371.

⁴⁹ *The Cross*, pg. 381.

explained what Kristin had known on the journey when she saw herself reflecting her father's mercy. He said to her, "You loved God the way you loved your father: not as much as you loved your own will, but still enough that you always grieved when you had to part from him."⁵⁰

Kristin understood and tried to submit her will to God's will, she was not going to be able to atone for her sin of disobedience until she was obedient. Kristin lived as a good sister at Rein Convent and on one evening as the Black Death had taken much of the population of the city, Kristin placed her own life and her own will at stake for the sake of the most wretched people one can imagine. Even in this she at first tried to do it with her will. Ulf offered his assistance, which she said she had not asked for, but he reminded her that "things can happen without your request or orders... you can't always manage alone everything that you've taken on."⁵¹ Finally, leaning on God's faith in total resignation to that of which she was uncertain, she said, "Now Bjørgulf's dream will come true. I trust in the mercy of God and the Virgin Mary."⁵²

Kristin accomplished what God had called her to do. She had set aside her willfulness; she had willingness, but it was resigned to God's will. Lying on her deathbed Kristin no longer brooded over her sins, nor the souls of her husband and her sons, rather she lay there in contented tranquility recalling:

God had held her firmly in a pact which had been made for her, without her knowing it, from a love that had been poured over her—and in spite of her willfulness, in spite of her melancholy, earthbound heart, some of that love had *stayed* inside her, had worked on her like sun on the earth, had driven forth a crop that neither the fiercest fire of passion nor its stormiest anger could completely destroy. She had been a servant of God—a stubborn, defiant maid, most often an eye-servant in her prayers and unfaithful in her heart, indolent and neglectful, impatient toward admonishments, inconstant in her deeds. And yet He had held her firmly in His service, and under the glittering gold ring a mark had been secretly impressed upon her, showing that she was His servant.⁵³

⁵⁰ *The Cross*, pg. 395.

⁵¹ *The Cross*, pg. 415.

⁵² *The Cross*, pg. 416.

⁵³ *The Cross*, pg. 422.