



USVA

INTERNATIONAL 2010

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#### Contact / Editor-in-Chief:

Anne Leinonen / usvazine@gmail.com

Kiisterintie 146, 50670 Otava, Finland

<http://www.usvazine.net>

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Usva (The Mist) is a webzine publishing speculative fiction (fantasy, science fiction, horror stories, mainstream prose with a speculative twist) - short stories, poetry, articles, photos and illustrations.

**Cover Art:** Juha Veltti

**Layout:** Eija Lappalainen

**Graphics:** Carita Forsgren, Tomi Jänkälä, Juha Veltti,

**Authors:** Carita Forsgren, Marko Hautala, Tomi Jänkälä, Marketta Niemelä, Marika Riikonen, Katja Salminen

**Translators:** Emmi Itäranta, Marianna Leikomaa, Jyri Luoma, Liisa Rantalaiho, Anne Volmari and J. Robert Tupasela

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#### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Juha Veltti is a maker of images. He has done illustrations for numerous publications (i.e. Tähtivaeltaja, Parnasso, Kirjo, Vegaia) . His comics have been published in several anthologies (Dead Future, Horrific Tales Anthology, Aukko). Currently he is working with Steve Orlando on a project called God's Body. He also does paintings and graphic design. Oh, and music, too (Metsämorfeus). To see more of his art, go to <http://www.veltti.net>

Usva International 2010 publishes six superb Finnish short stories.

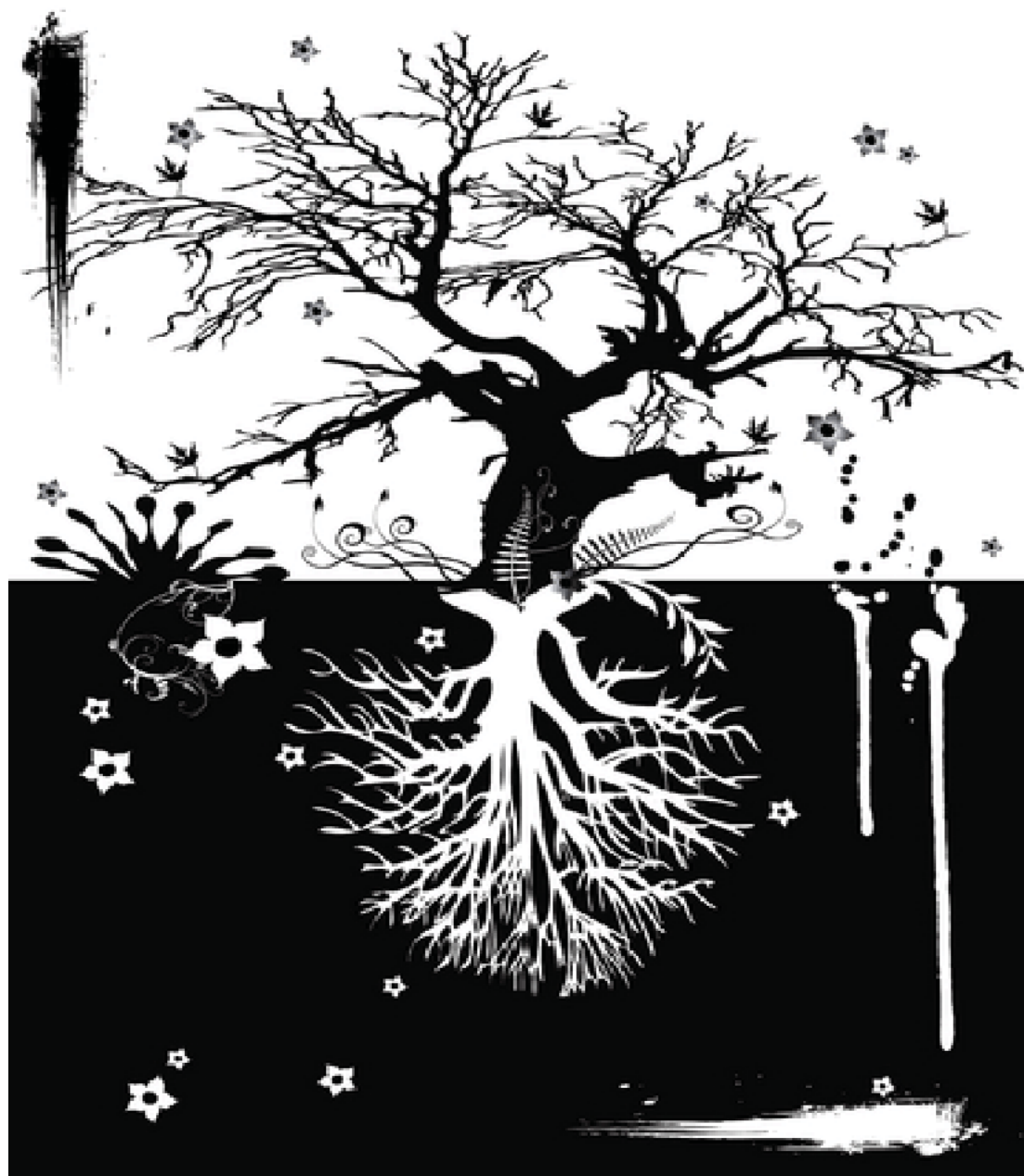
**Katja Salminen's *Boughs, Copses, Bones, Corpses*** combines pagan themes with the modern world. Salminen paints for the reader a forest, where the trees hide secrets. A woman in seclusion in a wilderness cabin for a week meets ancient powers in the woods.

**Marika Riikonen's *The Jewel in the Crown*** twists the familiar fairy tale of Cinderella into an unexpected direction. The focus is now on the prince, and what a prince! **Marketta Niemelä's** effective science fiction piece, *Wagtail*, gives us a startling portrayal of parenthood and the children's' role in a society, where motherhood is granted by agreement.

**Carita Forsgren's *Hairball*** is a warm and humoristic short story of a woman and a drain block, but also of love, which may suddenly surround you.

**Marko Hautala's *The Laughing Doll*** is an intensive short story about a gathering of friends, overshadowed by a malformed figure of their childhoods. **Tomi Jänkälä's *Black Water*** is a lifelike short story of a young heavy metal fan. The story combines perfectly teenage horror, the final moments of childhood as well as the rough and complicated family relationships.





# BOUGHS, CORPSES, BONES, CORPSES

BY KATJA SALMINEN

TRANSLATED BY MARIANNA LEIKOMAA

*Outside the sky drizzles cold water, but the golden rowans make even the rain look more fun. And where the little one is playing, it is warm. A silent child. He is used to the silence and knows how to listen to those, who speak in whispers. Faces and hands flicker around him in the green darkness. They float around him, and all look at him.*

I came to Aljospää for the first time exactly one year ago. My teacher and a good friend of my late father, professor Karas, asked me to visit the place. He was quite old himself, and spending time in the middle of nowhere, far away from the nearest health centre, did not seem sensible anymore, as much as he loved Aljospää. He said that he did not think he could vacation there anymore, but he could not bring himself to sell the cabin, either. He suggested that I'd stay there for a week, warm up the place a bit, and just make sure everything was all right. I had just received a rejection for a grant, and I had no idea what I would do next. A week in the quiet of the wilderness, pondering my life in peace, seemed actually a quite nice idea. I don't think Karas knew it, but after my father's death, he'd become one of the people closest to me. I had not seen my mother, who lived abroad, in years, I had no siblings and I had not been in a relationship since high school.

I was convinced that I would really be quite on my own in the cabin: there were no trails, nature study stations or army training grounds near Aljospää. Deep down, Karas was a hermit, and it was important to him that he never had to receive unexpected guests. That's why I found it a bit confusing that I noticed the presence of a human on the same day I arrived at Aljospää.

I saw smoke. It was actually just a twist of smoke, gray-blue and translucent, a dancing moment against the dark side of a distant hill, like a sophisticated wood sprite. A sudden breeze spread the fragile fan across the forest cover. I did not see any more smoke during the daylight, but it was obvious that someone was very near. As I did not see anything in a while, I thought the person with the fire had been some wanderer, who had made their coffee on a camp fire and then continued on their way.

In September, there is only the number of daylight hours there is. After I had unpacked my things,

and begun to make myself dinner, dusk had already started to thicken around my cabin. The day had been cloudy, and by the time I'd eaten my dinner and opened a bottle of red wine to unwind a bit, moonless darkness had swallowed the entire view, and I did not see anything when I looked out the windows. It felt as though darkness had pressed itself against the windows like a silken, whispering fur. The fire I had built in the great fireplace in the Aljospää cabin had died down, and I did not want to go outside to get more wood. Besides, the cabin was already more than warm enough. A few candles threw the shadows of their flames onto the timber, which had suffered from the cold for a long time. Now they were getting used to the heat by stretching with cracks and bangs - or at least that's how I explained to myself all the strange noises, which constantly kept interrupting the silence of the cabin. I tried to read a bit, but for some reason could not concentrate. Even though I was used to being alone - perhaps a bit more than what was healthy for a young woman - I would have gladly spoken to someone then. You don't always notice the feeling you get when you are close to other people, even if they are in the next room to you, but when there are no people around, you notice a sort of restlessness, even though there is no cause to be restless. Finally I decided it was time to go to bed, and extinguished the candles.

My bunk was close to a window, and as soon as I lay down, I saw a light from the darkness outside. A fire glimmered behind the lake Aljos, right where I had seen smoke earlier that day. The crooked figures of pine trees seemed to move as the fire gleamed on their red trunks. The image of the slow dance of the trees captured me, and I lay with my head propped up by my arms, staring out of the window at the dim glare until I was sure the trees twisted in the cloudy darkness, which erased all distances, to some extremely slow music I could not hear. During the night, I thought I heard speaking many times, whispers and hissing from outside and



under the building, but I had already clung too deep into my dream to even be afraid of the noises.

As I woke the next morning, the first thing in my mind was that I could no longer see the smoke. The forest cover looked very desolated. I did not miss anybody showing up unexpectedly in the yard of Aljospää to wonder about the weather, but I did like the thought of having somebody nearby. Somehow I got to thinking that if I'd yelled really loud, yesterday's camp fire burner would have heard me, even from beyond the lake Aljos. But why would I have yelled? I got out of my bunk and thought about what I should be doing. I had brought a few books with me, along with some writing equipment, in the thought that maybe the wilderness would inspire me to write a diary. Professor's own library in Aljospää was also vast and appropriate for the wilderness. I felt neither like reading nor writing at that moment, however, so I got dressed and went outside.

The Aljospää cabin had been built on a beautiful spot atop of a small hill. A gentle slope led to the black-watered lake Aljos, which size-wise felt more like a pond than a lake to me. It was very deep, or so it was said, and the fish in it had such character that they could never be snared. On the other side of the lake, the terrain rose to continue on as a plain covered by mire spruces and twisted pine trees, all the way to the side of the hill rising up a few kilometers from the cabin. Without thinking about anything, I started

strolling towards the shore.

The water in the lake Aljos did not move. The rickety pier of the cabin looked a bit rotten, but the boat, which was tied to it, seemed perfectly all right. Later on, I thought how come I did not think about how the boat just floated there, looking like somebody had been taking care of it. Shouldn't it rot too, just like the pier, be filled with rain water, sink or be crushed by the ice? It did not occur to me, then. I just thought that since I was offered the opportunity on a platter, I could row myself across the lake Aljos and get to know the landscape beyond the lake. At the same time, I could meet my fire starter and exchange a few polite words, since we happened to be so close to each other. I kicked the boat off the pier and rowed, to the best of my abilities, to the other shore.

A few birches and many rowans grew right on the shore. Beyond the shoreline the woods become more dominated by pines. Because there was almost no undergrowth, the landscape was easy to traverse. The sandy river must have been washed clean of nutrients by sliding water, because even the trees were small and twisted. I trudged up the hill for a while longer, and then I stopped to listen. The forest was quiet and very beautiful. The night clouds had withdrawn, and the wind had calmed down. The bright sunlight of the fall day cast graphic shadows on the bottom of the group of pine trees, and I could even see the individual needles clearly. I drew a breath and yelled: "HEY!"

I got no response. I yelled again. A slight breeze flew through the forest, but that was it. Another moment

passed. I had already thought that whoever had lit the fire last night was not there anymore, but then I heard, right next to me: "Who keeps on shouting here?"

He stood just a few paces behind me. I turned to look at him and smiled in embarrassment. I noticed a few important things right away. First of all, he did not seem in any way strange or dangerous. I'm afraid of certain types of men, and if this man had been one of them, I would have most likely just said a brief hello, and left immediately. That must have seemed a bit odd, to say the least. Now all I thought was "Good. I'm not afraid of him." As though he'd heard my thoughts, the man gave me a wide smile.

He was about my age, thirty or a little under. He was massive: tall and robust, like a tree trunk, and yet somehow a bit baby faced. He pushed his thick, honey and tar colored bush of hair away from this forehead, clearly a bit confused himself too. For a while, we just stood there in silence.

"Johannes," he said then, and thrust out his hand to me. I grabbed it. Its squeeze was warm and a bit sticky from resin.

"The voice of one calling in the desert." I smiled, and he smiled too. "My name is Senja," I said.

"You live in Aljospää, Senja," he stated. "I saw a light there last night."

"I saw your fire," I replied. "I came to see who sneaked around in my grounds."

"That was me. I have a camp a bit further away. Have you bought Aljospää?" he inquired.

"No. Professor Karas is a friend of mine. I needed a little peace and quiet of the wilderness." I waved my hand to indicate that I'd been joking. I had no right to talk about 'my grounds' here.

"Funny it should happen to be just this week, to seek for peace," he laughed, and then explained a bit self-consciously: "I mean, with me being here and all... Karas does know it... I'm here every year at this time of the year."

I shrugged. "Maybe he forgot."

"Oh no, he wouldn't forget." Johannes seemed very sure of the matter. "He just thought that you wouldn't be bothered."

"Anyway," I said, "what do you do here, every year at the same time?"

"I do some mapping here," he said. "For the

wilderness study centre."

"What do you map?" I wasn't really interested anymore. I had seen my fire starter, my curiosity had been satisfied in a way, and the man in the camouflage suit seemed nice. If I had had any underlying irrational fears in my mind, they had now been wiped away and that was all. I did not understand much about wilderness studies, and I always felt uncomfortable when people talked about things I did not understand.

"Mosses and lichen," he said seriously.

"I see. They seem to be good indicators, right?" I remembered reading something like that.

"Well," he grunted, and I noticed that we had begun to climb the gentle slope leading away from the lake. "They measure the condition of the nature well, heavy metal concentrations and things like that, but those measurements can be taken anywhere, even closer to the study centre. I have my own reasons for coming just there. Are you sure Karas did not tell you anything?"

I shook my head. Johannes appeared to be so devoted to his field that he did not understand that not everybody was quite as interested in his moss as he was. "I think Karas studies religious science," I said. "I doubt he understands much about moss."

"Not those, in particular, but others," Johannes said. "I showed this to him, too."

After we had climbed to the peak of the hill, a different type of scenery opened up in front of us: The ground was wet, almost boggy, and overgrown. Dark green mire spruces formed a thick forest, slim as candles. Some deciduous firs grew under the spruces, but none of them seemed to be fully grown. Here and there, sparsely, could be seen the reddish trunks of pine trees withering in the dampness and astringency of the soil.

Johannes started walking in front of me. Amazingly he seemed to find a path there where there was none, and we progressed relatively smoothly. He did not speak and I did not have anything to say, either. I just looked around, letting my city eyes offer me the total difference of a primeval forest: the pine forest below had been warm and sunny, but in the shade of the spruces the light was dark green, refracted many times. The bottommost spruce branches had dried, but still hung brown and needleless, pressing the outermost fingers of its limbs deep into the bright green peat moss. All



around between the trees hung spider webs, which were so dense and white it seemed like some nameless forest dwellers had hung their capes out to dry in the green darkness. Strange colored beard moss reached its strips between the webs almost all the way to the ground. Apart from the noises we were making, the forest was absolutely quiet. Some small birds skipped around in the branches, but they did not sing.

After walking for about half an hour without saying anything, we reached a small clearing. It seemed dry and hard ground, an island in the middle of the bog. Johannes stopped. "This is my camp."

A lean-to had been built on the side of the clearing, and a place for a campfire was in front of it. This is where the smoke I'd seen had risen from. A few stunted pines bordered the clearing, so my memories of pine tree trunks flaring in the glow of the fire turned out to be true.

"It's amazing how far even a small camp fire can be seen in the darkness of these nights," I mentioned.

"And it drew you to it like a butterfly. Coffee?" he asked.

"Why not."

Soon we sat at his lean-to and drank bitter instant coffee.

"I'm from around here," he said. "Many generations since. This place has a particular significance for me."

It might've had. I didn't recognize any local dialect in his speech.

"You do know what *aljos* means, don't you?" he asked?

"Yes. It means something like 'sacred'," I replied. I hadn't sat in professor Karas's lectures for nothing. Johannes seemed pleased. "Great, I knew that the professor wouldn't send here somebody who didn't understand... Did Karas ever tell you why this place is 'sacred?'"

"He didn't mention this place, but sure, there are sacred places everywhere, I think practicing religion used to be pretty localized back then," I replied. Johannes grinned. "Well, there are stone idols and burial grounds and sacrificial groves and gods' homes and paths to the underworld pretty densely around here. However, on this spot grew the *Aljos* tree."

He motioned in front of him, and then I noticed it

too: In the middle of the small clearance, so close to the centre that it might have well been the mathematical centre of the round clearance, was a low elevation. I got up and walked to it. Johannes followed.

"Many have forgotten it. The local vicar, Mikael Freifelt, had it felled in the late 18th century. It was one of the last true *Aljos* trees of the area. I have inherited knowledge of its location from my own family." Johannes bent forward towards the elevation and gently lifted the moss on top of it. A piece of ancient stump was revealed. Actually, a very small piece of it. I looked at the elevation like I'd never looked at it before. It was round, like the tree trunk should be, but its diameter had to be more than two meters.

"It was a huge tree!" I breathed out.

"For Finland, and for this latitude, yes." Johannes answered and his voice contained more than a little of barely concealed pride. "It was a pine of sorts."

I imagined the gargantuan tree, which used to stand where the stump now was, and I could not help feeling shudders myself, either. "Did you say a pine of sorts?"

"I think it wasn't an ordinary species," Johannes said and sat down on the stump. "Although it was no sequoia, either, obviously."

"A sequoia," I repeated.

"So-called redwood," he said with enthusiasm. "The largest trees in Europe have always been spruces, and of course larger than this. The giant trees, which are of the pine family, grow in America. When we talk about those, we need to talk about a whole different size range, but this, too had been pretty impressive."

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"The tradition calls it not only the *Aljos* tree, but also God tree or God pine. The worshippers seem to think it is a pine."

"Do you know anything else about it?" This, naturally, interested me. Instead of mosses which measure the level of pollution, we talked of god trees, and I might have had something to say about that topic, too.

"The vicar Freifelt followed the law, and demolished an object of pagan worship. The axe was quite a powerful conversion tool around here, where there were not only individual sacred trees, but also memorial tree groups and sacrificial groves. Even Agricola, in his listing of gods in his book of Psalms, claimed that Finns worship nature alongside a number of named gods."

Johannes glanced at me as if to verify his information. I don't think the department of nature sciences had the book of Psalms as an exam book.

"Yeah. According to Agricola, the Finns also worshipped "branches, boughs, dead men's bones," I said and tried to pronounce the words in an old-fashioned way, just like Agricola had written them ages ago.

Johannes shrugged. "He was originally German, this Freifelt was. None of the locals, not even a servant of the Christ, would have dared to touch this tree." Johannes sighed. "It required an ignorant outsider."

"Does the tradition say what happened to the vicar?" I immediately asked and Johannes nodded. "Mikael Freifelt died of croup even before the next Hallowmas."

"Served him right."

"Exactly."

We were silent for moment. I kept thinking if I had something in the cabin which covered old Finnish sacrificial trees. I most likely did. I missed Aljospää, and I told this to Johannes. We started trudging away from the god tree's clearing.

We had arrived reverently and quiet, but on the way back, Johannes kept blabbering about trees. I heard how the largest known tree in Europe had been the now fallen Ludwig's Tanne in Bavarian Forest. It had been a 52-meter tall silver fir. Amongst the fir trees around that area, over 40-meter tall spruces had not been uncommon back then, and their gigantism could not be fully explained. However, you just had to see the over 100-meter tall trunks of Californian giant trees, Johannes said, before you actually realized how incredibly big they were, and I had no doubt about that. Johannes had seen them.

"Worshipping trees is nothing incredible, Senja," he said. "The dracaenas in the Canary Islands are thousands of years old, and so are the baobab trees in Cape Verde. A baobab can live up to a thousand years, and there is proof that the sequoia, which the humans call General Sherman, is over 5000 years old. Would it be completely impossible to think that during that time period, a living creature would develop abilities that us, who only live a fraction of that time, can never achieve?"

I laughed at his enthusiasm as gently as I could. "Overly romantic nature scientist! Now I've seen everything."

We had arrived at the shore of the lake Aljos. He walked directly to my boat, even though I had pulled it on the shore so close to a rowan reaching into the water, that it was almost invisible under the branches. He promised he'd visit Aljospää, if he only had the time. "But I only have tomorrow," he said. "After that I have to be elsewhere."

I replied that I might have some new information about the sacred trees, once I'd had the time to examine the bookcase at Aljospää. I did not say it out loud, but I had a feeling I would be really happy to meet him again. That surprised me as well.

As I'd expected, the professor had some books about mythology of nature in his cabin library. Nothing very special, of course, there was no point in keeping the most valuable books in a remote wilderness cabin, but for me, there was enough to get started. As I lay down to sleep, I thought of this Johannes. It would have been much nicer to talk to somebody rather than lay staring at the ceiling, head full of thoughts.

I lay awake long after I'd blown out the candles. The night outside was very different from the previous one: only a few coal black slivers of clouds swam in the sky; the full, except for its thin, shaded edge, moon lit the landscape and polished the tops of the spruces in the plain with a silvery glow. The warm light of Johannes's campfire did not break the dark blue palette of the moonlight. The fire could not be seen anywhere. I decided not to worry and turned my back towards the window. As sleep delicately approached me that night, I thought of trees. Johannes's passion was understandable. The eldest and the most magnificently sized living things had undeniably always been trees, and besides, they seemed often be just where the action was. My father had sometimes read to me from a history book, of which I could not remember anything else except that on an island in the river Narbada, a fig tree grew long time ago. After their long march, 7000 soldiers of Alexander the Great rested in its shade. It had impressed me already as a child. I thought of the Bodhi tree, at the foot of which Siddhartha Gautama attained Enlightenment, and the tree, where three Portuguese



children saw the Holy Mother over and over again. And then there were of course the world trees of various mythologies: Mímameiðr, the tree whose branches held up the Viking heaven, and in the pond next to its foot, the severed head of the giant Mímir spoke words of prophesy... And the two trees, which grew in the middle of Paradise, and which God forbade to eat from... And also the tree, upon which the Christ was crucified... And the beanstalk Jack used to climb up to heaven... I remember thinking of the beanstalk last of all, and then the reflections of the moonlight lulled me to sleep.

As soon as I woke up I glanced at the lake and saw Johannes rowing there. I got dressed and walked to the shore. I waved his hand at me and rowed the boat next to the pier. There were two dark, meaty fish in the bottom of the boat.

"You've borrowed my boat, but I'll forgive you, if you share your catch," I said.

"It's not your boat," he grinned. "Nor Aljospää's. Nobody bought it."

"Mysterious," I smiled.

"Very."

Even though it was clear that somebody responsible

for access to the wilderness had provided the boat, I felt a slight shiver.

He grabbed the fish from the bottom of the boat and climbed onto the pier. It lurched threateningly.

"You've managed to catch a few lake Aljos fish," I noticed. "I was told that they cannot be caught."

"I think these came more or less voluntarily," he replied.

Johannes set up a camp fire on my yard and speared the fish on sticks over the fire.

"I read about those trees last night," I said.

He just nodded.

"It seems that trees were worshipped all over pagan Europe. The German apostle Saint Boniface wrote in his report to the Pope that the Germans sacrifice to trees and springs... Missionaries felled them in abundance."

"Yes. Even the Germans, sensible people," Johannes laughed.

"Apparently absolutely everybody. There's information about the Holy Trees of Europe all the way from Spain, and of course there have been instances outside Europe as well," I said, and taking the risk that he would consider me a cocky lecturer, I continued: "What I found most interesting was the question of what was



being worshipped when people worshipped the trees. Was it specifically that gigantic tree, which stood apart from the rest of the scenery, or someone, which was signified by the tree."

"Such as?" Johannes glanced at me, and fixed the fish into a good position for the fire.

"Like a pixie living in the tree, tree spirit, a snake slithering at the foot of the tree, or the brownies or the dead living under the tree's roots?" I replied. Johannes stood up, looked at me very thoughtfully for a moment, as though he was not thinking so much of my question than whether or not he could reveal the correct answer to me. Then he drew a breath, and said as sure as a born-again priest says his creed: "The dead. Branches, boughs, dead men's bones. Right?"

I shrugged.

"I think it's obvious," Johannes sighed. "The roots of the trees are in the underworld with the dead. The trees hear them whispering."

I did not reply. I got a few plates, glasses, bread and wine from the inside, poured the drink and we sat on the Aljospää porch to wait for the fish to roast. Somehow I did not feel like talking about the whispering dead on a clear autumn day. Especially since I had to spend my nights alone. Johannes glanced at me, and seemed to understand that there was no point going on with the topic. "Oh well, I think I've said too much of that. I'm leaving today, you'll get your peace," he said. "I'm coming back next year again."

"At least your tree will be waiting," I said.

"Yes, it will be waiting."

After we had eaten we said our goodbyes in front of my cabin. He wished me a good vacation, and I wished him good luck in researching the Aljos tree, once he had the time to really get into it.

In the afternoon I chopped some firewood, and read a little bit more about trees. When the evening had fallen I lay in the glow of the fireplace, just enjoying the warmth, wine and silence. I thought that I should've asked Johannes for an address, e-mail or even his last name, but then I figured I could easily find them out by calling one of the near nature research centers once I made my way back to the civilization.

I could even help him in his research, especially since I was now unemployed. Collaborating might very well be nice. Strange enough, I missed him a bit, and I blushed at the thoughts going through my head. As for Aljospää itself, I did not feel quite as uneasy anymore. After having listened to the noises the house made for a few nights, I had got used to it, and the cracking of the timbers just seemed romantic. When the fire in the fireplace had died out and myself - which I'm glad to admit, because it had nothing to do with what was about to happen - a little drunk, I scrambled into bed thinking that I could enjoyably crawl to the bottom of sleep like into a black, warm pocket. It was certainly one of those nights, when everything seemed right. I was tired, a little infatuated and far away from everything.

I did not notice it right after the cabin had got dark. I had already closed my eyes, and saw really an afterimage of what I should have seen right away. I lifted the covers over my eyes. Tiredness and intoxication disappeared instantly

The full moon shone from the sky like a silver medal sewn into blue velvet. The stars around it looked very big and bright. The side of the hill repeated the moonlight in white, as though covered with snow, and in the middle of the plain, between the hill and myself, stood the Aljos tree.

The tree might have reflected the moonlight, but it seemed to glow on its own as well. It was surrounded by a dim, aquamarine corona. It was inconceivably large, because it towered over the other trees and only begun to branch into a huge crown of branches up where the tops of tallest mire spruces just reached.

I got up and, never letting my eyes leave the Aljos tree, got dressed. The vision did not vanish. It did not quiver.

I went to the porch. The night air had fallen below freezing point, and I could see my breath in front of me. The coldness woke me up for good. I was not dreaming, and the God tree was still there, directly under the moon, reaching for its disk from the sky.

I also heard sounds. Swishing sounds, which softly sliced the air. The darkness of the forest around Aljospää seemed to move in flickering pieces. As the moving darkness formed shapes, I saw that the sound was

caused by the beating of the wings of dozens of birds, black as sin. Without chatting to one another, they flew from both sides of my cabin, beaks directed towards the ghost tree.

What should I have done? Should I have got my camera, and photograph the tree from my porch? The thought did cross my mind, but I abandoned the idea immediately: you could not photograph a phantom image anyway. Maybe it should have been wisest to go back inside and to draw the covers over my head, hoping to forget the whole thing, but I could not do that, either. I was overwhelmed by a feeling which is very difficult to explain. A sort of feeling of immediate religiousness. A feeling that something of divine origin was present and tangible. It was obviously clear that I had never experienced anything like that before. Very few people experience something like that in their whole lives. The feeling was close to fear, but without the urge to flee. I actually wanted to embrace my fear, to dive deep into my terror. To return by touching the divine. This is how I try to explain why I begun walking towards the Aljospää pier and the boat tied to it.

The row boat flowed across the lake as though by itself, and I just had to guide a little with my oars, and when the boat softly bumped into the rowan shelter on the other side, I got up as one might get up from a car driven by a driver; not giving a single thought to what would happen to the vehicle after I had left it.

The golden rowan leaves which had fallen to the ground crunched as they had been frozen by the night. I walked over them, all the while keeping my eyes on the light shimmering behind the hill. It was possible that somebody walked with me. I heard vague sounds, unpredictable, sporadically waking murmurs. Shadows of a strange language, which disappeared like a subtle scent, just when I was about to reach them, so that I could never be quite sure if I had heard them at all. I struggled my way up to the top of the hill, and the boggy spruce forest I had seen earlier opened in front of me. The moonlight invaded its shadows in thin silver threads. The shadows were shockingly deep chasms between the trunks. I walked slowly, avoiding their sharp edges.

The whole forest flowed towards the clearing of the God tree. As the large shadows sank deep into the ground as unmoving as megaliths, the small shadows

in the branches and in the moss made short, one-way spurts towards the Aljos tree. The God tree gleamed dim light, but some lights bowed towards it. The sounds, which I had heard amongst the spruces, were running or galloping whispers, hurried, very quiet mumbling. These voices surpassed me many times, disappearing in the same direction with the shadows. I could not get lost. Even though my reasoning told me nothing moved amongst the spruces, the flow towards the Holy tree was so strong, that I do not think I would have had the strength to fight it. I drifted to the tree, just like everybody else.

I did not stop until I reached the God tree clearing. In the spot, where during the day had only been the ages old stump of a big tree, now stood a tree. And what a tree it was! Vicar Mikael Freifelt must have done a favor to the tree by felling it, because it seemed larger than its stump would have indicated. Its trunk seemed to be formed of several thick wood pillars, which were intertwined in a chocking embrace. The twisting branches spread out into a huge crown, which looking from below seemed to catch the moon into a prison of baroquely garlanded bars. The God tree did seem to be a spruce of sorts. Its body was covered here and there by a reddish bark, even though most of the bark had fallen off, and revealed the layer of wood, now grayish with age. Here and there I could see patches of needles in the branches, but mostly the branches were bare, and as decorations, the living jewels of the crown, stretched their wings the pitch black large birds which had flown by me and reached the tree before me.

Step by step, very slowly and hesitatingly I approached the tree. Dark forms flitted on the edges of the clearing, but they did not come into the moon's light. There was no other movement. The Aljos tree seemed to be waiting for me, but it was very patient. The air between us stood still, there was no longer a flow, nor the demand to enter the divine connection of the tree. The God tree had made its presence known to me, but now let me decide on my own whether I wanted to more than see it. If I had had any hypocritical humanism in me, a false pseudo-understanding of the faiths of the previous generations, it was now wiped away. This was something you could not approach with books as your shield. This was the moment, where theology transformed into wrestling with an angel.



I got to the foot of the tree. I reached out my hand and touched the trunk. It seemed to vibrate to the brush of my fingers. I circled the tree. I ran my hand up the tree's bark, lifting my gaze up towards the crown which spread out like a cathedral embroidering intricate ornaments against the moon. I walked right into his arms.

Johannes had stood on the other side of the tree. I cried out, frightened, and a few birds from the crown took flight, just to land back soon. He wrapped his arms around me and whispered quickly: "It's OK, it's only me."

"Johannes, this tree..." I sighed.

"God tree," he said his voice full of reverence.

"Journey tree, Senja."

"You have seen it before," it seemed perfectly clear. He was exited, but not besides himself, as he should have been. Actually, he felt extremely calm holding me there tightly in his arms.

"Of course," he said, "I did say: 'I'm from around here'."

I tried to get away from his grasp, but he pushed me against the trunk. "This is not a nightmare, nothing bad, Senja. Calm down."

His voice was very gentle and warm. "You're not afraid of me, are you? You said you wouldn't be."

"I never said that," I whispered terrified. "I just thought it."

"Nevertheless."

"I was not afraid of the moss researcher, whose name was Johannes. You are not a moss researcher and I don't think your name..."

"Nevertheless," he said again.

Then he kissed me. His mouth was warm and soft, but his tongue was rough and tasted slightly of resin. I kissed him back, because it was not unpleasant, and this man, truth to be told, was not at all unpleasant either. He was just so scary that while my tender and easily distracted senses surrendered, every cell which had an ounce of sense left screamed that I must tear myself free from him, to kick, yell, surprise the freak, when he least expected it. These panicked voices inside me were muffled by the gentle humming of the tree.

He pressed me even closer to Aljos tree. The tree against my back started first feeling warm, then soft.

Slowly, as his hands found their way under my clothes, I felt how we leaned into the God spruce. The soft, resin and decay scented darkness enclosed us, and I could no longer see the moon, the leaf crown or the clearing. Just his face in the dim aura of a light coming from some unknown source.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked? Not everybody gives choices, and I was most certainly at his mercy now.

"Of course you do," he replied uncomfortably.

I sighed and looked around. I was half naked, my unbuttoned shirt had fallen to my waist and my coat hung underneath my shoulders, half way down my arms. It was a cold September night, but the place we were in was pleasantly warm. Its borders, both from the edges and from above, were lost in the darkness, so it was impossible to tell its size. The floor seemed to be covered by a soft, very dark green moss of a species I had never seen before. There might have been something intoxicating in the smell. My mind was much calmer than it should have been.

"We're inside the tree," I said.

"In a manner of speaking. We went through it," he said. "It is very wise, it can build paths."

"Is this your home?" I asked.

"I was raised here," he answered and sat down, pulling me by the hand next to him.

"Who raised you?" I whispered, but I was afraid I already knew the answer.

"Those who live here," he said.

"The dead," I said and he nodded. What living thing could have raised him, anyway? All those, who had know the world of the God trees had died a long, long time ago. I thought of the dark hushing inside the tree, and a very small boy playing alone on this same green moss. Within my mind, I saw faces swaying in the darkness, the dead of the past, who looked after the child's play, and the things they whispered to the child! I thought of the youth, who could travel the tree's paths to anywhere in the world: even to see the Sequoias, if he so chose. And maybe elsewhere, to other worlds. He stroked the back of my hand softly.

"No parent could ever have a warmer heart, more sweetness or wisdom," he whispered, "but it seems you have some difficulties believing it."

I was not sure if I did, though. The dead do not have

the passions of the living, but they have all the time in the world.

"Where are they now?" I asked. The kind, warm darkness surrounded us, but beyond its borders ancient eyes might be watching us.

"They have retreated deeper," he said. "They want to give us some privacy."

Johannes, or whatever his name was, looked at me and waited calmly. We sat there for a while, and then I reached out my hand to him, brushed against his cheek, leaned towards him and kissed him. He kissed back with his resin tasting mouth, and softly pushed me underneath him in the soft moss of the underworld. The scent of living decay was everywhere.

*The boy is just three months old. I gave birth to him in Helsinki, received the maternity package and have taken good care of him until today. When I told Karas I wanted to travel to Aljospää with my child, he just nodded gravely. He knows, and has known this whole time. He arranged it, and he felt it was significant. Maybe he thinks that one day I will tell him something of the world he has only seen glimpses of. Or maybe the sanctity of the God tree has touched him as well, and he has become a true believer. Maybe he did what he did to serve. I am taking my baby to the dead of the tree. I have a feeling that if I do not, they will come and get him anyway. But there is something else, too. I have missed that man.*

*The forest is filled with living shadows, just like the previous time. Full of voices and movement. We come to the clearing of the God tree, and I lift up my child so that he sees the Aljos tree. To my delight, he looks happy and calm. He does not cry, is not afraid of the glowing giant. He smiles and reaches his arms to the tree. The black birds move their wings in the crown, as though the tree was rustling huge, black leaves. I start walking towards the tree, and soon I notice a man walking besides me. He smiles at me and our child. We reach the tree, and I give the boy to him.*

*He takes a breath as though he would like to say something and I shake my head. I bring my child to the tree of the dead. There are no words to say. I look at him and am not afraid of him. No. I have thought this over carefully. I have thought of what to do and what to say. "I brought him to the dead, but they must take me as well," I say quietly and with determination. "You must convince them of that."*

*"I will talk to them," he says and looks happy, just like I dreamed he would. He kisses his child and then me. The tree opens up next to us, like somebody had just pulled aside a thick curtain. He takes my hand and takes me deep into its gravelike darkness. I sleep, and I do not know if I'll wake up.*

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by Katja Salminen 2008

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# JEWEL IN THE CROWN

WRITTEN BY MARIKA RIIKONEN.  
TRANSLATED BY EMMI ITÄRANTA.

Dear diary. Royal realms and their ancient customs be damned. Make no mistake: money and a decent-sized treasure chamber have made a lot of things possible, my delightful collecting hobby included, but the current situation is most disagreeable. In fact, or more accurately, it is awkward. This afternoon I was dipped in royal piss up to my neck hair.

I was tending to my collection in the North Tower, when Poppa and the Grand-duke, that stuffy old miser, appeared out of nowhere. I was brushing a North-Italian high-heeled velvet shoe with chamois leather and felt my lower lip beginning to moisten in an earth-shattering manner, when the oldsters barked at the door. I sucked my lip clear of the drool foam, so Daddy wouldn't get it into his head to create a timetable of fresh extracurricular outdoor activities for me. I had my fun-filled (!) share of those back in the days of hawk-eyed governesses.

"My son," my father began and cleared his throat again. That sounded ominous. I think the last time his tone was similar and equally coughy was when Father nearly caught me grabbing a kitchen maid by the ankle in the South Tower. But because Daddy couldn't prove anything, resolving the matter was left to the level of throat-clearing. The damsel hobbled off the very same day (wearing only one clog). Sweetheart was so charmed by my ability to brush the skin of her feet with the tips of my moustache that she agreed to take off without further ado. She probably thought I would rush into the night after her, but naturally I stayed in my chamber and claimed that the harlot had eloped with the cousin of the swineherd of the mansion. You know those kitchen girls, immoral creatures.

"Jacobert, my dear godson," croaked the Grand-duke. Too much whiskey and a dangerous fondness

for smoking rosemary and birch leaves with his tobacco have begun to take their toll.

Because the old geezers had trouble getting to the point, I'm going to fast-forward a bit: they want to bore me. The wizened ones think I'm old enough to start taking responsibility for my father's vast realm. To be more specific, to start riding around with a crown on my head and learning the first names of the tenants, so they will like me when I'm shoved onto the throne sometime soon. "Hullo, Manfred, how're the oats growing?" and along those lines. To make it worse, the romantic dullards expressed in coy terms that it was about time for me to marry some wench. Or rather "meet the girl of my dreams, fall in love and sail into the haven of marriage".

Already?! Why are they pestering me? Has Father's gout got worse? I thought I'd have at least another five years without the constant company of some whiny, neurotic princess. Hell, even the Crown Prince of that mini state was allowed to turn forty in peace before they got him chained to the throne for any village moron to gawk at.

Wriggling and letting out suffocation noises was no good. The traditional courting ball will be thrown next week. I can't take this, now I have to shuffle around the music hall every morning until then, guided by my mother's chamber mistress, and the old bag stinks of sweat. Then all "marriage-age maidens" will be dragged here for three evenings for me to bounce around with. On the last night I have to decide who is the least evil. If I'm in real luck, there will be a chick who is up to some fun in the sweaty sheets of the tower chamber.

Perhaps someone will have clef-shaped kitten heels or turquoise brocade strap sandalettes? Yum. My lower lip is moistening again and my silk pants are getting tight.





Ah, diary, howdy-do, here we are again. The first night of conga is over, am feeling somewhat run-down and reckless, and one delicious, drool-worthy doll (and her mother) had to be smuggled out of the castle via the balcony.

In the early evening I peeped into the ballroom and saw thousands of enthusiastically blushing little birdies, wannabe-brides. And keeping company and ogling around were large, flushed pheasants, their mamas. I drank generous glasses of pineapple punch for my strength and for a while saw those thousands of dames in triplicate. They all had too-long skirts and so obviously little experience of anything worth experiencing that I suspected just a chivalrous running of a finger along a leg would be enough to make any one of them scream.

I was right. Thank heavens for adhesive tape.

But before I nabbed a random bumpkin virgin – white pumps with a strass buckle, yawn – for a visit to my special room (and knocked her momma out with a good shot of cinnamon grappa) I saw something rather interesting. Daddy’s bashes have something to them after all.

After I had boogied with at least a hundred aspiring brides, all of them wheezy of breath and constantly stepping on my toes, a late bird fluttered into the

ballroom. I stopped and stared with my jaw all the way to my chest. The last time this happened was in Madame Gloria’s salon, when one of her girls lifted her skirts, revealing purple mid-thigh plush boots and no pants of any sort. That same night one chick had already complimented the “dirty glint” in my eyes.

But when this late-to-the-party dish walked along the corridor, I caught a glimpse of a *transparent shoe* under her silvery skirts! On top of that, the popsy arrived without her mother, all by herself! The sock in my pants nearly tumbled to the floor.

I left my dame du jour in the bosom of her bearer and danced with the late lady all night long. Or to be more accurate, until she threw a tantrum around midnight, tore herself from my embrace – which had undeniably grown quite tight and moist – and trotted off, shoes and all. No idea of the name of the shoe babe or anything. Her face was decent, as far as I remember. Hard to say anything about the voice because she didn’t speak. I think I forgot to greet her. But surely that is no reason to whisk off from the arms of the heart of the party?

I had to comfort myself, since the house was full of goods. As the old proverb goes, it would be insane not to have a bite when the table is tottering under the weight of cakes.

Dear diary. Pissed off. So seriously that last night I couldn't even get excited by the idea of an encore pair dance number in the darkness of my princely chamber. I took off right after midnight and beat myself to sleep.

The same shoe chick made another appearance on night number two. She posed in a purple and cream gown, but I recognized her by the intoxicating click-clacking of the heels. And by the fact that she was late. The girl made a rather showy entrée, what's not to love about clicking unhurriedly along a wide, soldier-lined lane when the rest of the folks are already sweating in the ballroom.

I rushed to clutch her and didn't let anyone else even come near. The privileges of a Crown Prince. Girlfriend accommodated to my tango drops quite nicely, but on the minus side she jolted a bit when I squeezed. Thrillingly, though, she didn't say anything. I managed to drop the rose attached to the front of her dress and bowed down to pick it up right at her feet. The darn shoes are made of glass! Matte, polished glass which feels slightly coarse when you run your finger along it. Dayumn.

The chick got shifty when I squatted on the floor for a while, but I was so stirred I couldn't quite get up in plain sight right away. She had rather juicy-looking legs, too, so I had to go through the safety phrases three times: "Birkenstock, marriage, cabbage casserole, moustached female, thermal underwear, copper coin." That took care of it.

As I was crouching, the clock began to strike twelve, and the chick repeated her whim from yesterday. Turned on her heels before I had time to get up, the hems swung and the slippers began to clink. I couldn't even shout after her, because I wasn't sure of the name she had told me. Unfortunately I had inquired while I was fiddling in her skirts. Cindy? Diorella? Dahlia? Amalia?

It wasn't very royal to scramble to my feet under the scrutiny of the whole ballroom, and to be left staring with a wet lower lip as the dame floated out of the door. I was able to discern the dumbfounded face of the Grand-duke among the crowd. Where is the royal etiquette, where the feminine titter and the reflex to fall down under the good old Prince? I ran off to the

tower right away.

I need to think of something for the final evening. I will brush her into unconsciousness. I must have those shoes. The black velvet cushion in the North Tower is screaming to have them resting on its mound.

Ah, diary. Hear this.

Yesterday was the last evening of the courting jamboree. Same old. Honey and mint punch. I tilted all kinds of birds in my arms – one of them was on the ugly side, but strangely enough gave a refreshingly kinky impression, told me she has her stepsister polish all her shoes and everything in order to spare her nails – until again an hour after the party started, the doors flung open and Miss Glassheels sailed into the house.

This time she wore a blueish dress. But still those extraordinary shoes, if my ears were not mistaken. I wouldn't let go either, if I could lay my hands on something like that. Or, what a shiver-inducing thought, perhaps she has several pairs! Maybe the footwear really had a hint of blue to them today? The face of the lady still acceptable and the shape excellent. Really excellent. Birkenstock, marriage, cabbage casserole...

I took hold and held on – for as long as I could. I must have nearly blacked out because of the heel-clacking and the curves of the lady, because when she wrenched herself off again at midnight, my hands slipped embarrassingly easily. There she went again. This time I scooted after her. I had set a trap.

Click-clack-click-clack-click-clack – smack – click-splat-click-splat-click-splat. The maiden went limping halfway down the stairs, but still managed to dart off through the arch gate and vanish. The guards combed the area, but only saw some vagabond trollop with her pet mice.

On the marble stairs glimmered a perfect, beautiful, shiny left shoe, yes, with a hint of blue, matte, magnificent, drool-worthy. This prince will not be diddled three times! Ha ha! I had told the Royal Gardener to sweep some tar on the stairs slightly before twelve o'clock, and it was so worth it. One shoe is better than no shoe at all. But because I want all of those glass shoes and as I need to marry anyway, I will find that

chick.

I told Daddy today that my chosen betrothed bride shall be (oh, the awkwardness of these traditional wordings) the girl who lost her shoe yesterday. The Grand-duke grumbled about manners when he realised I was talking about the candidate who had dashed away, but the ancestors couldn't argue that I was not granting my favour to this particular dame last night. Hence, "in love". (Sandra? Dinah? Relena?) Thus, as we speak, a lackey is out in the town looking for the owner of the shoe. Unfortunately I had to give him Shiny Blue to carry so he wouldn't bring back the wrong woman. I arranged little tests to select a servant without grabby hands.

Ohh, the anxiety of anticipation. I can't even concentrate on fingering the silk boots that used to belong to the Marchioness and Aunt Admara, let alone on groping the female population of the castle in my chamber.

About bloody time they got here.

Ahh, diary!  
Found it! Found them! There are three new velvet cushions in the North Tower, and as I look at them, brush them and use them I am literally bursting with joy.

The dame is in her chamber. There was some kerfuffle at her place, a number of broads who had

attended my party happened to live there, and one of them apparently even sliced off a toe or something. That is quite wild, I guess there should be royal spouses on offer more often, so we'd get some action in this backwater village. Good thing the shoe wasn't shattered! If it had been, I'd have hopped on my horse and galloped to the house to do some more slicing on the shoe-breaker.

Ooh. Makes me tremble.

The shoe chick is currently being groomed and dressed to be a bride. The wedding is this afternoon. I hear the miss was delighted to leave home. Have been told she was orphaned or something and used to live in a fireplace. The only one from her family to attend the wedding is apparently a godmother she has met a grand total of three times. Or perhaps I misunderstood something.

Never mind.

Strangely, I'm already looking forward to the joys of married life. A wife should provide some happiness for a week or two.

Fare ye well for a moment, my diary and shoe collection. Wait a while, sweet jewels in my crown, Bertie boy is off to wed and will be back in no time at all. Smooch.

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# WAGTAIL

BY MARKETTA NIEMELÄ

TRANSLATED BY LIISA RANTALAIHO

That Friday evening I hadn't even noticed the hours, working overtime, and it was quite late when I finally parked my ve'cle by the kindergarten gate. I ought to have picked up my daughter long ago, and that was obvious from the nurse's face as she led the little plaited six-year old child to the gate.

– But that's not Anne, I told the nurse.

– I'm sorry, she said. – Children were scarce today. Anne was reserved for another family. You may have this one instead. You may call her Anne if you wish.

I gathered the girl still lacked a maternity contract, for one reason or another. However, I would not call her Anne, I called her Violet. Her blue eyes were violet-tinted, and violet was her favourite colour. This much I found out, as I tried to chat with her in the ve'cle, sitting opposite each other on the way home. What a nice coincidence that Anne preferred violet, too. I think Violet felt at home in her room as soon as I showed it to her. She lay down obediently under the lavender quilt to wait for sleep.

The next morning I woke up into silence. A bit frightened, I got up and stepped quickly to the door of Violet's room. Dressed in her nightie, the girl sat on her knees upon the rug; her hands were stretched out and her fingers were criss-crossing between the long threads of the rug. The groping hands patted, pawed and twiddled the colourful tuft. To me it looked like two wagtails on grass, seeking treasures. Completely concentrated, Violet kept softly whispering to herself.

The kindergarten evidently had no woolly rugs.

– Violet! I said.

The chirping stopped and the girl turned to me, the slender shoulders stiffened, and frightened, the hands rose up from the rug. The eyes were big and violet blue.

– Didn't you notice that the kiddie programmes are pre-set on the viz? You are welcome to watch them in the mornings; my viz will start up when you sit down in front of it. Or couldn't you get it to open, didn't it obey you?

Violet gave a slight nod and hid her hands under the nightie's hem.

– Come on, I said. – Let's go and have breakfast.

Later on, we watched the viz together. I surfed impatiently from one channel to the next one and kept looking for something Violet would like, too, since she didn't at all care about the same kiddie programmes as Anne. I had to laugh alone by myself while Violet sat mute by my side, not even giggling once. At last I got bored and let her get up from the couch. After wandering around the room for a while, studying its shelves, nooks and crannies, I noticed she had stopped by the big living room window. I went to her.

On the lush grass in the shade of a deep green fig-tree my pride was grazing, the okapi, a funny looking crossbreed of horse and zebra. The big ears flapped lazily, the chocolate brown flanks rose and fell while the okapi was stretching its graceful head, pulling twigs from the tree, the black-and-white striped legs clattered when the animal wandered around nibbling fallen leaves from the ground. Whitethroats sang, hidden in



the shrubbery, and the okapi blew bits of twigs from its mouth, stealing sideways glances at us.

Absolutely fascinated, Violet was breathing fast, lifting and bending her arms as if she were patting the okapi, catching the falling fig leaves, coaxing the whitethroat to come sit and sing its trills on her finger.

I admired my little savannah garden with her for a moment but soon returned to the viz. During a commercial break I realized the girl was still standing by the window. Now she was jumping up and down and her hands were flapping as if she were trying to fly. The okapi had lifted its head high and stared at her, ears shaking nervously. What was the girl trying to do, to scare or to amuse the animal?

– Violet! I said, a bit angry now. – Come here and watch the viz!

Violet didn't even glance at me, but the hands flew to the skirt hem, the heels settled down and the small fists started squeezing the fabric. I stood up, went quickly to Violet and lifted her up in my arms. Violet went rigid, stretched out violently, hit her head on my chin

and screamed shrilly. I let her down at once. The okapi cantered off and the flock of whitethroats fled into the shrubbery and twittered anxiously.

What a terrible, peculiar child! Not at all like Anne. I didn't know what to do, so I called the kindergarten.

– Just leave her alone, the nurse on call advised. – She usually eats well, and she'll surely watch the viz, too, at some point. She's not actually a bad child at all. I'm sorry for the last moment switch, but please remember that the possibility is included in our contract.

Silently I wondered what an actually bad child would be like, but I accepted the advice politely. I left Violet to stand by the window and went on watching the viz myself. Slowly, the okapi returned under the window, the whitethroats calmed down and flitted about the shrubbery from twig to twig.

And by the window Violet stayed happily almost the whole weekend. Twice I managed to get her outside, but she didn't want to go either to toy stores or to the playground, she just wanted to walk around in the park. That was weird, too. Violet paced in a funny way, she



almost danced, bounced unevenly, and her way twisted here and there, the hands whisking aside in their own rhythm. Her movements were restless but charming, like a drunken ballerina's. Or perhaps those of a little, dreaming wagtail.

The rest of the time I mostly left her alone. I watched all the best viz series just by myself, so hours went by and I didn't even remember she was there.

I was happy to return her to the kindergarten on Monday morning, and even happier when I got back from work in the evening and had my own Anne back again. I lifted her into the ve'cle, she felt fat and heavy, and I loved listening to her endless lively chatter. At home, Anne immediately rushed to open the viz, then galloped into the kitchen; she ate greedily and talked incessantly, even when she had food in her mouth. She filled the whole house with her shrill voice, ran from room to room and left a trail of breadcrumbs after herself.

As the kitchen started to sweep up, I suddenly thought of Violet, the little wagtail. The silent wagtail. Why hadn't she even wanted to watch the viz? That's what we did with Anne, we always watched all the series and movies, and had such fun together. I felt incredibly lucky for having Anne as my daughter. I'd chosen my child good and proper.

**I**t was months later when I again arrived late on a Friday evening to the kindergarten gate. The nurse waited with a child by her side, looking embarrassed. I recognized the little plait-head immediately. Violet was even thinner than before, she hang from the nurse's hand, head drooping. Only her hands were alive, the fingers rose and fell rapidly, the free hand drawing anxious figures in the air. The wagtail was fluttering in a trap.

– Could you please, the nurse started.

I opened my mouth.

– We really have nothing else just now, the nurse said. – Isn't it nice to have someone, at least? And didn't she do all right last time?

Soundlessly, I cursed my second-grade maternity contract and took Violet's hand. She curled her small fist softly inside mine, as into a nest, and followed me to the ve'cle.

The nurse was right: she was better than nothing. I felt horrified even trying to imagine a weekend or just one evening without a child. I hadn't forgotten the mouldy years of being alone and childless, before Anne. I gave full credit to the public child production–and–booking system which made it possible to combine career and motherhood, but personally, I still couldn't afford the better kind of contract which would allow me always to get Anne for myself. Children were expensive, your own ones sheer luxury.

On our way home in the ve'cle, Violet was no more talkative than last time. Perhaps she didn't even recognize me at first, poor little bird. I supposed she was one of those kids who for some strange invisible reason are always left over, the last alternative who circulate from one family to another, never getting a mother of their own. Or perhaps nobody ever wanted her; perhaps she only rarely got out of the kindergarten to a home at all. What was it like to spend years in the kindergarten? To watch the others vanish into their homes in the evenings and weekends, returning in the mornings laughing, replete with the love of their mothers. One had to pay for children and loved them for all the money's worth. Did Violet wonder: why the others, why not she? Was that why she was like this?

I myself had been chosen when I was so small I couldn't even remember that far, the time before mother. I suppose I felt sorry for Violet, for I tried to cheer her up.

– You may watch the window again, and the backyard. Remember, there's the okapi and...

Violet lifted her head, the purple violet in her eyes deepened and the narrow face lightened. Did she actually smile? So I kept on with my monologue until we got home.

At home, Violet waited patiently while I gave her supper in the kitchen; she sat quietly though her fingers were mussing the skirt hem all crumpled. For once, I left the viz off and we both ate together by the table. Violet watched me attentively, her head aside, asked for the same kind of sandwiches I was eating and took small bites in the same rate with me. I felt like laughing and Violet smiled, the second time already in the same evening. I wiped a breadcrumb off her mouth and felt like a real mother.

Perhaps she wasn't so impossible, after all, the little hatchling. She just needed a bit of care and lots of food,



this petite girl child. Somebody ought to take care of her. A thought of two daughters came to my mind, which was completely absurd. I couldn't afford that, not possibly. On the other hand, what if...? To control any further flights of thought I said: – Would you like to go and watch the backyard? And that's all it took; Violet jumped up and flew to the living room.

Amused, I followed her and there she stood, in the very same place as before. She kept looking at the backyard and rocked on her place, she started to jump up and down in front of the window and lifted her arms; soon they were flitting in the air in wide curves and waves. A wagtail's spring flight! The white-throats in the backyard warbled loudly, they darted to and fro in front of the window and Violet answered, warbling. She rose up on her toes, and it looked like she actually might levitate, so delicate she was, airy, as if she had nothing but wind under her skin.

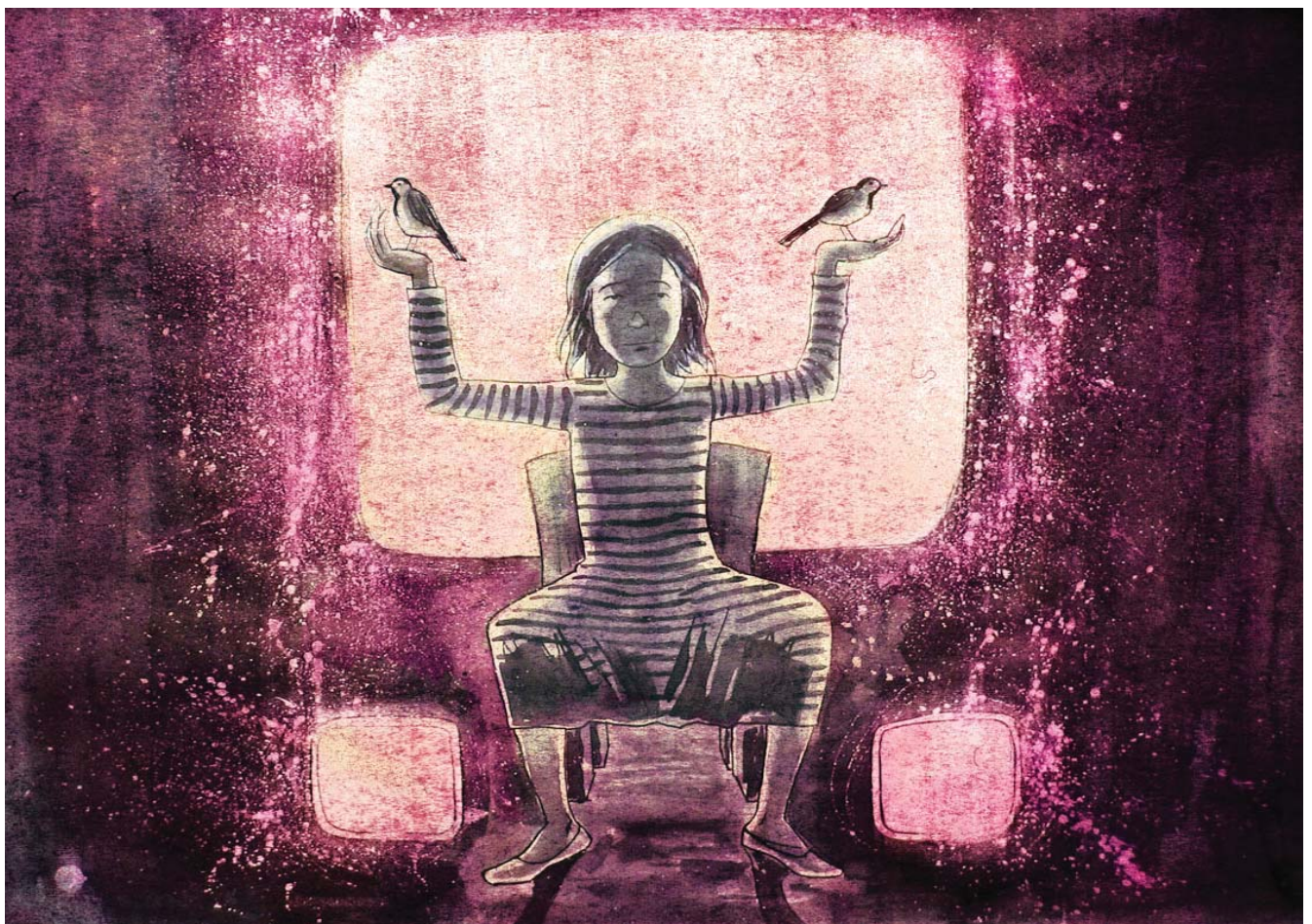
Suddenly, a whitethroat flew so close to the window that I heard its wing brush the window glass. Violet reached out after the bird. The whitethroats were making such a noise that my ears hurt. This wasn't normal any longer, had a virus invaded the AI? All of a sudden I got an idea, and had to say it quite loud.

– Would you like to paint the backyard yourself?

I regretted immediately. I'd used several weekends to plan, process and finish the backyard, the okapi alone had taken two whole days. Every single feather of a whitethroat had been created and polished with the uttermost care. Besides, the window's immemory was almost full, I'd have to delete several older paintings to save this beauty with its magnificent details.

Violet settled on her heels, lowered her hands and turned to me, the beautiful violet eyes in open amazement. I saw she didn't understand what I meant. But what's said was said – all pedagogical guides emphasize that once you give a promise to a child, it should never be broken, even if this child wasn't my own. So I nodded and said, though Violet hardly heard me for all the warbling: – Look, I'll show you!

I drew the curtain aside and opened the panel behind. I turned a few switches, though it pricked me to the heart when my first three creations were destroyed. I continued with the window painting programme and copied my gorgeous savannah backyard in the immemory. Violet stood quite close to me, her hands back at the skirt hem, the little birds hiding in a bush. Soon they'd get to fly again! The girl would get to paint



whatever kind of backyard she wished.

The restless flock of whitethroats bobbed up and down in front of the window and their clatter sounded like a war march. One of them seemed to fly directly at the window. Violet lifted her arm and opened her hand as if to catch the virtual creature.

I erased the backyard. The window flashed and cleared out to a grey wall of concrete. The sudden silence hummed in my ears.

Violet shrieked.

I turned to look, and Violet started screaming. She jumped against the window and scratched at it, she beat the glass with her head as if intending to peck her way through it. I did not comprehend what was going on, but Violet was pecking her nose bloody against the glass, she kept hammering at my expensive virtual window, trying to shatter it with her head, and I had to catch hold of her. I squeezed her in my arms and she shrieked. She wrenched herself free from me and darted to the panel, she hit her hands to the controls, beat at the keys and switches, she scraped and tore with her fingernails so that pieces of plastic flew around. Finally, she banged her head against the panel. And once more. The immemory fell to the floor, and so did Violet.

The wagtail fell from the twig, fell down with her wings and feathers, head first. I stood petrified.

Violet did not get up any more. They came from the kindergarten and took her, very quickly, once I was able to call them. It felt difficult, talking with the nurse, something thickened behind my cheekbones

so that my tongue felt thick and my eyes watered. They offered me Anne for the rest of the weekend; they'd even have fetched her out from her family though that was exceptional. I refused.

I let the water leak from my eyes and asked the living room to clean up slowly, so that I saw every trace and damage from Violet's furious wing strokes covered and swept off. The living room couldn't fix the immemory. The backyard was gone, gone with the okapi, the fig trees, the flock of whitethroats. With its little wagtail.

When everything was otherwise as before, I opened the viz, and closed it immediately again. I got into my ve'cle and let it drive me along dark tunnels to the park. The bright white artificial sun illuminated the verdant shrubs and numerous plantings, the birds trilled stunningly. Perhaps there was a wagtail among them singing, too, I didn't know, and would even Violet have recognized it? The last real bird had died out long ago.

Underneath all the noise I tried to hear the echo of the wagtail, and water leaked off my eyes again, the waves rose again and again, they shook me until I finally calmed down from sheer exhaustion.

As soon as it was Monday, I sold my viz and my watching permit, both my own and Anne's, and signed a first-grade contract on Anne.

*"Västäräkki" © by Marketta Niemelä 2008*

*Translated © by Liisa Rantalaiho 2009*



# HAIRBALL

## CARITA FORSGREN

TRANSLATED BY ANNA VOLMARI  
AND J. ROBERT TUPASELA

That morning, something stank. I noticed a slight odor as soon as I woke up. In the kitchen, it mingled with the aroma of fresh coffee.

“What’s that smell?” I asked my roommate Rosa (I sometimes wondered why her parents had given their daughter the kind of name you give a cow. On the other hand Rosa did remind me a bit of a cow, with her large eyes and long lashes, round belly, and breasts that hung like udders).

Rosa sipped her coffee. She was already fully dressed, as usual, with her hair and makeup done, and ready to go.

“Check the bathroom. Then you’ll know.”

“The drain?”

Rosa nodded her head, finished her coffee, and got up as soon as I sat down.

“You get to clean it.”

“Why me?”

“Because it’s your long hair that’s clogging it,” Rosa said flatly and ruffled her own one-inch crop.

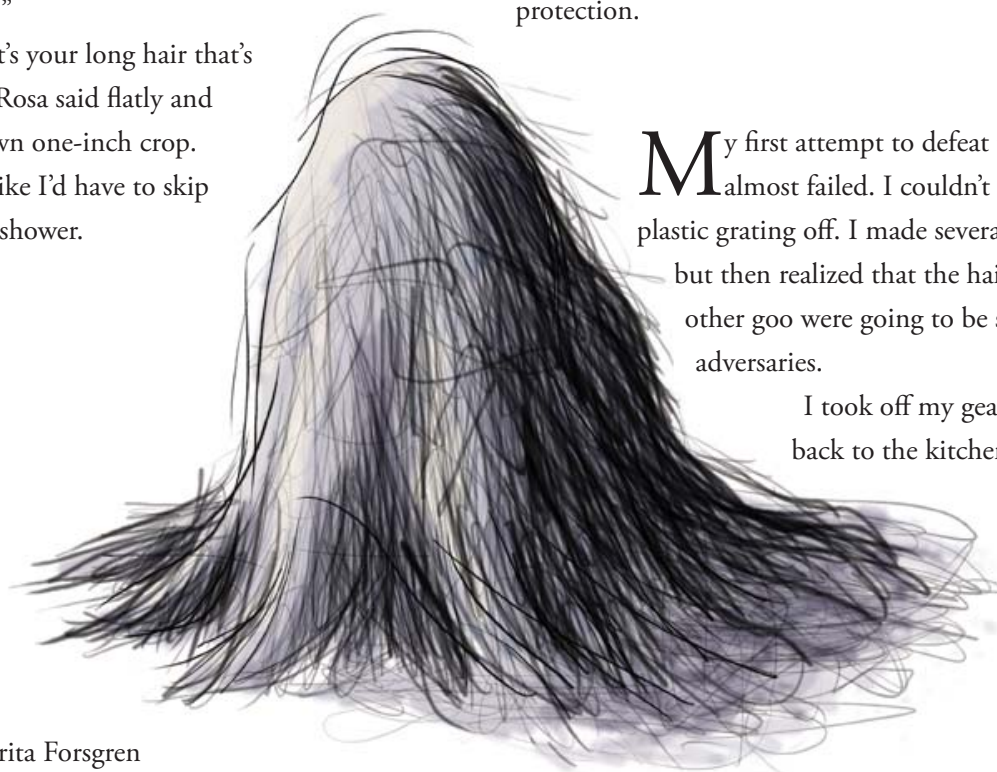
It looked like I’d have to skip my morning shower.

After finishing my coffee, I took a tentative step into the bathroom. I soon had to retreat and return with reinforcements – an old dish brush, a bottle of chemical toilet cleaner (the label claimed it was groundwater-friendly, but I had my doubts), rubber flip-flops, a flashlight, plastic bags, a plastic bucket, and a done-in toothbrush. The shower drain had been a bit clogged for weeks, but now the floor had flooded.

I took off my socks and rolled up the legs of my sweat pants, put on my flip-flops and long yellow rubber gloves, and was all geared up for combat. The stench tried its best to chase me away, but in vain. I was determined to win the battle, even if it rose to the epic dimensions of the Iliad or the Kalevala. A radioactive sign was printed on the packaging of the rubber gloves, which presumably meant that they could even handle nuclear waste. I hoped that they would be enough protection.

My first attempt to defeat the drain almost failed. I couldn’t even get the plastic grating off. I made several attempts, but then realized that the hair and other goo were going to be stubborn adversaries.

I took off my gear and went back to the kitchen. I opened





the flatware drawer and picked out a blunt, fairly worn-out knife, which might have belonged to Rosa. Back in the bathroom, I crammed the knife deep between the gaps in the grating and was able to use it as a lever. The grating came up slowly, inch by inch. I could now see that the grating was firmly in the grip of a black four-inch-thick mass of gunk-encrusted hair. To unclog the drain, I would have to pull it all out. By now, the smell had become like another person in the room. I had an image of it dancing around me in a shiny seventies disco outfit and John Travolta hair.

After a moment's consideration, I grabbed the long, black glob of hair with my atomic rubber gloves and began to pull. I expected it to give, but it was surprisingly tough. It wasn't easy, but I finally managed to pull it up, further and further, out of the darkness of the drain toward daylight and air. More and more kept coming out. I expected it to become thinner and sparser, but it only seemed to grow thicker and denser. Could all of this really be my hair? Some other garbage floating in the drain pipe must have been caught up in it as well.

How much did I pull out before I was done? Several yards, or at least that's how I felt. When I reached the end, I almost tumbled backwards onto the damp floor. All I needed to do now was to stuff the gunk inside a plastic bag and take it outside to the trash can. It lay in a pile on the bathroom tiles, reminding me of road-kill that had festered on the highway so long that it was impossible to tell what it had once been.

I poked the lump carefully with the handle of the dish brush. I was startled to notice that it quivered at the touch. I poked it a second time. The lump shrank back. After a third poke, it bunched up into a round mass. I opened the duck-shaped bottle of toilet cleaner and began to pour the green liquid into the drain, making sure not to turn my back on my new visitor. I wondered what would happen if I poured some of the poison on the hairball. I decided not to try. God knows how it would have reacted.

When I had scrubbed the drain clean enough, I began to detach the last hairs that were still joining the hairball to the drain grating. I thought that something might happen when I removed the last strand of hair,

but I was wrong. I decided to make my move. I grabbed the hairball with both hands and stuffed it into a plastic bag, which I then closed with a tight knot. The hairball barely fit inside the bag.

As I was carrying the bag out to the garbage shed, it felt as though the contents of the bag were wriggling a little. By then, it was 9:30 a.m. In an hour, I had to be at a lecture. I went back inside, got dressed, and left. By the time I was on the bus, I barely remembered my morning efforts. People are good at blocking out all kinds of unpleasant memories. Self-deception is the sweetest deception of them all.

In the evening, Rosa and I were relaxing by watching some silly talent contest on TV, trying to forget that we'd ever had brain cells. The door bell rang.

"You expecting someone?" Rosa asked.

"My friends call or text before they come," I said.

That could only mean one thing. Rosa and I had a plan for this situation. I turned off the TV and Rosa threw a floral tablecloth and some books on it. I went to open the door.

But it wasn't the television license inspector. It was the hair creature waiting outside the door. Or it didn't exactly wait so much as it slipped silently inside, as if returning home. Technically, it was.

"Who was it?" Rosa called from the living room.

"Some practical joker," I answered.

"With a stink bomb?" Rosa asked, sniffing the air.

I was afraid of what Rosa would say if she saw our guest, but it stole quickly into the bathroom through the half-open door. I couldn't let Rosa see it.

I found the hairball crouching behind the washing machine. I could just barely make out its dark mass in the beam of the flashlight.

"Stay there," I whispered to it, not giving a thought as to whether it understood speech or not. "I'll get you something to eat as soon as Rosa's gone to bed."

I'd already gone to bed myself, when I remembered the hairball and my promise to it. I poured a drop of milk into a bowl and left it in front of the washing machine. If Rosa asked about the bowl in the morning, I'd say that I thought the machine was leaking.



A surprise awaited me in the morning. The hairball sat by the kitchen table drinking the coffee Rosa had made. I'm not sure whether it could be called drinking, though. Its top end stretched into something like an elephant trunk, which it then dipped into the coffee and started sucking. Sure, it still reeked, but its aroma was less pungent than yesterday. Or was it just that I'd gotten used to it?

The hairball nodded to me, as though in greeting. Rosa noticed and asked,

"So, you know something about that?"

I told Rosa the truth, because lying or holding back would probably have been useless at this point. Rosa let out a sigh.

"You planning to keep it?"

"It's not exactly mine," I said uneasily. The hairball seemed to be following our conversation.

"I guess it can stay," Rosa said at length. "As long as it's housetrained and sleeps in your room. And whatever

it eats comes out of your pocket!"

I shrugged my shoulders as a sign of consent. I didn't even know what the hairball ate. Maybe I could use it as a garbage disposal?

In the following weeks, I noticed that our guest wouldn't be useful as a garbage disposal. It liked to eat the same food as humans, sitting by the table, maneuvering a spoon as well as any two-year-old. It had started to grow, probably due to nutritious food. One time, I came home earlier than usual and caught it in front of a mirror trying out a more human posture. It could change its shape, and after a couple of day's practice, had been able to grow itself arm- and leg-like protrusions and learned how to use them.

At first, Rosa acted coldly towards the hairball. She'd wrinkle her nose at its smell and avoid sitting in the same room with it. I admit, I did the same. It spent its

nights in my room, in the warm nook between the desk, wall, and radiator. I didn't know whether it could sleep. One night I woke up to a stench more pungent than usual, and found that the hairball had climbed into bed and curled up next to me. I shoved it onto the floor without hesitation.

The following night, the hairball tried to climb into my bed again, and again I kicked it off. The same took place two more times. Finally I grabbed the creature and threw it against the wall as hard as I could. It left a wet mark next to a poster of a boyband singer. I struck the hairball a few more times with the handle of my badminton racket, until it finally understood to crawl out of my room.

The next morning, I was surprised to be up before Rosa, and on my way to the toilet, I saw the hairball sneak out of Rosa's room. While the creature was brewing coffee, I knocked cautiously on Rosa's door, steeling myself for my roommate's inevitable fury.

But Rosa's reaction wasn't what I'd expected. She came to the door sleepy-eyed and yawning.

"I'm so sorry," I began. "I threw it out of my room last night and..."

"It's okay," Rosa said with a languid smile. "The creature's alright, actually. You've just got to get to know it first."

The hairball slept in Rosa's room for the next month. One day, when Rosa had a big exam, I told the hairball that I was no longer mad at it.

"If you want, you can come back to my room," I said. "You can even sleep next to me, if you don't snore or smell too much."

Rosa didn't speak to me for a week after that.

My relationship with the hairball was purely platonic, until one night I dreamed that I was embracing my ex-boyfriend. When I woke up, I realized I was hugging the hairball, and it was hugging me back. That's when I really got furious.

I kicked the creature onto the floor and started smacking it with the racket. It seemed as if its shape gave way to each blow and that it also expanded a bit. Each time I struck it, it looked more human. I threw aside the badminton racket and started punching it with closed fists, then switched to slapping it. I ended up stroking it with my fingertips, molding it, making

it smoother.

The belly button went right there, like that. Its neck became shapely and its Adam's apple nice and round, its shoulders wide enough. Muscular arms and legs, and of course, firm buttocks. Its hair was in dreadlocks, naturally. I molded a suitably strong chin and a good, although slightly crooked, wind-breaker of a nose. The part of anatomy that I craved the most at that moment, it, he, already had. That, I didn't have to mold myself.

That night we made love over and over again, until we fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, tired but satisfied.

"Morning," he said to me when day broke.

The next morning, Hair and I were already making plans for our life together.

"I see," Rosa said when she saw us together. After a month, we found a two-room apartment for rent through an add on the internet, and Rosa no longer had to put up with our courtship rituals. Rosa, on the other hand, found herself a nice, bisexual man through an internet dating service (yes, Rosa and I had once been an item, but not for very long).

Hair wanted to take evening classes to get a high school diploma and after that maybe apply to a polytechnic. He was by nature interested in plumbing, but he would need an official identity, which he didn't have. He was an industrious person, however, and didn't want to lie around at home surfing the net or watching TV. Luckily, he was able to find a job at a construction site where they didn't care about IDs. The construction workers soon noticed that Hair was extraordinary talented in anything related to pipes and plumbing, and one job led to another.

We lived comfortably in our two-room apartment until I graduated two years later. I got a part-time job that matched my degree, we got engaged, and started to plan a family. My parents – especially my mother – had disapproved of Hair for many years, even though they didn't know his real background. But when our first child was born, and my mom saw what a good father Hair was, my whole family warmed to him.

"Sure he smells, but you get used to it," my 76-year-old grandaunt said about Hair. "He really has become a good man."



Our daughter was followed by a son, and our life followed its course like the Earth its orbit. Or, at least, that's how I felt. One day I left work early, with the flu brewing in my throat. We now lived in a row house in a sleepy suburb, and as I walked home from the bus stop, the spring sun shone on my face through the birches. The children would be home from school in a couple of hours, so I'd have a moment to myself.

I was wrong. As soon as I opened the door, my nose told me that Hair was already home. He was sitting on the sofa sipping a beer.

"Oh, you're already here," I said.

"Mm. I got your message that you'd be home early. I decided to come home, too."

I sat next to him on the sofa. He offered me a swig from his bottle, but I turned it down because of the flu.

"Are you seriously afraid that I'd catch something from you?" he said with a crooked smile, and continued: "We need to talk. That's why I'm here."

What did he want to talk about? Was he having an affair, maybe with Rosa? He shook his head.

"Are you happy with our life?"

Of course I was. Wasn't he?

"Sometimes I feel like I want to get out to more open waters...the ocean or something."

I sighed with relief. He was just planning for us to move closer to the sea again, or buy a new boat. Why not, it was a fine idea. Maybe we could go sailing in the Mediterranean; we could leave the kids with their grandparents.

"No, you're not getting what I'm trying to say."

"Okay, then explain it to me!"

"Look at me. What do you see when you look at me?"

I looked at him. I saw my husband, my partner for life, my best friend, the father of my children.

"I'm all that, yet I'm not. You only see what you want to see. Look at me for real, look at what I really am."

I blinked, but nothing changed. He was still the same.

"Close your eyes and don't move. I'm right next to you and I'm going to touch your hand. What do you feel?"

I felt his firm skin, his familiar and gentle touch. And then – for a second – I felt a moist, hairy mass



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between my fingers. I opened my eyes quickly and for a moment saw what really sat beside me. Then the vision was gone, and my handsome, though strong-smelling, husband was sitting on the sofa, without slimy protrusions or hairy trunks.

"You were able to see, weren't you?" he asked me in a quiet voice. I nodded. That's what he'd been all the time. Everyone, including me (but perhaps excluding my sharp-eyed grandaunt), had only wanted to see him as something else.

"But ...if you haven't really changed into a man, then how were we able to have kids?"

He didn't answer. I thought about it. Before he came along, I had brought more than a few short-term boyfriends to the apartment I'd shared with Rosa. A couple of times the condom had broken and, of course, I had run to the shower. Hair had absorbed the sperm in the drain and copied the design. That's how it must have happened. I didn't want to hear the details.

The flu made me feverish, and everything started to feel even more surreal. Maybe that was why I was able to accept the truth about my life more easily. I still started to cry, though. Hair wrapped his arms around me. "Hey, you're not the only one," Hair said. "We're not the only ones in this situation."

"What do you mean?"

I then learned that the nice old lady from next door was really a neglected compost heap. That my sister had just moved in with a vacuum dustbag. And that – worst of all – my grandfather had actually been a pile of used Bakelite and old bicycle tires.

I held my husband tightly, because I knew it might be the last time. I still had to ask, "Couldn't we carry on?"

Hair gave me a bland smile, and kissed my lips quickly. Then he was apparently no longer able to resist the change that welled up from within him. His human form started to melt, transforming little by little back to its original form. In the end, I had to hurry to fetch a bucket and one of the kids' plastic spades. I was able to scoop the slime off the sofa in time, before it left a permanent stain on the fabric.

After that I took two pain killers, washed them down with cognac, and considered what to do next. I tried to push my feelings aside, and even thought I succeeded.

The following Saturday, the kids and I made a trip to the sea shore. I took a metal shovel from the trunk of the car and used it to scrape up what was left of Hair. Then I threw his remains off the pier into the sea.

I whispered a few sentences to commemorate Hair. The kids started to complain that they were cold. I'd told them that their dad had to go abroad all of a sudden. It was the same story I'd made up when their pet hamster died. I inhaled the sea air and felt the flu leave my lungs.

It has been three years. Last week I saw a familiar face in the newspaper's foreign affairs section. Hair had become the new prime minister of the neighboring country. But I couldn't care less about the news. I've already made myself a new dynamic spouse from telephone cords, computer cables, and old circuit boards, and I'm now expecting my third child. One day my new spouse will fall apart, too, when the inner tension created by my will starts to weaken in him. But at least this time I'll be prepared for it.

I have to admit that sometimes I catch myself wondering what I really am. I look at my hand and try to see what it is that I'm really made of. Before he went away, Hair said that no one, or no thing, is completely what they seem.

So what if I'm really a human? I can see my skin, but cannot see the cells it's made of, which ceaselessly take in nutrition and oxygen to stay alive. If I am a human, a bustling cluster of matter and energy, I'll remain in this shape for a few decades, until I, too, disintegrate like everything else.

Oh Hair, you taught me to look beyond the surface, but I don't like what I see.

© *Karva by Carita Forsgren 2008*

© *Translated by Anna Volmari and J. Robert Tupasela 2010*

*Carita Forsgren is a 39-year-old writer, visual designer, and mother of three from Tampere who doesn't get enough sleep at night.*





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# THE LAUGHING DOLL

BY MARKO HAUTALA

TRANSLATED BY JYRI LUOMA

”But hey, does anyone remember the Laughing Doll?”

Milla looked dramatically around the dining table, her drunk eyes wide in the thrill of recollection. On the other side, Alisa lifted her hands to her mouth to cover a sigh. In fact, it was one high note ending in a minor vibrato.

”It was dreadful,” Alisa uttered to the hollow space between her palms.

”What are you talking about?” Sami asked.

”Just dreadful,” Milla and Alisa said together in a girlish conspiracy. Sami mumbled something and looked at Karri. Why can’t they behave, his eyes said.

Grown-up bitches.

”Is it some sort of urban legend?” Karri said, to escape Sami’s glare.

”Abominable...”

The women were laughing and weeping simultaneously. Sami sighed and wiped at a wine stain on the linen with a napkin.

”I’m sure the girls can tell more about it,” Karri said hoping to gain with his eyes a mutual understanding.

”You’ve never heard of the Laughing Doll?” Alisa stared at each of the men. Karri shook his head and looked to Sami for support. He was preoccupied with the wine stain.



"The Laughing Doll," Milla started, "is probably my worst childhood trauma. Really. The worst."

"You have a few others beside that," Sami mumbled.

Milla's did not even blink towards Sami, and he continued: "The Laughing Doll was... a murderer or something. A ghoul. It stalked the kids walking these paths through the local woods. And I remember..."

Milla burst into a giggly moan. She shook her face the way she did when she talked about how tastelessly a man had approached her at the work place or a restaurant.

"I remember walking home too late at night one autumn by that beach. The electricity was out; it was when that was still possible. The whole road was dark, and suddenly I had the feeling that there was someone walking by me."

"Oh no," Alisa said with her hands on her rosy cheeks. "Did you hear it –"

"I didn't hear laughter, but I didn't have to. I already knew. Based on those stories I already knew the sound of it..."

"Ha-ha-ha," Alisa helped with a machine-like, monotonous voice, and Milla shook her head and flailed her arms about.

"You know, I ran like I had never run before. My God, I was sure it was the..."

"Laughing Doll," Sami snorted to his wine glass.

"I think I even saw, amidst the trees, the shape of a creature walking like..."

Alisa interrupted Milla by standing up from the table so that all the glasses spilled a little. She started walking in a bizarre, jerky fashion to and fro at the head of the table. It was like a clockwork toy with a damaged mechanism.

"That's it," howled Milla, and Alisa's pantomime ended in a fit of laughter. "That night I couldn't sleep at all, because I was afraid that if I looked at the window, it would be there and would start that..."

"Ha-ha-ha."

"Stop it, Alisa. Or I won't sleep tonight either."

Alisa sat down laughing and put her hands down on Milla's hand.

"You'll sleep alright," Sami said and smiled joylessly. Milla wiped the tears from her eyes. Suddenly it was easy to imagine the same gesture in this same space, when there were no guests.

"Why did it walk like that?" asked Karri.

"How should I know?" said Milla. "It was somehow... like..."

"Disabled or... a jack-in-the-box," said Alisa. "A jack-in-the-box that was not turned off."

"Awful."

Milla smiled and gave one more lazy laugh. Disappointed, that the joy did not last longer.

"They said a madman used to live in those derelict cottages, missing a whole knee joint. All bone. A deformity of some sort."

Milla lowered her hand under the table, and it was obvious that she was feeling her knee.

"Whatever," she said. "Kids' lore."

"That's right," said Alisa. "Our Ines was also afraid of Karri's furry gloves when she was little. She even had nightmares about them."

There was a torrent of laughter, then silence.

"Oh well," Sami said and emptied his wine glass in one swig. "Should us men go and get some fresh air?"

"Why not," Karri responded and started to think of matters to discuss. Work, women. Sami was probably not drunk enough in order to talk about the Thai whore who got sperm in her eye and asked for additional charge. That at least led to a proper conversation last time. Loyalty, guilt, the difference between men and women.

Sami cut two Cohibas. Milla and Alisa started talking about their old teacher whom Karri also remembered. He and Sami had been at the same school as their present wives, two years senior. Alisa and Milla had been best friends since upper elementary school. Karri and Sami had affirmed the existence of one another while at school, nothing more. They remained hopeless outsiders during these evening get-togethers, for which Karri was not too keen on driving all the way from Helsinki. The whole suburb had changed. It was beyond Karri how Milla and Sami could continue living amongst the ruins of their childhood.

"No need for a coat," said Sami and handed over a cigar.

It was a dark night in August. Sami sat with a quilt over his shoulders, smoking his cigar and staring at the woods. The sound of the sea came from behind the trees. In the daylight it was visible amidst the fallen lime trees. Now, one could only hear the hissing of the surf, smell the scent of the ocean.

"How's things at work?" said Karri.

Sami paused, inhaling the smoke.

"Nothing much," he replied. "Got sacked."

Karri gave a laugh, but Sami remained drunkenly serious. Some ash had fallen over the quilt.

"Really?" asked Karri.

Sami sucked on his cigar, until the fire end looked like a warning light, then he let the smoke rise up from his mouth.

"Yep."

The silence was awkward. The wind was humming, as if a great wave was approaching from a distance. Next to them was a house, money was needed in order to keep it. A crumbling castle.

"Are you sure?" asked Karri.

Sami's nose produced a cloud of grey smoke.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Silence.

"Oh shit. Does Milla know?"

"Yes."

"How did she--?"

Sami shrugged his shoulders.

"Laughed," he said. "It's always been like that, although she gets to go shopping in Shanghai every December."

Karri regretted the fact that he had asked about the job. Instead, they could have just listened to the sighing of the reeds and lazy waves, the darkness that was no more summer, not yet autumn. Now there was restlessness in the air. A need for consoling words.

"The world's nastiest weapon," said Sami. "Woman's laughter."

He put his hand on his crotch.

"Paralyzing."

Karri nodded. He looked at the darkness of the trees and thought of Sami on his way to work. A part of life in the past as well.

When they returned inside, Milla looked over her shoulder with a routine smile. Her eyes were somewhere else.

"Cigar men," noted Alisa and started to giggle.

Milla whispered something that made the ladies laugh with tears in their eyes.

By dawn, Karri was too drunk. He was afraid he might say aloud that he was truly sorry. Sorry about the decaying castle, the excesses of life. And about what happened between him and Milla in the end of a night

out last year, when Alisa had gone to bed and Sami had passed out on the couch. How could Karri have known that all Alisa wanted was to laugh at Sami. To paralyze.

That night Sami had sat there all the time like a gorilla absorbed in thoughts. Or like a little boy fallen asleep in the backseat of a car, trusting that the parents knew where to go.

"Did Milla tell you?" asked Karri as he searched his bag for his toothbrush. "That Sami got sacked?"

Alisa sat near the mirror table of the guest room and rubbed her arms with lotion.

"No."

She did not stop. The lotion made the skin of the arms shiny everywhere she touched.

"Sami said that Milla thought it despicable."

Alisa sighed.

"No, she didn't. She was worried. For the kids' sake."

"I'm also a little worried."

The lubricating hand stopped.

"Don't you worry about Milla," said Alisa and looked at Karri in the mirror.

Karri looked back and realised that they always talked about Milla this way. Through the mirror.

Karri brushed his teeth and left the toilet unflushed, in order not to wake Milla and Sami's kids. When he returned to the dark guest room, Alisa stood in the centre of the room and stared outside the window, her shoulders crouched and her fingers crossed over her bosom.

"There's someone out there," she said.

Karri closed the door and looked at the window.

"Where?"

"Look. There's someone standing out there."

Karri walked over and looked out at the dark yard. He could see only the reflection of himself and Alisa, the shapes of the shrubbery in the glow of the street lights.

"There's nothing out there."

"Yes, there is."

Alisa stood next to him and pointed at the black tree trunk in the back of the yard.

"Next to the ash. I saw it moving just now."

Karri got closer to the window. He could see the bumps that might be interpreted as human, if so desired.

"You're seeing things," whispered Karri.

"No, I'm bloody not. It moved."

"Some of Sami's garden project. The wind moves it." Karri kept his eyes on the black shapes, waited for a

movement.

"It's not moving," he said.

Then it moved.

"Look," Alisa hissed and backed away from the window.

The thing, which had just seemed like the outline of a tree, was now moving across the yard with jerking steps as if it was dragging something behind.

"Goddamn," muttered Karri and followed the movement of the shape until his forehead touched the cool glass of the window. The coolness passed through him, all the way to his fingertips. The shape disappeared somewhere behind the house.

"Go tell Sami," said Alisa and squeezed Karri's shoulder.

"Maybe it left."

"Just go."

Karri looked at the street lights outside the yard. The black walls of concrete houses in the distance. A few lights were still on, like the flames of candles. The small, suburban tragedies, the plastic carpets coming apart at the seams and dirt-yellow lights.

"Or I will," said Alisa.

"All right."

Karri walked out of the guest room and closed the door behind him.

He heard the door lock; Alisa making herself safe with her mirror and lotions. The darkness of the hallway made it impossible to move with determination. Karri felt about the white of the walls and tried to imagine the paintings in broad daylight. It was the same place where they had entered and kissed each others on the cheeks to show they were no longer kids, that they knew how adults would behave. Karri took the first step on the stairs and climbed with his hand on the rail. He could see the after-image of a loping figure in his mind and recalled the women's laughter.

As he reached the top of the stairs Karri stopped. There was a sound coming from the bedroom. A grunt, coughing. Milla's voice.

Karri looked around and saw someone sitting at the table. His skin tightened, belly turned into rock. The creature had been there the whole time. As if it was attached to a tree.

"Howdy," the voice uttered.

Karri froze, too terrified to explain why he was creeping around and listening to Milla's grunting.

"Feel free to put the lights on."

Karri felt for the switch.

The light's yellow gleam revealed Sami like a lump of dough on the chair. Exhaustion and intoxication pressed his right eyelid down. The other eye stared at Karri.

"There's someone in the yard," whispered Karri.

Sami sighed heavily.

"Sit yourself down," he said. "Let's drink ourselves silly."

Karri looked at the bedroom door, then Sami. His chin was moist from red wine. There were wine stains on his shirt.

"Really. There's someone lurking around."

"Why don't you sit down."

Karri let go of the stair rail and walked to the table. Sami started filling a glass before he even had time to sit down. It was Milla's, but what did it matter anymore?

"It's probably some junkie from the flats," said Karri.

Sami gave a laugh.

"You should get motion detectors or –"

"The fucking Laughing Doll," Sami interrupted. The silence that followed the words was bustling, like there was a fireball trapped inside it.

"You wanna hear?" asked Sami.

Karri was not sure. When he touched the glass of wine, there was a brief fragmentary recollection of Milla's lips, her hand wandering under the table touching his knee.

"It was no fucking Laughing Doll to begin with. And it wasn't a psycho or anything..."

Sami waved his hand in the air. His fingers were numb.

"It was a fucking weakling. They used to call it a Laughing Mask. That is what it was called originally."

Karri glanced at the bedroom door. He would be partly to blame, if Milla and kids woke up.

"It tried to be everybody's pal, but nobody wanted to be with it. They sliced the tyres of its bike and in the springtime they left it alone on an ice raft. Everyone was waving at it from the shore. But it just kept laughing."

Sami emptied the glass with one gulp and poured some more.

"Then we decided to put an end to its laughing. We went to one of those deserted buildings on the shore and took the Laughing Mask with us. We told it that



it wasn't brave enough to go down to the cellar of one of those buildings, that people had got killed there. Of course it dared."

Karri tried to interrupt, but couldn't get his mind off the figure moving outside. In his imagination, it ran to the woods, lifted into air and flew over the fallen tree, touching the reeds.

"We..."

Sami interrupted and stared in front of him. Karri stared at the rubbery skin of the face, underneath the muscles were twitching. The reflexes of distant memories.

"They bolted the basement door. They said that now you stay down there with the dead. Let's see if you'll keep laughing."

Sami drank some more, stirred the glass so that he could get the last sip.

"It remained locked up the whole night," he mumbled. "And the next day when they arrived, it had stopped laughing. After that it never did. People started to fear it. Respect."

Karri did not want to touch the wine glass anymore. On its surface the microbes of him and Milla intermingled. For a brief moment he was sure that Sami would realise it during some inebriated moment of sensory clarity. But he kept looking at his hand resting on the table like an alien being.

"That's the source of those legends, the fables old wives can't shut up about. Blah blah."

Karri fixated on Sami's hand. The fractals of the red stains at the curve of his thumb. On the refrigerator door handle there was also a stain. And on the floor. The footprints leading from the bedroom. They would look dismal in the morning, when the sunlight entered through the wooden blind. Milla's moan was again audible. Now it echoed at the walls longer. Karri felt a cold vibration in his spine.

"Milla and..." he began, but could not finish.

"They won't wake up," said Sami and suddenly he sounded completely sober.

Karri's drunkenness was also gone. Just like that. He could see the kitchen, the yellow light and Sami's hand in a stunning state of clarity. There was ringing in the ear canals like he was under water. The tingling of drowning, a warning signal. He slowly stood up from the chair.

"They won't wake up anymore," Sami repeated. His

hand searched for the wine glass. Like the hand of a blindman. The hand of someone used to darkness.

Karri turned away slowly and walked down the stairs. Sami's shadow did not follow. The stairs felt like they would give in any second.

He opened the guest room door, forced Alisa to pack. He shook her by the shoulders when words did not help. They clattered with their bags to the back door, walked by the shrubbery, the ash and the cherry tree to the gate, then to the car parked in the street. Alisa cried and threw accusations all the way, so that the sound of the reeds and the waves was inaudible.

In the car Alisa banged against Karri's shoulder and arm, that was pushed stiff against the wheel. They didn't even say goodbye to the kids. Blah blah.

When Karri started the engine, he could see from the rear-view mirror the crumbling castle and its only lit window. There, he could see a figure of a lonely man. When he squinted, he could see his shoulders shaking. Spasmodically, unnaturally, as if he was a mechanical toy in the circus. It was a mysterious movement. Perhaps he was crying, perhaps laughing.

When Alisa was finally convinced that they had to leave, she called the police screaming hysterically. Karri drove on. He pressed the gas pedal, looked at the rear-view mirror and thought that in the glow of the rear lights he could see someone following them. A figure behind the car, moving along the dashed line on the street. Lightly, determinedly, as if looking for an embrace. The weightless shadow of a boy woken up from the ruins of childhood.

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Translated by Jyri Luoma 2010

Proof-read by James Wheatley

*Marko Hautala (b. 1973) is an author and a teacher whose latest novel Käärinliinat ("Shrouds", 2009) is a modern gothic story set in a mental institute. Hautala used to work as a nurse in a psychiatric hospital. His previous novel Itsevalaisevat ("The Self-Illuminated Ones", 2008) received the Tiilikivi prize from the University of Tampere students of literature.*



# BLACK WATER

BY TOMI JÄNKÄLÄ

TRANSLATED BY LIISA RANTALAHO

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There's root growth, again, an inch of sandy brown. Ought to get a new batch of dye, but there's no cabbage. Shoe polish won't do the job, just stains the skin and then fades off. Have tested it. Otherwise the hair has grown pretty well, the night-black plait hangs well down to the shoulders, and I sure rock, man. Just the frayed pirate cap to top it and the parting's covered.

I'd be ready for the track, but a black trail has dribbled on the cheek. Blasted supermarket cosmetics, "may cause irritation in sensitive eyes". Fuck, there's bloody nothing sensitive in me except the stimulus threshold. They ought to make proper stuff and test them with animals, but no sir, the bunny lovers cannot stand to see weeping guinea pigs, so a heavy metal man gets to suffer. I rinse the mask off, even if I look silly without, better that than weeping publicly. I tramp out of the bathroom.

Mum's lying on the couch, as always when not working. She's an assistant nurse and does the shit jobs in shifts, changes diapers to vegetables and pushes them around the yard. Rest of the time she's dead beat. Now she's been working the night and lolls under a blanket, hair tangled and eyes puffed up. There's nothing in the telly at this hour and she's reading some Harlequin romance, still bothers with that, daydreaming, a broad far beyond forty as she is. Yuck she's lame.

My doings interest her just enough not to get bankrupt or involved with the fuzz, some free upbringing my ass. Actually she just doesn't have a clue. That's ok with me, as long as she keeps providing.

"Gimme some dough", I grunt.

"What for, again?" answers the dull voice. Great, she's worn out and too tired to object.

"School."

"When I was in school we didn't..."

"Got a project, gotta pay for myself. Tenner's enough."

"Well, ok, take it from my purse."

"Yeah."

I leave the red note. Take the twenty and coins. Mum won't notice, or care. She thinks school's no longer free. You mention her Conservatives, and she believes anything. Why can't she find out about things, go to them parent-teacher-meetings or something. Wouldn't always have to be ashamed of her.

"Take your cap off when you are home", tries the couch potato. I just glower darkly, not bothering to

answer.

Suddenly, I feel totally perverse. The ticker jumping like mad, kind of roaring in the ears and it's hard to breath. I'd like to stand cheek-by-cheek, just close to somebody, anybody, and hug. What the fuck! It feels so strange I stiffen then and there for sheer disgust. Sensitive eyes and a hugging-lack, what kind of a damn precious Bambi I'm getting to be this morning?

A couple of proper guitar riffs ought to clear off the mental disturbance. I put the earplugs on and turn the volume to ten, let metal minister for the soul. Pantera's "Fucking hostile" booms deep into the bowels and the eardrums ache, but the strange feeling only gets stronger.

"Fucking NO!" I yelp and throw off the plugs.

"Fucking yes," mumbles nursing assistant Lepistö half asleep. "Take off the cap."

I get real fast away from the couch. The weird trembling wants to make me hug, but I sure won't touch mum. Where'd that lead to? Next I'd have to go Nordic-walking with her or have bees-and-flowers conversations, no thanks. Sooner kill myself.

Eikka! He's the kid brother, or half-brother, whatever. He's the coolest thing I know, a harmless guy. He's three and knows but a few words. By nights he sleeps in the shift workers' kindergarten and by daytime nobody talks to him. Now he's alone again in the playpen, stacking cubes. That's what he loves to do.

"Kaale!" Eikka yells, face in wrinkles.

"Hi, Eikka, how's biz?" I ask. Eikka is the only one who may call me Kaale. The name pinches the nerves. Kaale, Kaapo Lepistö, that's a weedy asshole from primary school, not me. I'm The Fist now.

"Play, Kaale, play!" the kid-bro' begs. I throw the arms around him and squeeze. Not part of the image, but needs must. The weird feeling eases off. I put Eikka back on the floor. He looks at me, kind of funny. Must've been a new experience for us both.

Eikka lets out a charge and starts to stink. He's not that endearing I'd go and clean him.

"Have to go", I say and push the cube man's nose button.

"Ow's biz, biz", Eikka screams. Snores from the living room.

"Eikka's shit himself", I yell as hard as I can. Just to be sure, I slam the door. The house shakes. That ought to wake up mum, if she's still breathing.



I start shifting the legs towards the shopping centre and light a fag. Smoke nourishes the lungs, tickles them. Chains tingle on the waist. The plushie stuff passes off and a proper feeling grows again. Need to thrash something.

I see Mari by the mall. He's a guy, only he's called Mari for always wearing a striped Marimekko-shirt. None of my chums actually knows his real name. He's a weirdo, says nothing, just stares at the ground. Someone said he's still playing with legos. The guy's fourteen and stacks coloured plastics. Has to be daft.

Mari realizes he's crashed onto a wrong tomcat, but pretends nothing's happened. He's brushing the roadside and turns to the parking lot through a rose bush. A couple of long strides and I stop the bloke.

"Gimme some money, fag!" I demand, one hand fisted and the other on his collar.

"Don't have any", he whispers so you can't hear properly. I give a smack.

"Don't piss me off! You've just been to the supermarket! Off with the bag or you'll get it proper!" I tear off his rucksack. I almost lose my cool: he's got a picture of Winnie the Pooh on it.

There's books, a bottle of fruit juice, Pringles and a few euros, better than nothing. The juice I let fly to the wayside, the books too. I socialise the chips and the coins. Push Mari to the grass and set my bony fist straight under his chin. "Ought to punish you properly. Just can't bother with it now. You bring more cheese to school or your fat'll get fried!"

"Don't... do... this, I do not like it", Mari squeaks the liturgy we've been taught in primary school when they talked about bullying situations.

"No really, what a surprise! Here's to the other cheek, then, so you get it according to gospel!" I yell and punch the bloke again. I let go of his collar and Mari thumps sideways to the ground.

"Hold me..." he whines and throws up black goo. The guy must've eaten a giant bag of liquorice and is now so scared his tummy turns over and the candy spreads on the tarmac. I leave Mari there and laugh. Quite a successful hassle, even if I say so myself. I'm myself again, the meanest heavy man of the town, the raw guy, harder than Chuck Norris in Chuck Norris jokes. Fags hug, The Fist punches.

"I do not like it", I bawl, imitating Mari's voice

while walking. So who does? Grow a backbone, you damn bonehead. Must find somebody to tell about Mari's squeakings; and I head towards the school, grinning, to look for Keränen and Bolt, my two loyal lackeys. Or actually just Keränen, Bolt I'd rather lose for good, except he plays in our band.

We are the three guitar players in the Black Water, that's it. It sucks, but who'd want to play bass, and we don't have the cheddar for a proper set. We take turns screeching over the rumble, none has the voice to do it all through. In our training sessions we push so hard the ears ring and sweat stings the eyes. Afterwards, all the limbs ache and it feels like you'd been battering somebody for a whole hour. If I didn't have the band to let go, I'd probably swing myself up or chomp trunks.

We've done a demo tape, too. Keränen found an old ghetto-blasters with a mike. Then and there we recorded a couple of c-cassettes of best-of-the-orchestra and mailed them to the journals. Keränen drew an axe wound for cover. We got feedback from The Sound magazine, on their Demo Effect in the net. The critic said the tape was a roller carpet of asynchronic death metal punk, he'd never heard anything like that. Keränen thought the man was pissing us off. Me, I thought it meant avant garde stuff.

Keränen is our composer. He's a geek, no school troubles and always does his homework, goes through secondary school with straight A's, an aggravating bloke. He's the only one of us who understands anything about intros and octaves and whatever. Yet the guy is way out as to heavy music. He thinks you'll be a proper band player once you learn to press with the pinky so the acoustic string doesn't buzz. As if that'd matter, as we use breakers, anyway.

Bolt is the negative image of Keränen, no light ever shone on him. He's called Bolt, 'cause he's got a big head and no shoulders. He surely has the largest cupola in the universe, and yet he's stupid as a gumboot. Fuck, there's no understanding biology. He's with the Black Water, for just two guys together are queers and it takes three to make a rock band. And let's admit it, he's got a more powerful singing voice than Keränen and I put together.

"Kaale", Bolt says as I drift on the scene. I give him

the eyeball. Let's draw some blood from your nose, to help your memory.

"No, I mean Fist, sorry Kaale", he amends. I don't bother to correct him. When you hit Bolt, he titters like a girl. It's embarrassing to punish a guy if he giggles. Spoils the mood.

"Where's Keränen?" I ask.

"Still on his guitar lesson", Bolt answers, coughs up a long spit and stares at his accomplishment. "Can snuff colour the mouth black?"

"How the fuck should I know, ask the Helping Phone."

Keränen is late, that's bad. Somebody might squeal to the teachers. I skipped the first lessons and don't intend to stay for the rest, either. Ought to check the garage situation, though. Keränen's garage is our prime training digs. Bolt's people have just a shed, we haven't even got a car. At Keränen's we may practice undisturbed whenever the Scodillac is out. Luckily Bolt's keeping his mouth shut now, no more stupid questions.

After an eternity and five minutes Keränen finally arrives.

"What's with the Fist, how's the Maiden?" he mouths, talking his sillies again. You never know if he's teasing you or not.

"Not so bad, just hassled Mari at the mall", I answer. The news doesn't affect Keränen. The last weeks, he's been the real boy-scout, only missing a yellow scarf. And now he changes the subject, too.

"Shall we train today?"

"Have we got the garage?"

"No, Mum's shopping bag is sitting there."

"Shit, nothing doing, then."

"We could practice inside without boosters. Hentunen gave me some notes, Metallica and Purple", Keränen tries.

"Deep Purple? What's the matter, Keränen, you got a jive virus? We ain't going to comp any evergreens. You must've got the notes of collected works of Elvis Presley, too."

Keränen just doesn't get it. Metal doesn't come from notes or skill with using the fingerboard. It's attitude, angst and anger. It's played with feeling, all the gates open, feet spread and dome shaking. Where's the feel in playing an acoustic just sitting on a bed, and no

breakers?

Suddenly there's the need to hug again. I know just exactly that I don't want anybody touching the skin, but inside there's some tenderness-craving hormone that says otherwise. It's a hell of a creepy feeling, makes fingertips tingle and tightens the throat. I'll never start hugging anybody in the school, would totally lose my reputation.

I spy on Bolt, his laughing idiot's face, teeth black from snuff and spots on his skin. The imbecile is giggling at something Keränen has said and I missed. Bolt has missed it, too, he just giggles so nobody would notice he's fallen wayside many sentences ago. Bolt's stupidity, uncleanness and the flowering acne would down the needs of a horny groupie, but they don't help me now. The feet go by themselves to Keränen.

"Any way we can get some booze for the weekend?" I ask, just to fill my mind with something else.

"Sepi's on camp duty, have to cuff something from the store", Keränen enlightens me. Bolt's bro has carried us some twelve-packs for a free can or two, but he's doing his military service now. No other couriers in sight.

"Couldn't you water something down?" I ask, though I know the answer.

"Feel free to try that yourself", Keränen mutters. He was caught watering down the booze; his father was entertaining business guests, some coat-and-tie fellers, who were served diluted vodka. They lost their cool, and the dad lost the contract. The situation bounced back on Keränen junior, who missed some of his hair for a long time.

"Your make-up's running", Bolt says and laughs nervously.

"Washed it off this morning", I answer and touch the face. There's something black under the eyes that sticks on the fingertips. "'Must have left some eyeliner in the tear-ducts and it's pushing through."

"Oh, I forgot, Hentunen said you have to visit the teachers' reservation", Keränen grins.

"Dammit! Why didn't you tell that at once", I protest. Ought to have guessed it. Needs must go and listen to the sermon, or Hentunen will call the social services and the visiting aunties will turn up at the home base. Better this, perhaps, at least I'll not be tempted to hug Hentunen. I throw a heavy metal greeting to the lackeys and slouch inside.

I spot Mari in the lobby. He's gone totally wacko, takes a step in one direction and turns the other way. His head and clothes are covered with black oily water, like he was a car's oil measuring stick. It was a parking lot where I punished him. He must have fallen in a puddle. That makes sense, though I can't remember any puddles there. I don't believe the explanation myself, either, but can't find any better reason for his looks.

The nose is leaking, flu coming on, I guess. Not good for the image, I'll be losing heavy-points. Hangover's okay to look sick, but a heavy man with a runny nose is a mother-fucker without balls. I draw it in and blow a snot rocket in the lobby corner. Must organize a hangover or stay out of circulation.

No rush hour in the teachers' loony bin, half of them at least are on sick leave. No wonder, they all have this basic fault. They go for years to some nerd college to get back to basic school. Then they start feeling mental health, 'cause the pupils are all shit-heads. Must have missed that the first time round. It's such a triumph of intelligence you just have to be sorry for them.

Our teacher Hentunen is one of the same mob, even if he himself imagines otherwise. He gives guitar lessons in his own time and distributes copies of musical notes. As if you could teach anything about heavy music with that kind of bearing. He's totally square, no edge in him. Uses a head-pot when biking, eats salad, and he's old, surely almost forty. Now he takes me down to the headmaster's office and gives me some face-to-face quality time.

"Sit down, guitar man. Did you have to interrupt your riff practice or why did it take so long?" Hentunen asks, trying to be witty. Poor guy, trying to be your mate and throwing his jokes, while everything funny about him is unintended. I don't answer, and he goes on: "You got any gigs yet? There's going to be a band presentation in the Youth Club just in a few weeks. "

Why doesn't he start with the crap shovelling? Would save both our time.

"Did you have something to say?" I ask and spit on the floor. Hentunen flowers red all over and looses his

cool. He lets out the drama by the longer manuscript and forgets to sound nice like a radio speaker. He's shooting the shit about responsibility and growing up. In between he threatens with the Youth Home. A bloke I know was there. It sucks. The patients are forced to do farm chores – shifting dung, baking bread and carrying water from a well. If you refuse, you get to clean the outhouse.

I can't focus on his sermon any longer. I'm as far away as possible, just stare at the wall. Why do they always paint schools white? Black would be cool, or a porn shop red. No, freeze, just a moment, did I hear that right? What did Hentunen say?

"What?" I ask. The voice is hoarse and the nose blocked.

"Are you crying?" Hentunen repeats.

"Well sure as hell not", I whine, but the mirror says otherwise. Two black stripes are falling on the cheeks.

"Oh, calm down, Kaapo. I didn't mean it so hard. Is there something on your mind? You can talk to me", the teacher tries. "If you can't open up here, the school psychologist is present and would certainly like to see you."

"Yeah, sure, thanks a lot, have you finished?" I return. I wipe the drops off the cheeks to the sleeve and stand up. Couldn't care less about pouring my heart out to some bespectacled auntie, who can't even get her own life in order. I did go, once. The broad was totally daft. She kept repeating "people understand" and "you are loved". I told her to take herself where the sun doesn't shine. Who really needs a nine-to-four sympathizer who gets paid for sitting in a flowered dress and pretending to care? Why don't they give me that thirty e's per hour, I'd love the teenagers out-and-out, I'd sure make a better job of it than the head shrinkers.

In the rage I've forgotten that awful feel, pushed it aside with hate. Now it's swelling up again. I want to hug, I'm sick with the need. The chest seems to expand and the arms are tingling. Can't breath. Hentunen is close and puts his arm on the shoulder.

"Are you sure you are all right, Kaapo?"

Hell no, not Hentunen, not a teacher, have to get away, somewhere with no people, anywhere, even off to the country, at once. Hentunen says something more, offers a handkerchief probably. I won't listen, I rush out, chairs tumbling down.





Watery snoot gushes on the upper lip and the eyes flow like a river. This is totally weird, feverish. The mug's wet. I know the colour without any mirror.

Can't go to the lobby. Mari is leaning on his knees by the door and puking black water. In the opposite direction there's a girl, chubby, mouse-grey. She looks vaguely like somebody I've seen sometimes, not in the inside circle of heavy rockers, however. I get it. She's from seventh grade, C-seven, dull and no style. There's a puddle at her feet, otherwise she seems calm. I can get past her, if I take a plunge. Worth trying. I turn the collar up, hunch down and start.

The dumpling charges and throws her arms around me. She squeezes and her budding breasts press at my back. Though there's this rebellious hormone plus its mates inside me singing Hosannah! it feels terrible. I'm scared, I'd like to scream that you don't touch me, hell never, goddammit no one! Black oily water is splashing out of the little woman's eyes. Everything is fucking dim.

"Let me off you crazy bitch!" I scream, but the girl takes no notice, just presses closer, pouting her lips. She kisses and her face sticks to mine. She fuses with me and crowds her head inside mine. I lose consciousness.

I know everything about her. She's called Tiina Penttinen. She lives in a row house with her mother. The mother's not interested. Tiina hopes, dreams. She fantasizes about a mad criminal who'd rape and kill, draw the body to hang in a flag pole. Her mother would cry for her, at least the once. She writes everything down and there's a heart-shaped lock in her diary. How can I know such a detail?

There's no time to wonder anything, when the huge black mass swallows me, swallows us. It has no name any more, it doesn't remember. It's out of its mind with fear and it hurts to live. It hates, cherishes its mind with violence and dares not stop. It bites a bit of flesh off its arm and laughs. The wound doesn't hurt, not as much as it's hurting inside. It keeps a kitten in a box and watches the animal die, shrivel and rot. It imagines the same happening to newborn babies and it smiles. It knows what it feels like.

For a moment it's a priest dispensing the last communion of salty chips and fruit juice. In the front pocket of its rug-sack it keeps a hunting knife, next to Winnie the Pooh. With the knife it's going to cut throats and forgive, himself, others, it doesn't know. It knows almost nothing. The only sure thing is that it's wearing a Mari-shirt.

There's black all-over and still more people are fused with us. Bolt hates his nick-name. Every time he's called Bolt he feels like getting a slap. He'd like to be Mikko. That's his real name. He hates being stupid, but he can't help it. He's ashamed of his large head and hates me and Keränen, but he has to tolerate us since no one else will be his pals.

Hentunen's brother is dead. It was a close thing for him, too. Drunk driving was fun for a time. He's a wimp, but he's no poser. He'd take a bullet for his pupils for that matter. That would be a good way to go, better than flying out through the wind-shield. He's scooping the black liquid inside himself and weeping, for there isn't any space for more.

Keränen's mother uses to scratch her daughter's neck in the evenings. The daughter pretends to be asleep and they both know it. In the next room, the father is making a sandwich to Keränen and tousles the rocker's hair. The dad hasn't been drinking for a month. How can a sandwich taste so good?

Some teacher, it's Nieminen, has been to Lapland,

been trekking around the wilds and fallen asleep by the mountainside in the spring sun. He's happy, doesn't leak. He finds it hard to realize how full of the black somebody can be, but he keeps soaking the rotten water as much as he can.

Aarnio, Yli-Pyky and Juntunen join up, Jäntti and Käksi, Keränen and Berg, Salmela, Riipinen and the Tanninen triples. They bring memories from close up, turds of happiness, small but so damn huge. One after another they get caught, even Antero C.J. Miettinen and Teijo Huttunen. The collective consciousness grows, the shared mind expands. The black water is diluted.

Well, lots of understanding and so on, very hippie, but to move on: the arse is getting cold. No wonder, when you lie stretched out on the ground and the damp has sucked up through the Levi's. The head's dizzy and you feel like you pissed yourself. No trace of oneness left.

It's easy to deduce that this heavy metal man Leppänen doesn't have all the Indians in the canoe. Not drunk, and it was just that one try with the glue. Soft drink, Bostik and head in the same bag once last year, next I was throwing a pavement pizza and the camera ran empty for a long while. It's not the solvents, but there're some strange images on the tape. There's food for thought.

I get up. Dizzy. What a peculiar OBE. Better not tell about this to anybody, one might be sent to the ER and get a nursing attendant as professional friend. Was it the health that failed, a lack of dictionary-elements in the head and hallucinations? Got to start a cure of veggies and vitamins.

Outside everything seems normal. Half of the crowd is standing alone, the other half is kicking rocks and the third half is yapping nonsense in small groups. Thanks for asking, the fractions aren't my strong point. Need a smoke.

A flash of zippo and smoke fill the lungs. A couple of breaths and peace returns to the limbs. Cracked out for a moment and had hallucinations. Got to forget it all. Everything is spic-and-span. Just have to eat a banana.

Keränen is hanging out by the woodcraft class. He's picturing something and adjusting the image wider

with his hands. Mikko listens, and Tiina Penttinen. Fucking hell's arse! Bolt's name is Mikko. I did not remember that this morning. Keränen doesn't know Tiina and I can't really know her name is Penttinen. The cancer roll slips to the ground. I push off.

I step up as fast as I can. I no longer know what's true and what's not. The lungs feel like bursting, but the image of the Winnie the Pooh rug-sack and ten inches of hunting knife keep the pace lively. Better not end up playing tag where the heavy-man has the direction and Mari has the tempo. I touch the cheek, afraid of the black. I trot like a proper racehorse until the home hallway floor is underneath the arse and the door properly shut.

Hands shaking, I light another fag and inhale a few times, even if mum will have a fit about smoking inside, the smell sticks in the wallpapers, she says. Luckily she's still asleep. The fag reeks, but I'm not smoking. I just stay there and stare. The beige linoleum of the floor is ripped in the corner. I tore it out as a kid, when I was pissed off. Mum put me out in the quad and said we'll fix it. The carpet's waited ten years for glue and it's still torn. There's been more important things to do, breaking, not fixing. The cigarette has burned almost to the filter and starts to heat up the fingers. The long ash roll falls on the floor, when I finally get up and wipe the cold sweat off the forehead.

Eikka is still stacking the cubes. He smells of talcum powder. "Kaale!" the nursery construction worker cheers up, lets the blocks fall and gropes for a hug. He remembers this morning. I stare at him a long while. He's the innocent fathead, forgotten even before he's learned to talk properly.

At last, I sit by Eikka and make a house with the blocks. The kid bro watches enchanted and dimples appear on his cheeks. I'm his idol. I chatter this-and-that to him, tell him about colours, describe shapes and teach the best cuss words. Once in a while I tickle him, and Eikka turns to a bunch of wildly kicking limbs. "Ow's biz!" he shrieks, whenever he can get air between the giggles. He's a hoop of happiness. I smile back at him, and a drop of colourless water falls down on the floor.

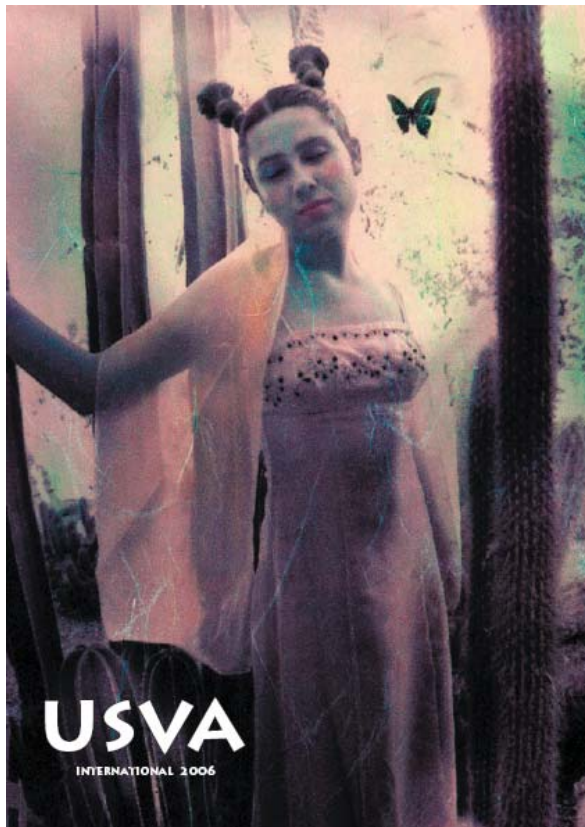
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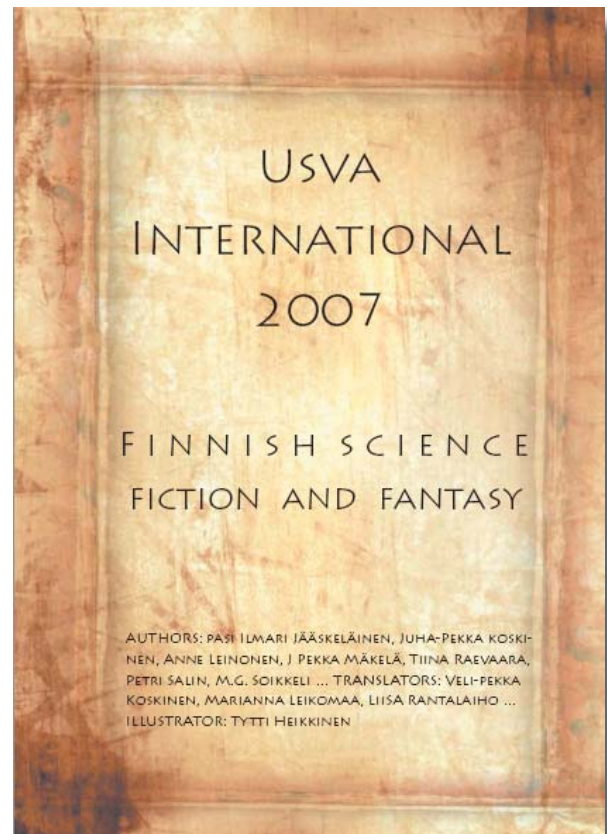
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This issue includes short stories from award-winning Finnish authors Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen, Juha-Pekka Koskinen, Anne Leinonen, Tiina Raevaara, J. Pekka Mäkelä, Petri Salin and M.G. Soikkeli.