

USVA

INTERNATIONAL 2006

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Pages worth visiting:

Partial Recall

<http://partialrecall.blogspot.com/>

Tero Ykspetäjä is blogging findom: telling what's happening in Finland, where to go and what to read.

Eating muffins in an agitated manner

http://eatingmuffins.typepad.com/eating_muffins/

The blog of Jukka Halme and Sari Polvinen. Halme is the head of the Finncon 2006 committee.

Enhörningen (Swedish/ på svenska)

<http://www.enhorningen.net/>

Webmagazine edited by Ben Roimola: news and literature.

Bakeknabel

<http://www.babeknabel.fi>

A virtual place for Finnish sf-enthusiasts. Although this site is mostly in Finnish, one can post in English too.

Finnish fandom

<http://www.tsfs.fi/sffaq/>

A list of Finnish organizations, magazines.

Finncon

<http://www.finncon.org>

The one and only con in Finland. We do it for free.

The world of Finndom

<http://www.emcit.com/emcit109.shtml#Finland>

An article in the Emerald City by Jukka Halme

Finnish science fiction resources

<http://kotisivu.mtv3.fi/jussiv/sf/suomisf.html>

EDITORIAL

Usva (The Mist if you translate it) is a brand new fanzine, started in 2005. It's main goal is to publish Finnish speculative fiction in Internet - for free. The speculative element should be understood here broadly: science fiction, fantasy, horror, surrealistic and absurd stories. Usva is doing it's best to narrow down the existing gap between mainstream prose and sf-/fantasy genres.

Usva publishes Finnish literature - in Finnish. But because Internet is making publishing more and more easy, this English issue became a very obvious choice to present Finnish speculative short stories for readers worldwide.

So, here we go!

In this issue there are examples from nine talented Finnish authors. Most of them are among the "new wave" of Finnish writers who have made their breakthrough around year 2000. Some of them are already professional writers, the rest will be professionals one day.

Enjoy the Finnish way of the weird!

Anne Leinonen, editor in chief

SUMMARY

In honour of the upcoming Finncon Usva puts out an issue (2/2006) both in Finnish and English. The purpose of Usva International 2006, our very first issue in English, is to present contemporary Finnish short stories to a wider international audience.

Love makes the world go 'round – and many of our short stories as well. **Juha-Pekka Koskinen's** *The Bosom Friend* offers the perfect solution to anyone who's well and truly fed up with house cleaning: a cleaning robot. And busting dust isn't the only personal service this mechanical maid provides. **Sari Peltoniemi's** *The Gift Boy* acquaints us with a tattoo artist who certainly knows how to charm both his patrons as well as his employer.

In **Natalia Laurila's** *One itty-bitty-bit of Black Thread* the central character of the story, a granny with a large family, holds in her hands the threads of their fate. Love, family and respect are key ingredients in this exotic story. The people speak their own special language which has been translated as Indian-English. **Jenny Kangasvuo's** lycanthropic tale *Riding Wolfhood* moves eerily somewhere betwixt and between a fairy tale and a curse: this time around it is the wolf that walks off with our sympathy and even the curse may be a virtue. The story received an honorary mention in the Baltastica writing



Photo: Eve Leinonen

Anne Leinonen, the editor and publisher of Usva-magazine writes books for young adults but also sf- and fantasy short stories. Her first speculative fiction short story collection "White Threads" is published in August 2006.

contest in 2003.

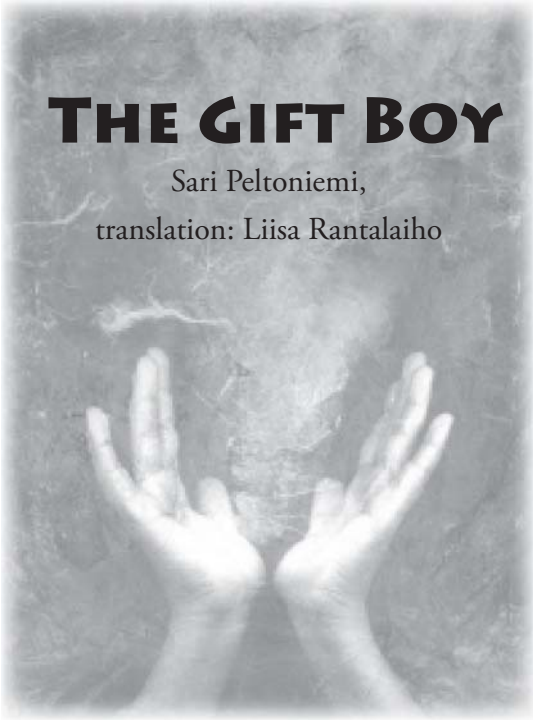
Petri Laine's *Shadow of the Earth* has relocated mankind in space because the Earth is far too polluted to live on. Mariko and Eiko, from New Tokyo, get to go on a unique trip – and are soon on the scent of a great secret. **J. K. Miettinen's** *Forever and a Day* is set in the early days of the Iraqi war. Young tykes Saddam and Abu explore the bombed ruins of their home town and come upon a surprise that may complicate their treasure hunt. **Irma Hirsjärvi's** *A weekend in the Country* takes us on a country weekend, with a delightfully surprising twist.

Hannu Rajaniemi's prose poem *A Last Eurovision Contest* is, as the name tells us, very firmly set in the world of that certain song contest that's at the moment quite beloved by every Finn. But whoever will win this time around? The versatile cornucopia of stories that is Usva International 2006 is topped off by **Petri Salin**. His story *The Third Woman* is a heady mixture of twisted alternative history, fast paced action thriller, prions and prime meat.

The translations are by kind courtesy of **Liisa Rantalaiho** and **Petri Salin**.

THE GIFT BOY

Sari Peltoniemi,
translation: Liisa Rantalaiho



That spring I turned fifty and received a helper as gift from Heron Hannusson. I made no fuss about my age and had invited nobody to celebrate, but Heron, he knew me. He knew I'd be waiting, anyway, that I would wake up early on my birthday morning and start watching for a visitor at my door. He also knew well enough that if no gifts would come, I'd sulk for a long time and take a lot of trouble to invent some malice I could cover up as innocent and unintentional.

The gift boy Heron sent was much to my liking. He had a man's build already, strong and much taller than me, but his face was a child's face. He had shorn his hair off and let Heron ornament one arm all-over with colourful tattoos. When he arrived, he kept swaggering and smoking an aromatic pipe, but his hand was trembling.

– What am I to do with you? I asked, when he had told that he'd been sent by Heron.

He smiled, embarrassed, and drew on his baggy.

– Heron has taught me to make tattoos. Look! I've made them myself.

He bared his other leg from ankle to knee, and I saw that, too, was covered with vine ornaments.

– You need not make your figures yourself, anymore, he boasted and smiled so I could not help but smile back.

– Do you wish to stay with me? I asked. I asked it in a friendly dispassionate manner. I hid my own appetites, carefully.

The boy nodded.

– Heron did not force me. I have come to learn from you and help you.

He measured me with his eyes, though he tried to do it without my notice.

– You are free to leave any time you wish, I promised gently, though I already had decided not to let this boy leave

me. He knew, too, that I was able to bind him to myself if I so wished. Still he stepped in my house mannishly and self-assured, and promised:

– I will bring much joy to you.

– What is your name?

– Peregrine, he said, blushing.

Which meant he most likely was called Jon or Kip or Mats, but I promised to call him Peregrine.

Indeed he brought me much joy that spring, but I did not get that joy for free. I kept asking myself: why would Heron give him to me – what had Heron been thinking about?

Often I secretly watched Peregrine while he was chopping wood without a shirt on, tumbling with the dog in the yard or tattooing a mark on a customer's skin. Often when I turned my eyes to him, he looked at me expectantly and then lightened our room with his smile. Sometimes, in the presence of a customer, he used a word in his speech that secretly pointed to the preceding night, and I blushed like a girl.

Heron would have laughed his ears off had he seen me like that. I did not grant him the pleasure. All that summer I never invited him to visit me even though I supposed he was expecting it.

I also knew very well that my happiness would be short lived. Peregrine was not the kind of a humble boy who serves his Mistress unselfishly and endlessly loyal.

When the eldest daughter of the manor came to seek my advice and to ask for the woman's mark on her breast, I already knew to expect trouble.

She had just turned eighteen and wished to know what I would see on her path. According to that we would choose her woman's mark and then prick it visible underneath the hollow of her throat. I saw nothing special in her, neither great passion nor sudden death. I chose the lily as her mark, and with that she was very pleased. She kept asking about love, as girls always do, and I promised her a handsome and wealthy man – which was how the merchant's sturdy son could generously be described – but gave her no exact information, of course.

She'd been eying Peregrine all the while, and neither had the boy been shy about his glances. Both showed their disappointment when I took out the bit and the mallet.

– Doesn't your apprentice do the tattoo? I'd heard he's the one doing it nowadays for you, the girl moaned.

And Peregrine:

– Why don't you let me do the mark?

The girl was opening the laces on her bosom and Peregrine hovered restlessly around behind me.

– All right then, I promised. – But you have to be very

sharp and careful so you won't smudge the girl's skin and her future.

– I know how to do it, Peregrine bragged, and I well knew it was so. Yes, he did; he was sure of hand and sharp of eye.

I realized they wished me to absent myself from the room, but I did not leave. The tattooing took a long time, Peregrine was delaying it on purpose, but I did not leave.

When finally the girl had paid and gone, Peregrine said:

– We have to please them so as to get good pay. When they speak well of us in the village, there'll be more and more coming to you. You wish, don't you, that...

– Did I ask you something?

Peregrine smiled with his little boy's face, but defiance sparkled in his eyes.

– You did your work well, I said and turned my back.

After that one, a swarm of other girls came, and then, matrons. Everyone wanted to see my Peregrine and be treated by him. Those who already had received their woman's mark asked for something else. One wanted an auspicious blue-ring, another one a sun-figure to grant male children, a third one just a decoration for her revelries. I was present to give power to the figures, but it was Peregrine who made them. I wondered constantly why I did not bind him to myself, since I could have done it easily, and even in a way he'd never notice anything but that he felt good by me.

During the years I'd gotten used to loneliness. Whenever I yet yearned for a man's embrace, I could always have gone to Heron. I had never felt a need to glance obliquely pained at the mirror and grieve over my aging. That matter had been as natural as the year's turn, and as little had I tried to meddle in that as in the autumn's rains or the snow's smelting. Now I was spreading my face with unguents every morning. When I walked around in the cottage I drew in my sagging stomach. And once again I asked: why had Heron sent that boy? Had I ever tormented him ... badly, anyway?

I chanced to hear the talk of two maidens close to my cottage. When I noticed the girls I hid myself from them and walked by their side within the cover of the forest, so I could listen closely to everything they talked about.

– You must demand that Peregrine makes the figure, said one of the girls and the other answered:

– Yes, of course. Everybody is talking about Peregrine and his soft hands.

– Yes, but that's not the only reason. Now listen to what my mother said – and my aunts agreed with it. They said there is no power any more in the figures that Thistel is making. Thistel is old and barren.

– ... and Peregrine is anything but!

For their age, the girls laughed lewdly. Then the other asked:

– Why then must we go to Thistel? Doesn't Peregrine make the figures for her anyway?

The other one shook her head.

– For sure, Thistel has given him some magic potion to drink; otherwise Peregrine would have gone away already. But believe me; Peregrine will wake up from the spell once he gets stronger.

– And what will happen then?

– You'll see!

And again they giggled so unashamedly I almost showed myself and chased them off.

Yet I allowed Peregrine to make pretty figures for both of them and let him strut around the girls so naively manly I'd have laughed if only my mouth would have twisted to a smile.

That night I wanted – once again – to deny Peregrine access to my bed.

– Sleep on the floor, I said, when he sat on my bedside and drew off his shirt. His tattoos seemed to glow in the twilight. Surely they did glow, at least those made by Heron. I'd often heard talk about how figures made by Heron nowadays were visible in darkness. It was only a matter of time before Heron would reveal me the secret ingredient producing a glow like that. But now Peregrine was sitting on the edge of my bed, his back towards me and his shoulders hunched up. Surely they had grown to a man's shoulders only shortly before his arrival to me. Their breadth and angularity made my eyes water. I drew him close to me before he even had time to ask. That's what happened every time.

If I'd had a female friend I could have asked for advice. Had there been anyone who knew me better than I myself, I could have asked why I kept behaving like this. Why did I demean myself? It was not love, neither was it pure lust. What was it, then?

What about the men, the boys – the candidates for husbands and fiancées? They, too, visited me sometimes, though most preferred to go to Heron. What would happen once they came to notice the game Peregrine kept having with their women? It seemed likely my falcon would get a proper hiding. I was waiting for it.

But even in this matter the boy had it easy. He charmed the men, too. Of course he did not surpass me I in bestowing power to his figures or in seeing the things to come. I doubted whether he had any secret powers at all. Perhaps it was just that he had something I knew that I lacked, myself: he needed other people and was comfortable with them. He had a good word to say to every person, even to me. But I was nothing more than one

among them all.

Heron had spoken to me about it, that I was indifferent to the people I tattooed, in contrast to him. Not that it would have been necessary for the work itself. Heron just did not understand why I actually bothered making figures and putting my powers into them; why did I not support myself in some other way, since I was not able to love the people I gave my mark to.

– Why don't you gather berries and mushrooms, keep a little poultry and some cows. Or if you really wish to be a shaman, be one. Come and be my apprentice, Heron used to repeat. As if I'd have need of his teaching – a man who wept in my sight whenever he'd been drinking enough beer, and didn't even know enough to be ashamed afterwards. Sometimes he was extraordinarily tiresome and simple-minded indeed.

With the same tiresome simple-mindedness Peregrine charmed the men of the village. He could prate on half a day with any farm-hand about thoroughly trifling matters.

With the young men, he whispered out of my hearing, and sometimes he made them figures that were so indecent I couldn't even look at them.

– I did not tell you to make them like that, I said. – I won't put my power into those.

– Those figures are powerful enough in themselves, he said; and the young men did not even consider themselves swindled, they just laughed and paid the same as ever. And the older ones acted nearly as stupidly.

As time went on, I came to understand that if I didn't send Peregrine away very soon, I'd lose my authority altogether. But how would I have sent away my own puppy? I had to find some other way, and I did. It would not be well done, but it was the only way possible.

I thought I understood now what Heron had intended. He had sent Peregrine to me to teach me a lesson. Heron would be disappointed, and punished, too. I would find a way to humiliate him so badly he would not quickly forget it.

I let my thoughts mature. Carefully I chose the ingredients I was going to use when the time was ripe. I let Peregrine make ever more figures and withdrew myself completely ever more often. My conscience troubled me somewhat in the evenings when Peregrine crept to my side, smiling, and in every other way tried to please me, whenever he had time off from other people. I appeased myself with the thought that it perhaps would not be necessary for me to carry out my plan at all – perhaps people would notice that there was no power in Peregrine's figures and would again turn to me.

But as I could have guessed, before that Peregrine managed to go too far. Had he actually thought I wouldn't wake up as he got up from the bed in the small hours of the night and crept outside? Even he couldn't have been naïve enough

not to realize I'd guess where he went and from whence he returned, hands and face so permeated with woman-smell that a quick wash in the spring couldn't possibly hide it.

– I prepared new colours for you, I told him, when he set himself at the breakfast table, stroking his brow.

– The old ones would have done, yet, he smiled. – You know how to make colours that do not dry or fade.

– They'd lost their former brightness, anyway. We cannot afford to make mistakes, my boy. You know that, don't you?

I unintentionally raised my voice and the boy startled. I quickly set the pot of gruel down in front of him.

– I went to the spring, he said. – I didn't want to wake you up.

– You do as you wish and go where you want, I snapped, again unintentionally, and he looked at me like a child who has stolen a piece of bread from the cupboard.

– Eat now, I said, more calmly, and touched his neck lightly. – There'll be a lot of people coming today. Your fame has grown. I suppose hardly anyone goes to Heron any longer.

The familiar proud smile appeared on his face again. He groped at me, but I withdrew.

– It's going to be a busy day. Warm up some water and wash yourself.

I kept observing him during the day, when he started using the new colours. He dipped his needle happily and without worry as always. And why should he have suspected anything.

He never learned of my plan, although I'd done everything with the utmost care, and in a way where the results would be as plain and disastrous as possible. Each tattooing colour included plenty of poison. Not lethal, but otherwise as nasty as possible: the red produced difficulty of breathing, the blue filled the whole body with many-coloured blisters, the black made nails drop off from fingers and toes, the green raised a fever.

None of the poisons had any effect. All the evening I was waiting for some word from the village, filled with horror and eagerness. I would stand up for the boy; I would not give him up to be punished. Instead I'd give an antidote to the villagers and the promise that Peregrine would never touch any one of them with his needle. But no one arrived; not that evening, neither the next one. Little by little Peregrine used up all the colours. I did not get the time to prepare new and even stronger colours, for Peregrine left me.

He left in the night, secretly, as he had done before. This time, however, he hung back a while. I thought I heard him give a sob at the door, but when I lifted up my head, the cottage was already empty.

So how long did I listen to the voice of my pride? The voice that clearly let me understand I'd be the laughingstock of the whole village if I'd run after a youngling along the village street? Not for very long. How long does it take to string up the moccasins on your feet and snatch a cape to cover yourself? I knew to direct my steps towards the manor.

I ran like a black storm cloud. My skirts billowed while I ran and my tears fell on the wayside moss.

– My gift boy, my falcon ... he was given to me and to no one else.

Only then did I stop, breathless, when I already saw the manor house shining on the hill. In the morning light the building in its whiteness looked almost like a noble palace, like a place of wise and important people and of no clumsy peasants.

I thought of the manor women and my hate actually made me stop and think. By force I would not get Peregrine to return.

Woe for me. My feet turned back to the woods by themselves. My mind spiralled towards the marsh and I started running again. Bloody saliva was collecting in my throat, and I saved and filled my mouth with it, but now my steps were lighter. I ran with increasing swiftness and force; I closed my eyes and looked at the image of the marsh.

I pushed my way far into the marsh and then I spit my blood into the bog.

– Come, I cried, but I could hear no answer.

Only now did I feel fear, but only for a passing moment. Then I cried even louder:

– Come! I, Thistel, tell you to come!

I cried a third time. Now I realized my heart was thumping so hard that my whole body kept twitching. Even so, I opened my mouth to cry once more, but then I heard quiet laughter and a mocking voice repeating:

– I, Thistel, tell you to come!

The voice went on:

– Why do you think you can tell me to do things?

– You have always obeyed me. My powers are...

– Your powers? You have asked and I have given. Why shouldn't I, when you have treated me well? But now you are telling me, little one.

Again I heard laughter and now it had a sound that made me quickly say:

– I'm asking again. Please come with me.

The laughter stopped, and there was nothing to be heard save the sounds of animals and the soft whisper of wind farther off.

I waited some time, but finally there was nothing to it but I had to get up and walk away. I had always got everything I needed from the marsh, and brought my own little gifts to it. My eyes started to water again when I thought that now I'd perhaps lost even this – the source of my powers – because of Peregrine. No, perish the thought.

I dug a little bottle from my bosom and took a sip of strengthening. It eased my mind quickly, but I knew I could no longer stop. For a moment I lifted up my arms and looked at the figures on my hands. There was a curled snake in both hands. One had been made by Heron, so long ago its colour had faded, and the other was made by Peregrine, on my birthday. That one shone brightly and seemed to guide me, but it was I who was guiding myself. It was I who was driving myself.

Since I got no help from the marsh, I got myself other means. I had to make careful preparations, and so it was evening when I once more arrived to the manor. During the day I even started to hesitate, but whenever doubt entered my mind, I only had to think of Peregrine. I only had to remember how he entered my home and looked at me the first time.

I let the snakes loose from my sack as soon as I got to the courtyard. I told them to go and do evil, and they obeyed me yet, even though I forced them to act against their nature. They were thick black adders, and they slithered across the courtyard towards the doors so that the sand seemed to be moving and darkening. They left curly patterns in the sand, as if somebody had raked the whole courtyard.

I hurried behind my snakes into the main building. I'd never been there, but knew to head towards the staircase, since there was a terrible bawling and crying to be heard from upstairs. The double doors to the hall were open. A group of women – the mistress, the daughters and some ladies I did not recognize – were rushing about the room and trying to shake off the snakes. Those were hanging from their arms, necks and hair, and not releasing their grip. Peaces of furniture were falling down, crockery flying and breaking on the floor; even a window broke with a clink when something was thrown against it. I couldn't help smiling. Then I noticed an infant crying on the floor and saw that she, too, had been bitten. With a wry mouth I shouted:

– Where is Peregrine?

No one was able to answer; hardly anyone even noticed my presence. I left the women to their pain and returned downstairs. I found my way to the servants' quarters and the kitchen, where my adders were attacking the cook and

the maids. They were not able to run away, nor did they yet scream like the ladies upstairs, they just kept staring at the snakes, mouths and eyes wide open.

– Peregrine? I asked.

– He is not here anymore, one of the maids finally managed to answer.

I told my snakes to stop.

– Where has he gone?

– He went to Heron's.

Had I been mistaken? Had all my work been in vain?

– Did he leave a message for me? I screamed. Again I felt my face twisting while I screamed so it hurt. Even my voice sounded distorted and strange.

The cook begged me to tell off the snakes, but the maid answered:

– He left no message to anybody. He just came and went, and when he left he said that if we need him, we should henceforth seek him in Heron's cottage. No longer at Thistel's.

I waved my arms and the snakes continued their work. I knew they were just as horrified as their victims, but I cared nothing about them, either. I went on my way, black and terrible, tireless.

Heron's hut was in worse shape than mine: the roof hanging over the leaning wall like the cap of a rotten mushroom. The window looked like there would never be anyone there on the alert for incomers, everybody would just be allowed to come and go as they pleased. And yet, Heron never got tired of insisting that he does his work better than I mine. That in each of his figures he leaves a seed for good to grow from. He really did not understand that people would not care for his shoots, however regularly he would seed them.

And yet I had considered Heron my only friend. Time and time again I'd let him into my cabin and even visited him myself. Sometimes I had shut him out and sometimes left him myself, when I'd got tired of his whining and babbling. But was that enough of a reason to take back one's gift?

I kicked the door open. Inside it was dark as ever and I had to blink my eyes to get used to the darkness. I opened my bag, but then I heard the voice of Peregrine:

– No use bothering the creatures. Let them go.

I did as he told. Then I went to him and put my hand on his cheek.

– Why did you leave? And why did you leave in secret?

Peregrine kissed me on the mouth and turned his back.

I was left looking at the tattooed snakes on my hands. They could be discerned though it was dark. In the darkness even the older snake was more visible than in daylight, and only now did I realize that the snakes were identical. They mirrored each other.

So, finally, I was not surprised when Peregrine again turned

towards me, and it was Heron standing in front of me.

Peregrine's smooth head was covered with Heron's long hair. The child's face had resumed a beard and a rough surface. I could just get out the words:

– You are not able to do this.

– You've always underestimated me, Thistel. For my sake you sent your adders to bring death to the manor folk. But don't you worry; I've taken care of them.

As if I'd been sorry for the manor folk.

He stroked my hair. Then I felt fatigue filling me. I realized how much of power I'd passionately wasted during the day, and I knew it was too much. I was completely empty.

– Stay with me, Thistel. Teach me and let me teach you. We are old already. We should not waste...

– Was this why you went to such great trouble?

– I did not wish to annoy you. You know I'm not evil-minded.

He helped me up when I asked and tried to take me in his arms. I dragged myself to the door, anyway, and out. He did not call after me but I did feel his eyes. I had no strength left for walking and fell down.

Heron came to me and carried me back to the cottage. He covered me with a fur softened by wear and started to mix something in the pestle.

My eyes started to close.

– I will not have your shoots, I whispered, but Peregrine came into my dreams and lay beside me.

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About the author

Sari Peltoniemi writes for children and young adults. Her work include fantasy, sf and mainstream short stories and novels. Her fantasy novel *Hirvi* (Elk) won the Kuvastaja-prize for best Finnish fantasy novel in 2001 and was also a candidate for Junior-Finlandia, the annual prize for the best Finnish novel for children and young readers. One other example of her short stories is found in *De-dalus book for Finnish fantasy* (edited by Johanna Sinisalo.)



Photo © Anne Leinonen

FOREVER AND A DAY

J.K. Miettinen

Them was the good days them was, real good days, when bombs was falling down from the skies smashing everything to rubble and dust real savage like, rocking the whole world so hard as they thought the city were sure to get swallowed up by the ground, or that them explosions was at the very least gonna wake up them what was already dead from their forty winks. The fires, them was lovely as well, but not as good as the bombings which was their favourites. They watched the whole show from off the tops of the tallest buildings what they could find, knowing that they wouldn't get hit, that they wasn't going to die, whatever happened, on account of them being the ratboys or the half-human cockyroaches what lived in the caves and sewers underneath the city and what always survived everything like. Sometimes they shook their fists at the planes what dropped them bombs, threw rocks at them even when they was so high they couldn't even see them, just for laughs and good times. And good times was had by all.

When them what lived up in the city what were in the land between them two rivers started to pull down the statues Saddam felt a bit sad, felt even sorry for the butcher what had his name - or rather it were him what had the butcher's name like - not that the butcher had ever done nothing for him. Nor not for nobody. Except like butchered them.

"S all the same", Abu had explained to him. "We's all alike. Us 'n' the butcher. Just 'im up there and us down 'ere."

"Like 'ow?"

"'E's got his gang what controls what's up there like we controls what's down under."

Which wasn't true. They didn't control nothing. They was too young and too weak and too scared to control nothing. They was just scavengers, living off pickings, living off what others what was stronger than them was left them. Living off and in garbage.

"S our chance", Abu had went on. "Now we's it."

"It what?"

"It. Them what doesn't take no shit from nobody like. Them what dishes out shit to others. We can go up. Do what we likes."

So they did.

But they wasn't alone.

Everyone what was still alive in the city was climbing the mountains of rubble and digging in like they was them loonies what dug holes in the desert looking for old bones and shite. Cept them here was looking for stuff. What they found was bones, new bones and new bits of new corpses what was newly dead - and what hadn't been woken up by the bombs neither

but rather the other way round - and more rubble. But what they most found were aggro, folks hitting and punching other folks and fighting over what they was finding so back off you slimy camelface fore I cracks your shitty skull open!

So they got beaten and backed off, went where nobody else didn't want to go as there were nothing to find there. No pickings. No stuff. No shite. No nothing. What Saddam and Abu found under a mouldy bit of plank what nobody didn't want cept for them were something small and skinny and scrawny and what started licking Saddam's hand wiv its little tongue.

"S a doggie", Abu said. "A pup."

Saddam picked it up and the doggie started to lick his mug.

"Now we's got something what we can eat", Abu said.

"Yeah", Saddam said and scratched the doggie's head.

"Not much to eat, though."

Abu took a closer look. "S a bit."

"Yeah. Cept maybe we should keep it for a bit. Till it gets a bit more meatier."

"Yeah", Abu said. "More fatter like."

So Saddam gave the doggie a few crumbs of bread what he had on him and put it in his pocket.

"We's gotta give it a name", he said and had a big long think. "We'll call 'im Enkidu."

"Owzat?"

"Cos that's what my da were called."

"You never 'ad no da."

"Did too! Just 'e wasn't my proper da. More a sometime da like."

Now they was three, which was good, much better than two. Three, now that were a proper gang that were. You didn't mess wiv no gang what has three in it you didn't. Not if you didn't want your head done in. Like real vicious too.

"Them Ericans", Abu explained, as they roamed the city, spreading terror and panic everywhere they went, now as they was a gang of three and cos they was bad, "they's chrestums."

"Wazzat?"

"Dunno."

"'Sit good?"

He paused to think. "Them's got nice stuff, them Erican's 'as. Like real lovely stuff. Not like the shitty old shite what we's got, but like new shite, all like new. Shite what's got lecricity."

"New stuff's good. Better than old stuff. Old stuff's shite."

"Yeah", Abu said. "Old stuff's shitey shite."

"Ow's we gonna get Erican stuff?"

"We's gonna take it", Abu said. "Off them Ericans."

"Yeah", Saddam said and started laughing. "Gonna take it!"

"Off them Ericans!" Abu laughed and Saddam laughed and even Enkidu joined in cos 'e too thought it a good thing to rip off Erican shite.

They didn't have to wait more'n'a couple hours when they saw their first Ericans.

"Them don't look so tough", Abu said.

"They's all soft", Saddam said and Enkidu barked at them, lemme get a piece of youse, he were saying, I's gonna chew youse up I's gonna, just youse wait 'n' see youse twats youse dossers!

They started following them Ericans, real cunning like, lurking, just waiting for the right moment.

"Ow's we gonna do it?" Saddam said.

"Dunno yet", Abu said. "Prolly gonna 'ave to get rough wiv 'em."

"Yeah."

"They's only five. But we's still gotta be clever."

As they started to plan just how clever they was gonna have to be to rip off them Ericans, Saddam felt his pocket and it were all empty. Enkidu were gone.

"Oi you mutt git back 'ere!" he shouted.

"Where 'e go?" Abu said.

Across the street were a big old house what hadn't been bombed all to bits, real creepy like wiv huge winders and pilars and shit. The doors was open and at the threshold stood Enkidu wiv his little tail high up in the air.

"E want's us to foller 'im", Abu said and darted after the doggie, wiv Saddam close at his heels. When Enkidu saw that they was coming after him he started yapping and ran in. They follered.

"Wazziz place?" Saddam said.

The rooms in the place was all enormous and wide and high so as you could've put a house in them and still have room to stand on the roof, and all over the place there was like real old statues and other worthless old shite what were no good for nobody. Most of the old shite were smashed to bits and you could see places where some old shite had been carried off. There was bits of broken glass everywhere, and bits of clay too, everywhere. On the walls there was like maps and pics and old writing like. Most of that too were on the floor, torn to bits.

"I know what this is", Abu said. "'S'a seeum. Them chelologicans what dig in the desert, this is the useless shite what they dig up."

"Wazzit good for?"

"Dunno. Nothing."

They started breaking up what hadn't been broken yet, which wasn't all that much. Enkidu joined in like he'd never had as much fun in his young life and he prolly hadn't. They threw shite out the winders what had already been broken, but they could still find a few panes what wasn't all broken, so they broke them till there wasn't no glass left what wasn't all smashed up.

Saddam picked up a bit of clay. It was round and flat and had little bitty pics on both sides, but not no pics what you could see what they was. Just strange pics. Queer like. Stead of throwing it away or smashing it on the floor he put it in his pocket.

"That were a bit of all right", Abu said as they left.

"Yeah", Saddam said. "'S not all useless, the old shite."

When they was out on the street again them Ericans was gone. All gone.

"Prolly got scared", Abu said. "Ran off when they 'eard us thrashing the seeum."

"We's gotta be more careful next time", Saddam said. "So's not to let them get away."

The rest of the day weren't much use as they didn't find much any good shite. Just a little food and a little water so as to make them a little less hungry and a little less thirsty. Most of it they gave to Enkidu what were more hungry and thirsty than they was. When it got dark they crawled back to their underground lair what were a lot safer than up in the city wiv all its raving loonies. In the morning Saddam found the clay disk in his pocket, looked at it, wondered why he'd taken it, and threw it away. And Enkidu fetched it. He threw it again and Enkidu fetched it again, thinking it were a lovely game. So Saddam started to throw it for him to fetch cos that were what he liked to do and he didn't wanna stop no matter what.

Somewhere far away they heard like thunder or maybe a bomb what went off, not loud, muffled like, like a hiccup. Funny thing were that it sounded like it came from down below, funny cos there weren't no thunder nor wasn't no bombs down there. Not no hiccups neither.

"Now them Ericans is blowing up the underground", Abu said.

"Nah", Saddam said. "'S thunder."

"Nah. 'S not thunder. Came from down under."

"Can't bomb down under. Everybody knows that."

Everything went quiet. Real spooky quiet like.

Then, footsteps.

Real big loud echoing footsteps what made the ground like shake and tremble. Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

And the steps was coming nearer, the whole time they was coming nearer and nearer and nearer.

"We's gotta get out of 'ere!" Abu said.

But it were too late.

They was trapped.

The only way out were blocked by a strapping big monster what looked like it had slept in a pile of rubble for like just too long so as it had went and become a pile of walking rubble itself, but a really nasty pile of rubble what could really hurt you if it like felt like it. And it proolly did.

"My name is Namtar, angel of death!" the monster said real loud like. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

"Wazze on about?" Saddam whispered to Abu.

"Beats me", Abu whispered back. "A right loony."

"I am destiny incarnate", the monster what called itself Namtar continued, raising its voice. "I am fate, the harbinger of plague, the herald of disease eke pestilence, the patron of rape and likewise pillage, the ravisher of mankind!"

"Oi!" Abu said. "What you want then?"

Namtar seemed right baffled.

"I have lain in my tomb for a long time, a timeless time and now you puny humans have awakened me from my sleepless slumber! I will extricate my vengeance!"

"You wha'?" Saddam said and pressed Enkidu against him.

Namtar looked at them as he didn't like know as what to make of them.

"I am Namtar", he said so as there wouldn't be no confusion as to who he were. "Demon of the Underworld, chief minister of Ereshkigal."

"Who's that then?" Saddam interrupted.

"What?" the monster said.

"Who's that when 'e's at 'ome? Old wazzit?"

"Ereshkigal is Queen of the Underworld", Namtar said and started to sound miffed like.

"You got any stuff?" Abu said.

"Stuff?" Namtar said. "Stuff?"

"Our turf", Saddam said. "You wanna be 'ere you'se gotta pay tribute like."

"Pay you?" Namtar said. "Namtar pay you?"

"'E's a bit slow 'e is", Abu said. "Thick like."

"Namtar has been awakened and now Namtar shall make the Earth and all its puny and pitiful inhabitants tremble. I shall know no mercy. All resistance will be futile. Your cries for help shall be music in my ears."

"A right loony", Saddam said.

"Now Namtar shall get his powers back!"

"What you want wiv us then?" Abu said.

"I shall wield my terrible power with a vengeance! None shall escape my mighty wrath! None!"

Enkidu started barking. He didn't like the monster what were totally mental and all psycho like.

"Now you must give Namtar his disc."

"'E wants the disc", Saddam said.

"Wha' disc?" Abu said.

Enkidu snapped up the disc and started chewing on it.

"'E wants tha'?" Abu said.

"The disc belongs to Namtar", the monster said, "and is the seat of all his powers. Therefore Namtar must have it, you miserable puny humans!"

"What you gonna pay for it?" Abu said.

"How dare you cross Namtar?"

"'S ours it is", Saddam said. "Cos we's found it."

"So what you gonna give for it?" Abu said.

The moster were getting a bit angry like and going all red and having like steam coming out of its gob.

"Namtar will pay nothing! Namtar will take what he wants! Suffer the consequences of my wrath you lowly worms!"

The monster lifted his fists and started banging on the walls like crazy. When his fists didn't go through the rock he were all surprised and like embarrassed. He tried again to smash the rock wall wiv his fist wiv like new rage and anger and only managed hurt his hand.

"Stupid berk", Abu said.

"'E needs 'is thingy", Saddam said. "'S 'is power."

"Very well, you incredibly rude little creatures that shall be like the dust beneath my sandals when my powers are restored. Namtar is not an unreasonable deity. If you ants will help Namtar, Namtar in all his benevolent kindness will not torture you too much. Namtar will not crush your bones nor devour your entrails nor defecate in your skulls."

Abu and Saddam moved closer to the mouth of the cave. Namtar saw what it were as they was trying to pull and moved to block it.

"You cannot attempt to trick Namtar", he said and just like when he thought he had them cornered Enkidu slipped out between his legs and in his mouth he had the disc.

"Curses!" Namtar bellowed and turned. And when he like turned Abu and Saddam slipped out. Namtar tried to follow them but they was real slippery and fast too, and Namtar were old and falling apart like cos he had been sleeping for like thousands of years. Nor did he have no powers. Plonker.

"So", Abu said when Namtar had stopped chasing them, out of breath. "What you gonna give us for the thingy?"

Namtar weren't no fool and he knew he were licked and beaten. And he also knew them boys had him now but once he got his powers back the sandal would be on the other foot like. And then - and bleeding then - who'd have the last laugh then?

"'N' don't try giving us no shite neither", Saddam said.

"We only wants good stuff", Abu said.

"New stuff", Saddam said.

"Not no shite", Abu said.

Namtar started digging deep in his clothes. He were dressed in some shitey old rag what you could see in them

real old pics of them real old geezers what lived in the real old cities what was before the city what were now. He pulled up a lovely piece of green rock almost the size of his fist. It were his good luck charm, his talisman, but he knew he'd get it back in a jiffy.

"Wazzit?" Saddam said.

"It is", the monster said, "the legendary Emerald of Utnapishtim, son of Ubara-Tutu, he of the eternal life, from the faraway land of Dilmun where the sun rises, and given him by the Queen of the Underworld Ereshkigal."

"Rubbish", Saddam said.

"You don't got nothing else?" Abu said. "New stuff?"

Namtar dipped his claws back in and came up empty. He didn't have nothing else. Nowt.

Saddam grabbed the rock and gobbled on it and started to polish it like and it became real bright and like lit up the whole underground passage they was in.

"Namtar has fulfilled his part of the bargain. Now you filthy vermin will give Namtar his disc. And then Namtar shall deal with you as behooves him and befits you, you impudent eggs."

"Yeah", Abu said. "Where is it?"

They looked around. Enkidu were still chewing on it.

"Stop it!" Namtar shouted real angry like. "Stop masticating on the seat of my power, you miserable puny dog!"

"Enkidu", Saddam said. "Le's 'ave it then."

Enkidu looked up and cocked his little head. When Saddam tried to take the disc he didn't let go of it cos this were a lovely new game and pulling at the disc wiv his teeth were like brilliant, real super fun. And when they had tugged for a bit Enkidu thought of another game what were fun too. More fun.

He ran off wiv the disc.

"Bollocks", Abu said and they was off chasing the doggie all three of them. The monster Namtar weren't much of a runner and when they was at the opening where they always climbed up on the ground he stopped.

"I cannot step out in the sun without my powers!" he shouted. "You must bring me my disc!"

"Yeah", Saddam said.

"You must bring it to me!" Namtar continued, his voice all whiny like, almost like weepy. "I have more valuables, more jewels, more riches you can ever imagine in your minds! Bring me my disc and I shall make you rich beyond your wildest dreams!"

"New shite?" Saddam said.

"New shite?" Namtar repeated, looking all confused like.

"Yeah", Abu said. "We only want new shite."

"Yes", Namtar said and heaved like a heavy sigh. "Yes, very well. I shall procure for you all the new shite you will ever need. You shall bask in shite that is newer and shittier than any

shite that has heretofore ever been gazed upon by human eyes. This I, Namtar, promise you pathetic miserable little monkeys."

"We's gonna be rich like", Saddam said.

"Yeah", Abu said.

"Go, you miserable eaters of dung and bat-droppings", Namtar shouted. "Go!"

"Yeah", Saddam said and they climbed up and shot after the doggie.

"Enkidu!" Saddam shouted. "Enkidu! Where is you? Git 'ere!"

He kept shouting his lungs out and Enkidu came to him wiv the disc in his teeth and ran straight off wiv it and they ran after him.

"Oi git back 'ere you stupid mutt!" Abu shouted.

All the shouting just egged Enkidu on.

When they had chased him for a long time they finally found him sitting and waiting for them.

"Oi!" Abu said. "Where's the disc?"

Enkidu cocked his head and didn't say nothing.

"Oh bollocks", Saddam said. "The blighter's gone and buried it."

"What you do that for!" Abu said, mad like. "We could've been rich. Bloomin stinking filthy rich like."

"Yeah", Saddam said. "Could've."

"Now we only got one crappy merald. When we could've got lots and lots of new shite 'n' like everything."

Enkidu looked at them and then he started to lick himself.

"But now we's free to eat the bloomin' doggie", Abu said. "So as 'e's of some use."

"Yeah", Saddam said and picked Enkidu up and scratched him behind his ears cos you couldn't be mad at no dumb animal what didn't know no better and had no idea what it was like doing, and started feeding him some dried grapes what he'd found as they was chasing him. "But maybe we should wait a bit till he's a bit more fatter."

"Yeah", Abu said and gobbled on the emerald and wiped off the dust off it.

And real lovely it were too, real lovely.

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About the author

Unfortunately JK Miettinen is one of those quite tedious writers who absolutely refuse to disclose anything personal about themselves: Sufficient unto the writer is the prose thereof.

RIDING WOLFHOOD

Jenny Kangasvuo



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Dear child, sit down and listen to my story - no, don't be afraid! Sit here, just beside me... sit! Don't look so shaky, I just want you to listen... you have beautiful hair, dear.

Once, not so long ago, I was as young and pretty as you are, though you might not believe it. Your hair is golden and my hair was dark brown, but still, young maidens are all so pretty. My skin was soft and my eyes were blue - as they still are. Look into my eyes! Look! Aren't they blue? Yes, yes they are. Don't try to run away, dear.

The day of my spring wedding scented like grass and milk, like the rarest spring days do. I was dressed in white silk and green velvet, and a poet could have written a sonnet of my beauty. Instead I heard praises from my family and my groom and I glowed more after each compliment.

Don't scowl, little one, don't look so spiteful - I was a beauty. You will grow old and ugly too, dearest, and then some young pretty thing will scowl at you. I scowled at old people too at your age, and I have been punished for that by fate.

But to my wedding. I was the only daughter of a wealthy family, I was pampered and spoiled. My father had arranged my marriage with the eldest son of a certain bourgeois family. Our union would bind the families together and even more wealth would result. The marriage was a good deal for me as well: the bride-groom was few years younger than me and it would be easy to push him around. I didn't love him, of course, but I

found him handsome enough to share a bed with.

Even though the marriage was a deal between two fathers, the wedding was mine alone. I had planned every little detail with my mother. I sat on a honorary seat behind a great feast table. This was my day, and after some wine, soft kisses from the groom and tender meat of a veal I felt that I was the centre of this small world. Everyone looked at me - my father, my father-in-law (a little bit of lust in his eyes), my groom. The ladies, except my proud mother, looked envious, and I didn't hide that I enjoyed it. There were almost a hundred people in our wedding, but the two families, bound together, sat at the same table.

It happened when my father was proposing the first toast for the wedded couple.

There was a quarrel at the main door, which had been left wide open for guests to come and go. From my seat I could see straight to the door: one of our servants was raising his voice at a hag and a dirty child. I hoped that the servant would get rid of them. The hag's hair was so tangled that it resembled moss and the brat was dressed in rags and dirt so that I couldn't recognise its gender.

My father was distracted by the beggars, but continued his speech for the toast. The beggars went away and the wedding day was beautiful again.

Then it was my father-in-law's turn to propose a toast.

And in the middle of his speech the beggars entered the banquet hall from the side door. They looked very humble and were very silent, and waited for the speech to end before starting to beg. My father-in-law didn't notice them but I saw my father staring at them angrily.

When the speech was over, the hag begged and promised to bless me and my groom if she and her brat got some bread and maybe some meat. I shivered at the thought of being blessed by such a creature. My father saw that and ordered the servants to throw the beggars out.

"You dare to ask for the meat meant for our wedding guests! We don't need your blessings, beggar!"

The hag and the brat seemed scared and fled. How was it possible for them to be so disgusting? I decided that I would never give alms to dirty and ugly people - only to those that could keep themselves clean and neat.

For a moment, there was peace and happiness. I ate some marmalade and sipped wine while the toasts continued. I got so many compliments for my beauty, prudence and good manners that I got tired of them.

When I felt the first sting of pain I just thought I had eaten too much. A moment later the pain got worse and I thought about poison. And then it struck, the most horrible agony I had ever felt, more horrible than most people will ever feel. I have given birth, dear, as you will, some day. Giving birth is very painful and on my wedding day I felt like my every muscle and organ was giving birth.

I staggered and tried to reach my father's hand but saw that he was staggering too. My groom seemed to have horrible convulsions and my mother-in-law was twofold from pain. I could barely see through my agony, but what I saw seemed to resonate with the pain. Everyone in our two families was convulsing. My groom's younger brother tried to grasp his mother's hand; my aunt had fallen on the floor and great spasms waded through her body; my grandmother-in-law banged her head on the table.

No-one helped us. The guests retreated disorderly and the servants just fled.

My ears were ringing, but I could hear the clear voice of a child. "They are jumping and shaking now!" In the middle of the banquet hall stood the brat of the beggar. I still couldn't see if it was a girl or a boy, but it was calm and a little amused. It looked at us for a while, then ran away and I saw its dirty bare feet.

The convulsions got worse. I heard something rip and realised that it was my wedding dress. I closed my eyes and wailed, tried to hug myself but my hands didn't obey me. I heard screams around me but couldn't recognise them. My body shook and I hoped I would die.

Then, suddenly, I felt good.

The feeling wasn't just the result of pain stopping. I felt

stable and content. I tried to get up, but got caught by the shreds of my wedding dress. I shook and bit at them until I got free. I stood up, and for a while everything felt normal. The hall was quiet.

There was a strange equilibrium.

Then I heard the child's voice again. "They have been turned into wolves now!" The child stood in the middle of the wooden floor and looked at us, unafraid.

I looked around and saw my groom freeing himself from the rags that once were his wedding costume. I recognised him immediately from his scent. I went to him and he kneeled before me, ears and tail low. He licked my lips and I let him. Father came and looked straight to me, and I lowered my head. My groom licked also his lips, but I did not.

Soon everybody was around us, sniffing and being sniffed. For a moment it seemed that my father and my father-in-law would have a fight. They snarled at each other, heads and tails high, but father's stare endured and father-in-law lowered his head and yielded.

I was confused, yet focused. Various smells caused vertigo but I could recognise every one of them. The smell of a non-weaned baby, scent of rosewater, lingering smells of roast beef and carrot pie.

"Out, wolves! Out, out!" The hag had come in. Her stench horrified us all. She drove us out by whipping us with a twig. "After seven years you can beg for bread and meat, and if you get it you become humans again!"

We ran through village towards the woods smelling of pine, game and safety. There was no-one to stop us.

We were ten lone and deranged wolves put together. We were led by every tempting smell: the scent of fresh faeces of a deer, of a rotting carcass of a lost calf. We were like a bunch of silly cubs of a dog, free in the forest for the first time. And in a sense, that was what we were. Inexperienced and careless cubs.

We hadn't had loving parents and siblings to teach us to play, hunt and live harmoniously without fights. Yes - there were some fights: everyone accepted father's authority, but my uncle and father-in-law fought before my uncle was finally settled higher in the hierarchy than my father-in-law. My mother and mother-in-law snarled at each other and so did I: I was stronger than my mother, but who would fight someone whose milk one had drunk?

For a while everyone was out only for themselves. How long, I don't know - there isn't a rigid sense of time in a wolf's mind. The witch who had blessed us had known that we wouldn't count those seven years that she had set and that most probably none of us would ever be human again.



But I am, my dear, and soon you will hear what kind of tragedies I had to encounter before that. I see that I have enchanted you with my story. Good!

The woods weren't large and most of the wolves that wandered to the area ended up as pelts. The villages were quite close to each other and woods were split by paths. Any normal wolf would have realised how heavy the stench of humans was, but we had lived with it and didn't find it unusual.

We didn't know what it meant to be a wolf, and neither had we time to properly find out. There were no other wolves to guide us - and had there been, they would have avoided us. Some of us might have been able to join a wolf pack as the lowest level members, but for father that would have been impossible.

The first common hunt was an accident. My groom, me and mother were playing tag when we rushed a rabbit out of a bush. We had smelled it, but didn't really care about it. We surrounded it, and suddenly the game of tag became more serious. I ran on the one side of it and my groom on the other - and when it took an abrupt jump, mother caught it.

For a moment we were astonished: how easy it had been! Rabbits are no easy game, they are fast and unpredictable - at least for inexperienced hunters that we all were. We shared the rabbit in peace and silence, and it was the first shared meal we had.

Through hunting our pack was slowly formed. Father was the leader, but mother was equally high in the hierarchy beside him. My mother proved to be a true hunter - it was easy to hunt when she was leading. Our hunting provided more food we could eat, and for the first time we could share it. Grandmother could eat well too, although she couldn't join us

in hunting treks. We hunted deer and even moose - though my uncle got kicked by a moose and broke his rib.

We ate fat summer meat, slept in the sun, played together and caressed each other. Sometimes we howled. The sense of togetherness during a howl was more intense than anything I had ever felt as a human - or would ever feel.

All summers are wonderful, but still that first summer of wolfhood was the most memorable. Scents and smells were new and fresh and hunting gave us both enjoyment and food.

As a contrast, the first winter was harsh. After hunting together in summer we were still clumsy. And the game was more desperate. It is far easier to hunt sweet fat deer through meadows than chase lean deer through snow.

Grandmother died during the winter. It was very sad, but winters are never easy for the old ones. We accepted her death and waited for spring.

In spring my mother got in heat. It was something we hadn't expected and my mother was like a bitch whelp in her first heat. She didn't know how to behave, how to show her dignity to males, and although father was her mate, it happened that most of the males of our pack mounted her. In later years that wouldn't have been possible: mother would have not allowed it and other males would have respected her too much. But the scent of my mother's first heat was just too new, too delicious to be resisted.

Maybe it was meant to be. Mother got pregnant, and gave birth to seven cubs who had several fathers. We could smell who were their fathers and through those cubs we finally formed a true pack. The puppies were our treasure, our reason to be. They gave us joy and love. Everyone was ready to play with them, to regurgitate food for them, even though that would have left us hungry.

We dug us a big den near a river. The puppies grew and although all of them didn't survive, we were an effective hunting party when the winter came. The cubs grew to be better hunters than us who had learned to hunt so late.

In coming years we lived a peaceful and content life. Of course there were some quarrels - some strong cubs quarrelled with others and left. Another wolf-pack was formed by these cubs and the boundaries of our turfs were set. After some fights it was easy to live together. The other pack didn't wander to our area and we respected theirs.

One autumn mother fell through thin ice and drowned. This resulted in some confusion, at first, but a new hierarchy was formed quickly. Father was getting old, and my groom's younger brother confronted him. Father avoided his stare and didn't snarl at him. I didn't need to fight with anyone: my place in the hierarchy of bitches was the highest after my mother.

I have called the male that was wedded to me at that

distant spring morning 'my groom', but his younger brother became my true mate. My groom was shy and obedient and never tried to gain status. His younger brother was more vigorous, and the wisest male of our pack. It was natural for him to become the leader.

He was just, he cared about the puppies and old ones, he didn't enjoy fights and he was very tender. And playful and humorous too! I enjoyed my life with him, and when my first spring heat came, I was more than ready to copulate with him. Those few weeks of heat were intense, and he mounted me several times, sometimes even on the same day. I didn't need to shoo the other males away: my younger brothers were just too young and my male elders were too old.

In summer I gave birth to a litter of the most beautiful and good scenting puppies. I licked them carefully, bit their navel cords and ate the afterbirth. When they sucked my milk and made small hungry whines, I felt utterly content. I did not remember my life as a human, for there was no reason to think about the past or the future either. I loved my cubs and my mate; we were good leaders who could provide security and food to our pack and that was enough.

My cubs grew strong and healthy and our pack became too big. One of my daughters left when she grew old enough - she didn't try to win a higher place in the hierarchy, she was too wise for that, but she was too strong and stubborn to stay either. She found another lone wolf and they formed a third pack in our woods. Their turf was very small and its boundaries were constantly changing, but its existence meant our turf's shrinking.

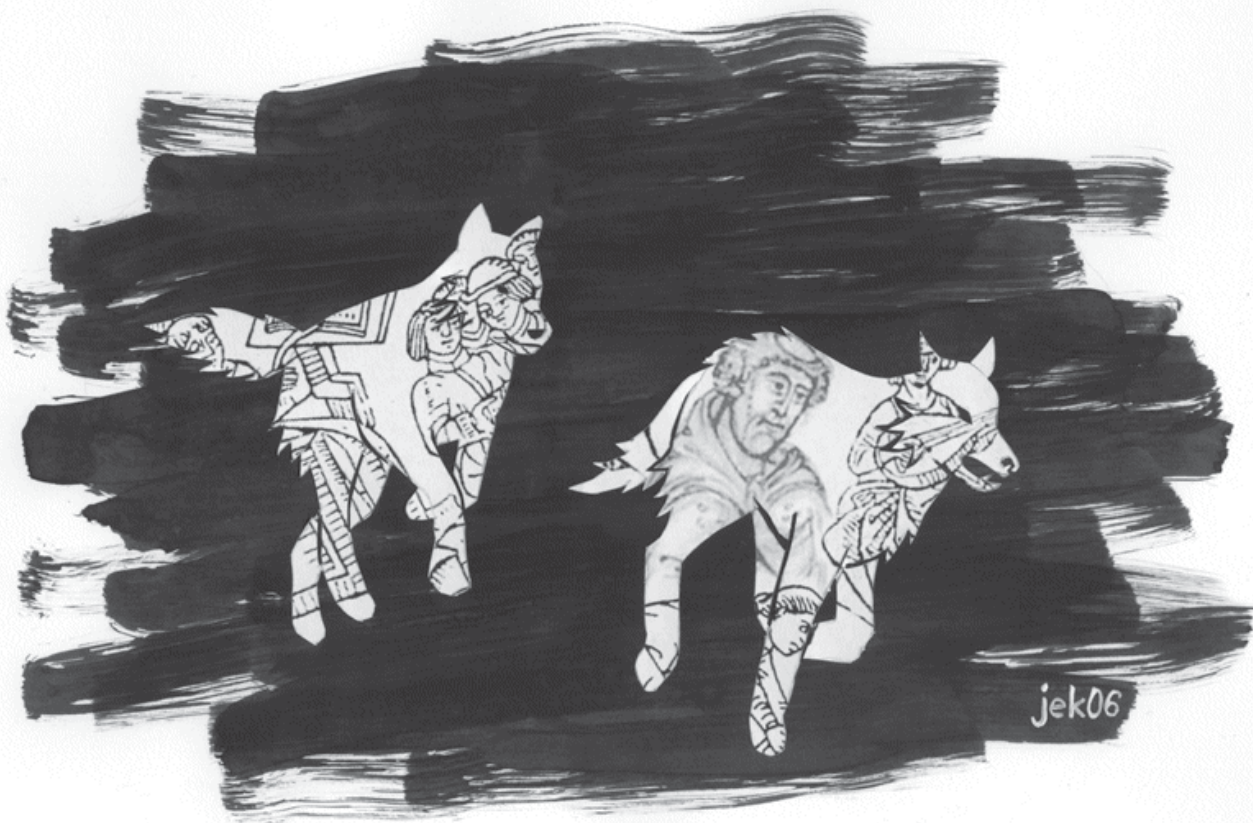
The woods were too small for three wolf packs. The game became scarce, even in summer. And when the winter came, the inevitable happened.

The winter was harsher than ever before. Deer were hunted out or they moved away. We lived on small game again, something we hadn't done after the first summer. We needed to hunt every day to full our stomachs. There were no lazy days in a warm den beside a moose carcass that would feed us for several days. Our large pack was starving.

In the middle of winter, when it felt like we had never felt anything but constant hunger, I decided that it had to end. There were villages around the woods, and although the stench of humans was terrifying, starving to death was even more so. Seven of us went to the village during the night. We tried to be as sneaky as we could, but seven wolves aren't invisible. We could sense the scent of other wolves in the village, my daughter's scent too. I realised that the village had become the last possible source of food for all packs of the woods.

A dog barked at us. My brother snapped its spine quickly. It smelled strange, even wolfish, and if it had been a bitch in heat, he would have rather mounted than killed it. Now it became meat.

We entered the shed that was nearest to the woods. Sheep were held there and we killed several of them - as many as we could. The kills were easy and soon the shed scented deliciously of meat. We tore one lamb into pieces and ate it, just to regain strength and then started to drag food to the den.



That night we ate well. Every shrunken stomach was filled and we still had some food left. We could rest and forget running after moles for some time. But our rest was not enjoyable - we were exhausted and it was still winter. Soon the hunger would return.

But most of us would never be hungry again. The villagers attacked our den only two days after our visit to the village.

I don't remember much of it, the incident is shadowed by horror and sorrow. I remember the horrible smell of wolf blood, my children screaming in pain, booming noises of arquebuses and men's shouts. I was the other leader of the pack, but there was nothing I could do. We tried to defend ourselves and each other, but the men wiped out our pack. I remember seeing my pack members die, one by one.

I wonder why I didn't die that winter day. Maybe I was spared to tell the story. You have listened to me well, dearest child, but there will not be a happy ending to this story.

I hid in an abandoned foxhole that I dug bigger, and lived by mice again. I wandered around in the woods, but found no traces of other living wolves. The smell of our turf markings was fading. I marked the limits few times with my urine, but didn't care to continue that. There was no-one else than me to smell them.

In a most glorious late spring day I came across a girl picking herbs.

The day was as beautiful as my wedding day had been, but I didn't remember it then.

The girl stared at me, but didn't look particularly scared. She had picked her baskets full of various herbs and was now having a meal. We looked at each other for some time. Then the girl cut a slice of her rye bread and pierced it with her knife. She handed the knife toward me.

"Come on, poor hungry wolf! Take some bread, there is enough for both of us!"

I hesitated, then took some steps toward her, but didn't dare go any nearer.

"Oh, you are a meat eater. You might not like bread. I'll give you some meat too." The girl cut a piece of salted pork and pierced it too, then handed it to me.

The smell of pork fat was intoxicating. I walked slowly toward the girl, afraid, my head and tail low, ready to run away if she would threaten me.

"Come on, don't be afraid! Take it."

I took the last steps toward the girl and snatched the meat and the bread and ran away.

I ate the bread and the meat. The meat tasted strange, very salty and smoky - not as good as fresh meat after the hunt. But after dozens of bony lemmings it was delicious.

Then I felt a terrible agony. I rolled around and whined and

panted and the pain just continued forever. I remembered faintly having felt such pain before, but the agony hindered me from pondering it more. My spine stretched and my tail shrank, my head reformed and my hairs got sucked into my skin.

After a while I felt senseless and shivering. I couldn't sense smells well and was almost deaf and blind. The grass pinched and itched me. I hugged myself to get warm and then I realised: I was human again!

I stood up, but the position felt odd. I was so high that I felt dizzy. There were no trails of smells I could follow. The homely woods felt unfamiliar.

I walked to my den, but couldn't squeeze in. I knew I wasn't wolf, but I didn't know what else could I be.

I robbed eggs from birds' nest, but lemmings were too quick for me. And if I had caught them, how would I have eaten them? I had no useful teeth or a strong stomach.

The first night was terrible. I cried for my mate, my pack and my puppies, for my wolfhood that had been taken from me so cruelly.

The beggar's revenge had been cunning. She had given me a happy and content life, but now when it was taken away, I would never be content again. I did not know whether to thank her for the years of wolfhood I had had or curse her for the years I had left as a human.

After a few days I had to go to the village. I was naked and speechless, but the same people who had killed my pack, took care of me now. I got food and clothes, and after some time I was given wool and a spindle. I did not know how to spin - I had never needed to learn that as a daughter of a wealthy man - but I learned quickly. I was silent and the villagers didn't disturb me. I spun and got food, that was enough for me. The whirl of a spindle distracted me from thinking that I had lost everyone I loved.

The final punishment for my ancient pride came when I saw my daughter's pelt spread on the floor of the village mayor. I fell on my knees over the pelt and cried. I had no one to blame for her death, not even myself. We had been hungry, and without food we all would have died. Ravaging the village sheep had been my decision, but it hadn't been a wrong decision in the middle of winter.

Now I have told almost all of my life story, there isn't much left. I have lived as a spinster in this village and told my story to anyone who wants to listen - and even to those who don't want to, like you, my dear. No, don't shake your head, I know you didn't want to sit beside me and listen. Now, you are very pretty when you are smiling, dear, please, smile a little bit more for me.

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Background of the short story Riding Wolfhood

Werewolf mythology is weird. A poor human being changes into a ravenous beast because of a bite, magic or curse. Rarely because of his/her bloodline, but the change is always a bad thing in a way or another. Although popular culture has bent werewolf mythology into different shapes, fundamentally werewolf is an uncontrolled, dangerous thing.

I have always been baffled by the werewolf mythology. The wolf is the first animal companion for humans! The social structure of the pack of wolves or humans is similar enough to make cooperation possible. How else could we have hunted together for thousands of years? Why the werewolf would be any more violent or blood-thirsty than you, me or the pooch at the neighbour?

I have written quite a few werewolf stories in which humans changing into wolves change, well, into wolves and not into deranged and hairy monster yearning for virgin blood. The core of my view on werewolves is the idea of similarity between wolves and humans, and the similarity is not due to hunger for power or blood, but due to ordinary things.

Most of my earlier werewolf stories were never finished, and those that were, are quite lousy. Riding Wolfhood is the

first one to be published. I wrote it in English for Baltastica 2003, which was a short story competition for people living around the Baltic Sea. The story got a honorary mention, but after three years the text has become unfamiliar. I like the voice of the protagonist, but the story could have been told with more swing.

I remember that I decided to borrow the old tale of wedding party that changes into wolves because the tale is a part of general European tale tradition. In my story, however, changing into wolves is not the culmination of horror, but a beginning of the story. I wanted to tell what happened during those seven years that the wedding party had to spend as wolves. The wolves of my story are just wolves, not mythical beasts. They eat lemmings when the game is scarce, suckle their cubs and argue about the hierarchy of the pack. And in the end, the greatest tragedy for a wolf is the same as for humans: to lose their loved ones and be left alone.

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Jenny Kangasvuo writes her doctoral dissertation about Finnish bisexuality at the Department of Art Studies and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Oulu. The hobby of Japanese popular culture changes sometimes into a job because of lectures and articles. Sometimes she draws, writes stories and runs. And cooks medieval food.





THE SHADOW OF THE EARTH

Petri Laine, translation: Liisa Rantalaiho

Mariko was licking a permapop, sprawling on her back on the lawn. Earth floated directly above her, white wisps of cloud covering parts of Africa and the seas around it, the continent just diving into the night side. The planet was upside down from its standard representations but Mariko didn't bother to change her orientation. The dome skeleton sliced the scenery into strips, as always. Mariko protected her eyes from the sunlight. In the opposite direction she could see a strip of black space. The dome cities circled Earth in a chain, turning their bottom away from the planet to increase protection from the sun's heat.

Eiko shook Mariko's arm. "Are you dreaming or what?"

"Don't. I was just looking at the sight."

"So what's so special about it?"

"Have you forgotten it's Lottery Day today?"

"You are sometimes really weird", Eiko said, stood up and adjusted the hem of her sailor blouse under the skirt.

"We might even win this time", Mariko sighed, twisted herself up and straightened her socks. They only had a few minutes before the lesson would start. Perhaps they'd even get to watch the Lottery live. Last time the city had won, Mariko had been just a year and a half. She had no memories from the time, nothing but the holo-recordings mother had taken.

Mariko was getting tired of raspberry. She adjusted the permapop's electric potential that stimulated the gustatory nerve to liquorice aroma, licked it and smiled, satisfied.

"Button up your shirt", Eiko said. "And put the scarf round your neck. The teacher doesn't approve of a revealing neckline."

"He doesn't want us to excite men", Mariko laughed. She lifted the hem of her school dress and moved her legs invitingly, flirting to Eiko.

"Silly!" Eiko screamed and pushed Mariko.

Hand in hand, the girls strode through the park. The central buildings were all of concrete and glass merged together, the only exception to the scheme being the low Shinto temples and the green areas, where the copious

vegetation bound carbon dioxide from the air and produced oxygen. A dense net of air train tracks threaded between the houses.

The air-conditioned wind wrestled with the hot weather. The sun had already partly moved behind the planet's curve, the shadows moving fast, until the shadow of the Earth completely covered the city. The buildings lit up, glowing like paper lanterns.

The school yard was crowded with black-haired students in school dresses, returning from the mid-day lunch break. When the bell rang, Mariko and Eiko shuffled along amidst the throng into the building and sought their way to the classroom. The teacher, a young man in his thirties, watched the students' entrance with a fierce expression. The tables and chairs were set in half-a-circle. In the middle of the room, the repler field had already been switched on, though it still showed nothing but the ghost of the test-signal.

"Great, we'll get to see the transmission!" Mariko cheered.

The students got set just in time before the glittering Lottery symbol appeared in thridee holo-image. The camera panned the studio and approached the official supervisors. The secretary, a young Asiatic woman, had died her hair snow-white.

The babble of voices in the class deafened the speaker's English.

"Shut up!" Mariko snapped.

Little by little, the noise in the classroom died down and everybody concentrated on the Lottery. The supervisors growled their greeting to the secretary's introduction. After a nerve-wracking wait, the Lottery balls descended into the transparent pyramid. Immediately, the balls were floating in zero-gee. The pyramid turned slowly round, stochastically changing its direction and speed. The balls tumbled and collided with each other. Each corner was lighted by a red-hued laser light pointing inside, to the middle of the side directly opposite. The rays intersected each other at the exact centre of the pyramid.

News flashes kept showing samples of crowds in the different metropolises. The broadcast was intensely followed at home, on the work sites and the streets. People's eyes were petrified with tension.

The Lottery machine was turning faster and faster. The balls seemed to go crazy. The clock ticked the seconds: 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1...

The device stopped. One of the balls had been imprisoned in the rays' intersection point, while the other balls flopped to the bottom of the pyramid when gravity returned. The secretary opened a small hatch in the pyramid's side and picked up the ball. She handled it so that the official supervisors could see it all the time. Then she unscrewed the ball's two halves. Inside there was a white note which she picked up.

"And the city is..."

The students stared incessantly at the woman whose long fingers were unfolding the winning ticket.

"New Tokyo!"

Some of the students exploded in a yell. There was no sign of traditional Japanese dignity when even the boys waved their arms and hugged each other. But others just sat there, applauded mildly or kept shaking their head.

Mariko was bouncing, with a broad smile on her face.

"Eiko, we are going to Earth! Isn't it wonderful!"

"Sure," Eiko said, leaning on her elbow.

The broadcast was showing cheering crowds. The older people, especially, still felt attracted to the home planet. Many youngsters had no interest in history; they'd been born in the space city and had lived there all their lives.

Mariko thought about the recordings her mother had sometimes shown her. In the pictures she was toddling in long grass, underneath a real blue sky. Birds flew through the air; the clouds hang low, ominous like mountains that would fall over you. For some reason she was fascinated by the scenery.

Mariko woke up from her memories to somebody tugging at her sleeve. Eiko pointed to the centre of the classroom.

"Isn't that your mother?"

The Lottery had changed to a special newsflash. Mariko grew more serious when she saw her mother in the picture. Not that she wouldn't have been used to the publicity caused by her mother's term of office, but this time mother was not being her usual smiling self. She looked grave and pale, eyes cast down to her feet.

Mariko couldn't hear for the noise what the news was about. There was a crush of people around mother. And even more strange was that mother was coming down the office stairs with a police escort.

"I don't know what's troubling her," Mariko insisted.

The wrist repler threw Eiko's pale ghost image into the room. Mariko sat crosswise on her bed, her back against the wall, playing with her multitoys that had taken the form of a rabbit softie. Mariko was bored; the poor bunny was speedily hurled to the wall where it changed its appearance to a big, hairy orb.

"Want me to play with you?" it whined. "Then tell me what to be."

"She's just sitting there, hunched on the living room couch, squeezing a pillow. No chance of getting to watch holo-programmes today."

Mariko would have liked to watch some historical or recent documents of Earth, but there was almost nothing available. The channel's programmes were more to adult taste than for the youngsters, anyway. Sumo wrestling, on and on.

Eiko was eating noisily. "Talking of programmes, they had those carton packed tapes in the museum, and then those shiny discs people would have in the old days."

Mariko looked at her friend who seemed to be in a world of her own.

"They had series of two-dimensional pictures in them, and it looked like movement," Eiko continued. "Yes, and sound too, of course. Just think, you could watch whatever you wished any time you wished."

Mariko, too, remembered vividly the museum visit by her class, it had been like time travel to the past. There'd been endless things to look at: different objects and utensils, photos of the people and sights on different continents, well-preserved clothes, jewellery, books... But the most fascinating had been the paper comics on show in the glass cases.

In the old days, any one was allowed to own things they could admire and touch. It was different nowadays. Production was controlled; the resources and the sun's energy were allocated to manufacturing of necessities only. The metropolis distributed goods to its inhabitants and guaranteed a standard level of living. Commercial competition was non-existent, advertising prohibited by law.

"I feel so bored I'm going to die," Mariko muttered. Mother's situation bothered her. Usually, mother had some work to do at home, too, but not today. When Mariko had tried to ask anything about tomorrow, mother hadn't answered.

The news had said something about a memo to which mother had referred. It shouldn't have been anything special, but the memo had been marked top secret, they said.

"So what was it about, anyway?" Mariko asked. Eiko looked surprised. "The memo?" Mariko specified.

“Something about Earth,” Eiko answered. “About the conditions there... but they aren’t telling anything more about the background. The politicians are hushing it up.”

“So-o exciting. Whatever can be that secret about Earth?”

Eiko set her plate aside and looked serious. “They said in the news that your mother will probably be forced to resign. Pretty heavy, that...”

Mariko kept staring at the walls.

“Aren’t you scared by it?” Eiko asked, cautiously.

Mariko shook her head and examined her fingernails. “It’s her career, not mine.”

“She’s your mother, anyhow.”

“That wasn’t my choice, either.”

Mariko was afraid Eiko would start asking how they got along, she and her mother. Fortunately Eiko just sighed and turned to lie on her back. Through her soles Mariko felt a slight trembling in the floor. The city’s steering rockets were firing corrections to keep the metropolis on its orbit and not sink down too low.

Mariko threw a kiss to Eiko. Eiko waved back. Mariko cut the connection from her bracelet and Eiko’s image disappeared. Mariko stripped naked, hung her clothes in the closet and started the wash drive. The closet whirred quietly while it was bombarding the textiles with particles to remove the dirt molecules.

Mariko combed her long hair straight. A few black locks were caught in the comb. She picked her multitoys from the floor and crept under the coverlet. The bedclothes automatically adjusted the temperature after her body. Mother’s voice carried faintly through the wall. She obviously was messaging with her lawyer. Mariko could discern a word here, another there, before she fell asleep.

“I had not asked for the information... I was just doing my duty... I think it is important that people get to know...”

Fresh from the shower, Mariko and Eiko lay on the long couch in their bathrobes, sucking permapops. Drops of water still gleamed in their hair. They’d both taken their turn but been too impatient to stay long enough in the shower cabin for the system to suck out all moisture – all water in the metropolis was cleaned and recycled.

The first prize of the Lottery, four weeks on Earth, would at last take them on the ground of the home planet. The former Lottery winner, New Gothenburg, had already risen back to its orbit. Mariko and Eiko followed the direct broadcast where the Swedes happily recounted their experiences and regretted that the Earth’s ecosystem could not tolerate the stress of more than one city at a time.

The first phase of the descent had already been underway for a few days. Even if the ascent of the colossal city complexes

to their orbits had in its time run smoothly because of the gravity accelerators, descending was not that easy at all. The city had to break down from its orbital speed to an almost standstill and drift slowly down. Staying outside was forbidden for security reasons, and the inhabitants had been warned about mild city quakes. Now New Tokyo was arriving to a lower atmosphere level and starting its second and final phase of descent. However, the broadcast was interrupted, when the newscaster’s face appeared on the screen.

“Now what?” Mariko wondered aloud. “What do they think is more important?”

“What if the whole thing has been cancelled,” Eiko suggested.

Mariko resented that. “Don’t... you know I’ve dreamed about this.”

It was about Mariko’s mother, again. The studio reporters were grilling some experts who just cultivated their standard answers: “We have to clear up the reasons behind this leak... who did and what and when. There are no grounds for acting precipitately with the question of guilt, before the facts are known.”

Many argued that the problems were legal issues and therefore separate from the Lottery. The conservatives liked to point out that Lottery was the only way to prevent politicking. The reformist radicals, however, were in power in several metropolises, and they thought the system was outdated.

The Lottery always brought out intense feelings in people. This time, too, there had been demonstrations on the streets. “Earth belongs to us” and “Hands off Earth” were the messages of opposite groups. Especially the inhabitants of New Houston were discontented. Mariko had sometimes heard mother say that nothing was enough for the Americans – they were just as dissatisfied with everything. Even losing the Lottery caused bitter statements, as if the Americans had somehow been more entitled to quality time on Earth than the citizens of other metropolises.

The news only showed selected bits of the unrest. None hurt, no tear gas, no blood. Mariko rather thought the reports were censored. The camera moved to Mariko’s mother, who sat in the studio in the grilling crossfire.

“Why can’t you reveal the whole truth in this matter?” the reporter pressed. He was wearing old fashioned, thick framed eyeglasses.

“I’ve tried to speak as truthfully as I can,” mother evaded. In her two-piece costume she looked quite elegant, but tired and insecure, all the same.

“Is Earth so badly polluted that trips there ought to be discontinued?”



"I'm afraid I cannot comment on that."

"No comments?" the reporter growled. "First you leak out this memo, then you withdraw from all responsibility?"

"I have received new information since then," Mariko's mother answered, obviously nervous. Her hands shook. Crying wasn't far away.

Mother's distress infected Mariko and she ran quickly off to the kitchen.

"Human lives are in danger. And you try to hush up the whole matter."

"I'm afraid... I cannot," mother whispered, ashamed, bowing her head. "Gomen nasai."

Mariko could not help but hear that. She tried to swallow down the lump in her throat.

The reporter directed his words to the audience. "What is behind this memorandum, what is kept secret from the citizens? Is there some kind of danger waiting for the inhabitants of New Tokyo on Earth?" the man inquired and left the question hanging. Then the picture moved back to space.

"Now, it's back on!" Eiko shouted to Mariko, who hurried back, two standard plastic juice packages in her hands.

All portions were packed in recyclable packages, both food and drink. You could get as much food as you wished, but high prices restricted extra consumption. The portions were not large but they included all necessary vitamins and trace elements and kept the population slim and healthy.

Mariko pushed the other package to Eiko, who opened it and took a sip.

"Orange," she commented, satisfied.

"All synthetics taste awful," Mariko fretted. "There, that's us!"

The three-dimensional planet filled the living room. New Tokyo floated like an orbiting saucer. The sun panels that usually opened fanlike around the circumference were now drawn in, and the metropolis was approaching Earth. Mariko stared at Eiko's black button eyes when the building started to tremble. Eiko stared back. The paper lamp in the ceiling shivered gently.

"It just the wind," Mariko said.

"Hope you're right."

Mariko took Eiko's hand and squeezed hard. The girls pushed closer to each other, deep into the soft pillows of the couch. What if something were to go wrong? So far that had never happened, but descent was the most dangerous phase.

Finally, the trembling stopped. The broadcast told that the city had settled at the height of 60 kilometres, and would, little by little, descend lower during the next hours. For a moment, the girls dared not even move. When they were sure everything was all right, they stood up.

Mariko gasped with surprise when she saw the blue colour of the sky in the thirdee images. Slowly the blue changed to indigo, then to dark grey, and finally black when the city moved to the night side. The Earth kept them waiting for a while longer.

Eiko was painting Mariko's face with a thin brush. The translucent gel made her lips look moist.

"It tickles," Mariko chuckled.

"Don't move," Eiko ordered. "You wish to look pretty, don't you?"

Mariko felt elevated. She had a surprise organized for Eiko, but refused to reveal it beforehand. It was 48 hours since the metropolis had floated through the atmosphere and at last touched ground on Earth and anchored at the landing site.

Eiko brushed the gel lightly on Mariko's eyelids. Next she took up a small light pencil and used it to illuminate Mariko's face. At first, the control adjustment wasn't quite satisfactory, the result seemed too dark to Mariko, but on the second try, the stuff on her face changed to reflect the desired wave length.

Mariko checked herself in her pocket mirror. Violet was exactly the right hue. Now she in her turn helped Eiko, who wanted a geisha look, with a white makeup and cherry red lips. That was quickly done. Finally the girls sat on the bedside and admired each other. Mariko noticed a stain on

Eiko's clothes.

"O bother," Eiko fretted. "May I borrow a shirt from you?"

Eiko undressed, hang the dirty blouse up for cleaning and buttoned on herself one of Mariko's school shirts. Eiko held out her hands. Mariko took them and Eiko pulled her up.

"Are we ready?" Mariko asked.

Eiko nodded. The girls hugged each other long and tight. Then they took their small back bags and stepped out of the apartment, into the corridor and then into the lift that took them down on the street level. The city was quiet; the morning sky amazingly blue, as if they'd stepped into a peaceful temple.

The landing site was on the island of Madagascar, where nature and geography would offer enough experiences for four weeks. The island was big enough to cope with the stress caused by a whole metropolis. There were strict regulations, however, covering all moving about, and the size of groups was restricted. The punitive sanctions for littering and violating the nature were harsh.

The travel organizer Mariko had chosen had its office only a couple of blocks off. The girls were just in time to get on a yellow air cushion bus floating above ground. They got seated.

The bus started. Mariko found it hard to settle down. The buildings streamed past the windows. The rim came closer; the pillars of the dome structure rose up right next to them. The dome itself had been opened and the planet's wind was blowing through the city.

Mariko squeezed Eiko's hand. "We are outside. Imagine that..."

The ride took over an hour. There was not a wisp of cloud on the sky. Through the window, the girls had time to look at the lush roadside vegetation that was thickening to the density of rain forest. In the south, the high inland mountains were silhouetted against the sky.

"How come these areas have been spared from the destruction?" Eiko wondered.

"Former developing countries."

"What?"

"Countries that lacked high technology... no consumption, no emissions. And favourable currents have spared the island from the worst atmospheric and ocean pollution."

Just then, the bus stopped and fell to the ground. People started to stream out. Mariko and Eiko let themselves fall behind on purpose. Mariko couldn't help it: she held her breath, until her feet at last encountered the ground. Her body was charged with electricity, there were butterflies in her belly, and her legs felt like collapsing.

"So this was that surprise of yours?" Eiko asked.

The beach opened before them, a golden yellow stretch. Sun shades were set up in the sand in regular rows. Behind those gleamed the sea, so foamy and heavy that Mariko felt both delight and fear. The smell made the sea feel alive.

While some people rushed straight to the beach, Mariko and Eiko stayed to stare at the scenery for a while. Finally, they too went in the dressing cabins and changed their school dresses to one piece swimming suits. Mariko tied her long hair back with a clip.

"Come, we've got an hour," Mariko said. There were certain standards about staying in the sun. One had to be careful with radiation. In the metropolis, they had constantly been protected by the dome that filtered the harmful ultraviolet radiation in the orbit. The earth atmosphere did that, too, but after the industrial era its ozone layer was still pretty thin.

The sand burned their soles, but one got quickly used to the warmth. The girls approached the water line, until the waves that hit the beach in an even rhythm met their toes.

Eiko screamed. "Cold!"

Mariko wet her legs boldly. "You'll get used to it."

A strong gust of wind was blowing from the sea. Eiko wound her arms tightly round herself and shivered with cold. Mariko unflinchingly waded deeper and forced Eiko to come along. The high waves beat against them and almost toppled them. Velvety water sprinkled their faces. Mariko felt the salty taste of the sea on her lips. Their laughter was drowned by the rush of sea and wind.

They returned to the beach. Eiko spread a towel and dropped down to sit on it. Mariko bent down next to her and fingered the sand. It felt so fine. Single sand grains were hardly visible at all. There were small smooth ground stones and shells among the sand.

The air smelt quite different from the metropolis. The sounds were more subdued; the colours in their eyes deeper. And the warm radiation of the sun crowned everything.

It wasn't just ordinary heat radiation; it was something throbbing with the mysterious energy that once had originated life.

It was hard to believe that the majority of the planet was polluted.

"I'm in love," Mariko said and twirled round, hands outstretched.

The teacher was demonstrating the protective suits to the class. The girls giggled, the boys declared they wanted a gun, too – who knew what mutants they'd meet on the continent. After the Lottery, even the school schedule had been altered; to the disappointment of many students, EVA had been moved on to next month; but an excursion to the continent was just as great an adventure.

"The filters will clean the air you breathe. The radio works from the control panel of the left arm, so does temperature control. Whatever you do, do not open your suit. If you feel

the need to urinate ... no clowning there... just let go. The suit automatics will suck the fluids in a small container. Any questions?"

Mariko put up her hand. "Shall we go soon?"

Suited up, they moved along to the other end of the shuttle hangar. The idea was just to stay a few hours on the continent, so no special equipment was needed. Underneath the protective suits they just had school dresses on.

Mariko moved her limbs. The suit was light and hardly hindered movement. The water vapour from her breath condensed on the visor glass, but with a little adjustment Mariko got the suit working properly.

The whole class watched closely how the silvery, tapering shuttle descended on the runway and rolled to the hangar. The doors opened, and the previous group of excursionists stepped down the ladder by the shuttle. The returning group had to pass a long row of showers, where their suits were disinfected with chemicals. Not even the slightest amount of harmful compounds and bacteria were allowed to the island. And an epidemic among the city's inhabitants would have been a catastrophe.

At last, it was the turn of Mariko's group to come aboard. The shuttle had double benches on both sides, and the girls chose seats directly behind the pilot. The teacher would sit by the pilot. The safety belts were checked before they were ready for departure.

The radio was filled with the babble of the students.

"There are riots in other metropolises, I've heard"

"Guess everyone would like to get their share of Earth."

"Well, it's their funeral."

Mariko tapped the teacher on shoulder and asked if one could shut out the extra noise. The teacher gave some advice; Mariko fingered the arm panel after the instructions and called Eiko. Eiko was shaking her head. Mariko reached out and helped her make the same adjustment.

"Can you hear now?"

"Yeah... what's so important you had to change on private?"

"Not going to listen to them making that ruckus."

The teacher's voice penetrated through the loudspeakers, however. He started lecturing about things that had caused Earth's capacity to collapse: acidic and eutrophic compounds, hothouse gases and heavy metals. Their interaction changed the climate to a cradle of massive storms. Average temperatures increased; the alternation of droughts and floods dissolved the ground nutrients. The cultivated soil got impoverished, the oceans eutrophicated almost solid and millions of species died off. After the ozone layer was punctured, the increased ultraviolet radiation weakened the human immunological system further and destroyed the last vestiges of flora on many areas.

"Haven't we heard this a million times?" Eiko whispered.

"Would it be possible to live on Earth by now?" Mariko asked the teacher. She had sometimes peered at the planet through a telescope, but it was impossible to discern details small enough. Not even on the night side could one notice any lights at all.

"Not at least in any large scale. There are some marginal areas that might be safe enough for habitation, but in practice the whole planet is a forbidden zone, except some landing sites."

Mariko gave a nod. The cabin hummed as the shuttle rolled to end of the airway. After the acceleration, they were on their way to the continent; Madagascar was left down behind. The sun was reflected from the ocean surface as if from cloudy glass. Suddenly, Mariko startled and pointed at the window.

"Look. There's something moving in the sea."

"I didn't see a thing," Eiko said.

"Yes! Some big creature glided from the surface into the depths. There were several of them."

"Oh, you mean monsters," Eiko mocked.

Mariko didn't feel like laughing. The topic had once been up at school: that the radiation and carcinogens might have caused mutations in the fauna genome. That some new, much more dangerous species might have appeared, and been able to reproduce in spite of mutations. Perhaps they indeed had some cause to be on their guard.

"I'll never ever step in the ocean again..."

"Wha-at?" Eiko hooted.

"I said you are a fool!"

Eiko pushed Mariko and Mariko pushed back with all her body. Only the teacher glancing at them over his shoulder made them stop.

The shuttle accelerated smoothly and ascended higher. Mariko relaxed and leaned back on her seat. At some point, the teacher got tired of lecturing and the radio traffic fell off completely. It didn't take long before the shuttle started slowing down and descended lower. The sea changed to brown savannah that went on as far the eye could see. They were above the continent.

The girls peeked out the window as far as the safety belts allowed. Mariko's thoughts fled elsewhere. This morning, mother had not wanted to talk. She hadn't even eaten, she just took some tea and lay on the couch eyes closed, and said nothing when Mariko announced she was going on an excursion.

Mariko got a lump in her throat. Mother surely must have remembered their former visit to Earth. Mariko would have wanted them to acquire some shared memories this time, too.

"Do you see... there?" Mariko got excited.

"Birds," Eiko noted.

"How gorgeous."

"What a lot of them," Eiko had time say before something thudded hard on the cockpit glass. Outside, the sky had become white.

Mariko startled; at first she thought the bang had been a technical malfunction, but then another bird blew the cockpit glass to pieces. The splinters hurtled into the cabin and the mass of birds that had covered the shuttle squeezed in through the crack. Suddenly, the whole cabin was full of flapping flesh and feather and blood. Mariko's visor got so smeared she couldn't see anything, but even through the suit she heard the panic-stricken concert of bird screams and the powerful wail of the wind.

The shuttle was shaking, Mariko's sight blurred, her insides seemed to change places with each other. She thought the end had come. She felt her body trying to rise up from the seat, but the belts held her – the shuttle was crashing down. Eiko's cry echoed in the radio, while the ground approached with terrifying speed.

Mariko closed her eyes. The automatic charges that were intended to decelerate the shuttle before collision exploded, shutting out all other noise in the world. Mariko went limp in her seat. The fall felt like slowed down motion, her hands wobbling from one side to the other.

The shaking stopped. Mariko sat still for a long while. She opened her eyes.

The first thing she did was to wipe the smudge from her visor. There were red stains left on the glass. Her hand automatically searched for the safety belt lock and pushed the red button. The belts snapped open.

The dust cloud of the crash was starting to settle.

Mariko looked at Eiko, whose head was leaning against her shoulder. Mariko opened Eiko's belts and shook her, until Eiko lifted her head.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes... no. My back hurts."

"Are you able to move?"

Mariko helped Eiko up. Only then did they realize that the scene opened out directly afore them. The cockpit had been torn off, the pilot and the teacher with it. In the cabin many lay unmoving. Some were lurching out through the back emergency exit. Mariko and Eiko deemed it best to depart through the front.

The girls staggered farther away from the shuttle. The other survivors stayed close to the wreck. Anxiety pressed Mariko's breast so hard she had trouble moving. With Eiko, she slumped down. They sat still, until their breath had at least somewhat evened out and the scare's adrenaline effect abated.

Mariko sighed. Here she was sitting, trapped on a remote, polluted, hostile continent. Everything was out of order; life seemed predisposed to go askew all the time, however hard Mariko had tried to keep going.

Mother would have a fit when she heard Mariko was in trouble. However, Mariko was feeling all the stronger that she herself ought to do something, especially now when she was here. A gentle slope covered with small stones opened out in front of her.

"Where are you going?" Eiko sniffed, as Mariko took her first steps toward the slope.

"Just looking around."

"Are you crazy? The teacher is dead... and we need a doctor here."

"Help will come, sooner or later," Mariko said. She looked at the shuttle, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to them.

Mariko took a holo recorder out of her suit's thigh pocket.

"Where did you get that?" Eiko snapped. "Those are not for sale to the general public."

"It's mother's. Perks."

"What do you plan to do with it?"

Mariko didn't answer. She made sure she knew how to start the recorder if needed. Eiko just sat there. If there was any indignation on her face, Mariko couldn't see it through the visor.

"Are you coming?" Mariko asked calmly and waited.

"Whether we'll ever see each other again depends on what you do now."

"Unfair."

"I think it's unfair how mother was made the culprit," Mariko said and looked around. The landscape was full of green patches. The sky was clear. Perhaps the Earth was sick, but it was not a dead planet. They had their protective suits, so they'd be safe. "How about it?"

Eiko remained silent. Mariko took a few steps and looked behind, imploring. Finally, Eiko yielded, stood up and started to trudge down the slope behind Mariko.

The landscape changed to a flat savannah with stumpy bushes and thorny cactuses. They saw flocks of birds, perhaps the same long-legged species which had crashed the shuttle. Mariko detected movement in the horizon. A herd of animals was throwing up a thick cloud of dust.

After three hours of walking, Eiko sat down on a rock, exhausted. Mariko took a sip of water and nutrients from the suit container with the tube inside her helmet. She only got a few drops into her mouth.

Mariko was alarmed. She hadn't thought about this.

“We’ll soon be out of something to drink,” Eiko confirmed. “My feet hurt.”

“It’s harder than I thought,” Mariko admitted. The terrain had become slightly more hilly, but they still had no landmark to orient themselves.

“How far have we come? There’s no sign of the great disclosure you promised. And no sign of a rescue shuttle, either. We’d have seen if anybody were out looking for us.”

Mariko fingered the control panel of her suit. Now and then, the radio had crackled as if some one had been calling them. Each time, Mariko had shouted an answer, but had not been able to identify anything clear among the buzzing.

“Isn’t that dazzling sun ever going to set?” Eiko wondered.

“We are no longer in the orbit. Let’s go on for a while yet.”

“Famous last words.”

One could hear in Eiko’s voice that she was giving up. She prised herself up and stepped forward with exaggerated briskness, as if to be rid of Mariko, but stiffened immediately on her steps.

Mariko startled, she saw the carcass of some animal on the ground. The flies around showed it had died rather recently. Killed by some predator.

Mariko felt like throwing up, but she managed to stay calm.

Not a word was said while the girls tottered on. Mariko was keeping an eye on the surroundings, uneasy. But it didn’t take long before Eiko started to fall behind. Mariko looked back and saw her friend falter on her feet.

“Eiko, what’s the matter?” Mariko asked.

She could only hear wheezy breathing in the radio as Eiko was gasping for breath and fell to her knees.

“Eiko!” Mariko cried and went to help. She supported Eiko, who was scratching her visor with her protective gloves.

“Hard...to breath. Suit...isn’t...working,” Eiko hissed and moved her hands to the helmet’s clasps.

“Eiko, don’t! The pollution!”

“I’m suffocating...”

“But you’ll die!” Mariko wailed. Tears were pouring out of her eyes.

Eiko opened the clasps and lifted the helmet off. She looked tired, shocked and incredulous. She was drenched with sweat, though the suit should have kept the temperature even. Obviously the suit control system had been damaged in the emergency landing.

Mariko kept shaking her head. She did not want to believe that this was happening to them. She had forced Eiko to follow. It was all her fault – just hers, hers, hers.

Eiko looked at the sky and at the surrounding land. She breathed deep and shut her eyes. Death would only be a matter of time. Eiko was puzzlingly calm and deliberate, as if she had accepted her fate long ago.

Eiko brushed Mariko’s visor with her glove. “I do so wish I

could touch you one more time.”

Through the helmet Mariko heard Eiko’s words only faintly, but they had long ago learned to read each other’s lips.

“Suki yo,” Eiko whispered.

“Me too,” Mariko said, brokenly.

They hugged each other. Just then Mariko saw a movement in the corner of her eyes and something jumped out from the bush next to them. Mariko screamed and started up. Eiko stayed on her knees and stared ahead.

A boy was standing behind the bush, a couple of years their younger. He had dark skin and curly hair. His teeth looked like polished white stones. He wore shorts, but nothing else. He was smiling, watched the girls attentively and said something they did not understand.

“Konnichiwa,” Eiko greeted, cautiously.

The boy changed to English. “Hello, I’m Hamisi. Are you from the sky city?”

The girls nodded.

“We saw it coming,” Hamisi said and pointed to the sky. “What are you doing here?”

“There’s been... an accident,” Mariko shouted from behind the helmet. “And my friend needs help.”

“But why do you have those funny dresses on?”

“We shouldn’t actually be here,” the girls hesitated. They had not expected to meet anybody. “We didn’t know any people were living on Earth.”

“I live in the village, over there.”

Mariko noticed the humps looming farther off; she had at first thought those were large boulders. But now, when she looked closer, they did not seem natural any longer.

“Come on,” Hamisi urged. The girls looked at each other and followed the boy. On the quiet, Mariko took out the instrument she’d borrowed from her mother and started recording.

They walked into the middle of the village; the dwellings were primitive mud huts. They had no windows, just an opening for a door and a thick roof of grass. Curious human faces peeked out from the openings and behind the huts.

“I guess you must be thirsty,” Hamisi said. The boy hauled up a bucketful of clear water from the well in the middle of the village and poured it in two cups. Hamisi passed the cups to the girls. Mariko didn’t know what to do with hers, but Eiko eagerly grabbed at her cup.

“Don’t drink it, it’s unfiltered!” Mariko shouted.

“I’ll die anyway,” Eiko said and drank her cupful with one gulp. “This tastes good.”

Mariko didn’t know what to think. The villagers got over their qualms and came closer. People were dressed lightly in shorts and tops. The grown-ups were content to stare at

them, but the kids giggled and pointed at them. The boldest approached to touch Mariko and Eiko.

The girls were embarrassed but didn't dare prevent the kids. Eiko decided to take off her suit completely. The first excitement was over when the kids seemed to accept them, in spite of their different looks. The villagers did not seem sick – or else the problems just weren't visible. Eiko was showing no symptoms, however.

Mariko made her decision. She grabbed the clasps and took off her helmet. Eiko was standing with her back to Mariko and was startled when she saw Mariko bareheaded. She came to Mariko and stroked Mariko's hair.

"I think there's no danger for us," Mariko panted and squeezed out of her suit, leaving it on the ground. She felt her arms.

Eiko checked her personal bracelet. "No signal," Eiko said. "We could have tried to call for help directly from the city."

Hamisi stayed with them. He felt honoured, acting as host to the girls. The other kids followed the girls from a short distance.

Finally, night was falling. The girls were hungry and agreed with no hesitation to the dinner invitation of Hamisi's parents. They sat on rugs on the earthen floor of the hut. Hamisi handed them plates. The portion was quite simple, steaming vegetable stew and some kind of bread.

Hunger won over prejudice. As soon as the girls tasted the food, they cried out of pleasure. Neither of them could remember ever eating anything as tasty. When the plates were empty, they asked for more. Hamisi and his family were laughing at the girls, benignly.

"Do you grow the food yourself here?" Mariko asked. She had seen no factories that might produce synthetic food.

"Of course. Everything's grown in the ground here."

"Won't that make the food dirty and poisonous?" Eiko wondered.

"What funny ideas you city people have," Hamisi laughed, and the whole family laughed with him. After a while, Mariko and Eiko started laughing, too.

Later on, the girls were standing at the door of the hut and looking at the black landscape. Bright spots were visible on the sky. The metropolises continued on their orbits around the planet, their brilliant ribbon like jewellery round Earth's neck. Perhaps some inhabitants of the metropolises were looking towards them and admiring the Earth sickle.

"You can stay overnight in our guest hut. There's a narrow bunk in there."

"Thank you, Hamisi. We'd be happy to stay."

Hamisi waved at them and Mariko pushed Eiko with her into the guest hut. The door cover was only a thin curtain which Eiko drew shut. The room wasn't big, but offered shelter for the night. There was even a mattress on the bunk. It smelt

a bit musty, but you soon got used to it. They undressed and put their wrinkled clothes on a chair by the wall. Mariko's chin hurt when she yawned.

"There's room enough for us," Eiko said and lay down in her underwear. Mariko squeezed herself next to her and drew the thin coverlet over them both.

"Don't you roll around in your sleep, then."

"G'night."

Mariko felt a little dizzy. Had she already been poisoned? Or was the odd feeling just caused by the planet's rotation? Though the Earth moved so slowly it shouldn't affect her. Unless she was reeling at the speed everything had changed. Just a week ago they'd been on the orbit, safe under the city dome. The past seven days seemed to pack more events than her whole former life put together.

"Would you ever have believed...?" Mariko started, but the sound next to her was already a light snore. Eiko had fallen asleep just where she'd settled down.

Mariko looked at Eiko's features, the round face, the black hair curving around it and the soft lips. In her short hair Eiko looked deliciously cute. In a moment's impulse, Mariko moved her hand on Eiko's stomach. Eiko didn't even budge.

Mariko thought on what Eiko had said. She thought about what she'd answered, herself. Gently she touched Eiko and felt the warmth flowing into herself from Eiko's soft skin. Everything was clear and yet somehow so confusing.

Suddenly, she startled, felt embarrassed and turned her back to Eiko. She fell asleep, thoughts still as whirl-about as the cloud pillars in the planet's atmosphere.

Mariko started her recorder. She described the village, its areas under cultivation, reporting details that came to her mind. She went through her experiences in the shuttle, arrival in the village, and finally discussed the effect of unprocessed foodstuffs on the villagers.

"Will this help your mother?" Eiko asked.

"I don't know," Mariko answered. She had no idea on how they'd be able to use the recording. "This doesn't prove anything yet... even if there's no sign in the villagers, the pollution may have long term effects."

"But Hamisi said his tribe has lived in the area for generations," Eiko commented.

Mariko shrugged. "Perhaps they've become immune to the pollutants."

"Radiation, too?"

Mariko drew a deep breath. Mother had been frightened by the reaction to the memo. Therefore, the secret had to be something terrible. Perhaps they should have gone even farther inland to reveal the truth.

"Mariko, Eiko! I'll show you something," Hamisi called

and beckoned them to come along. There were all kinds of stuff on the shelves: various dishes and ornaments, toys, books, and a big pile of comics, similar to the ones Mariko had admired in a museum.

"I've been thinking of what you told of your life in the city. I've got many things from all over the world," Hamisi said, took a comic book off the pile and handed it to Mariko. "Isn't this your mother language? I am sorry I don't understand it."

The manga pages were wrinkled and the pictures paler than in the museum exemplars, but just the very feel of paper in her fingertips brought waves of pleasure to Mariko. The language and the signs were familiar; Mariko read the balloons, following the story from picture to picture. The figures were well-drawn, but they all had very large eyes and mouth.

"Do you like it?" the boy asked. He enjoyed the girls' interest and undoubtedly wished to make an impression. "You can have it."

Mariko was leafing through the pages, until the boy's words broke her enchantment. She grew serious and looked the boy into the eye. "For my own? For me?"

The boy nodded.

Mariko looked at the paper and turned it over in her hands. It was so elegant and felt so nice in the hands. The colours tempted her.

"Domo arigatou," she said, finally, and bowed, since she didn't have the nerve to refuse. Mariko opened the knot in her red scarf and handed that to Hamisi in return. The boy's face broke into a smile.

Mariko was puzzled by many things. She hesitated, but finally decided to ask.

"When we flew here, we saw large creatures in the sea..."

"Whales," Hamisi said at once. The girls looked at each other.

"Just whales?"

"We watch them sometimes, my father and I, on the beach. We've even rowed the boat quite close to them."

"They were supposed to be extinct," Eiko whispered to Mariko.

Hamisi's mother called out to them. Hamisi got up, listened carefully and started briskly towards the hut. "Something's happening... something big."

The girls hurried after Hamisi, into the house. In the middle of the living space there was a small black box; Hamisi's family was gathered around it. Between the humming and buzzing they could distinguish speech.

"Nothing but voice?" Eiko wondered.

"A radio," Mariko said and bent to look at the instrument. She carefully turned the antenna, and the buzzing subsided a little.

"How is it powered?"

"We have solar cells."

"You listen to the cities' broadcasts?" Mariko asked.

"Yes. That's why we are familiar with some of the languages."

"Do you have transmitters... haven't you tried to contact anyone?"

"Our authorities are in constant contact with your people."

"Weird..."

The tone of the newscaster's voice eventually made everyone pay attention to the news. New Houston was in chaos.

"After the Bloc made their coup less than twenty-four hours ago, the inhabitants of New Houston have been in panic. As far as is known, half of them support the new Bloc, but there is ever-increasing and spreading uncertainty that perhaps they still ought to wait, after all."

"What are they going to do?" Eiko asked.

"Hsss!"

"This... we've just received news of explosions inside the dome. It is unclear how much damage the city has sustained, but we have unconfirmed reports of the city losing its altitude. Emergency contingency plans are effective. Rescue mission is underway. In the worst case scenario the city must be manoeuvred towards one of the Lagrange points..."

Something was going horribly wrong.

Just then there was a humming noise from the outside. Through the windows Mariko saw a cloud of sand billowing.

"We are being rescued, at last!" Eiko yelled and ran outside.

"Mother?" Mariko ran happily after Eiko.

There were two shuttles landing on opposite sides of the village, one of them some twenty meters from Hamisi's hut. The shuttle door opened and Mariko started running towards it, but stopped when ten unarmed soldiers in protective suits stepped out. They had the Rising-Sun badge in front of the suit, the official army insignia.

People came out of their huts to watch. The soldiers surrounded Mariko and Eiko, catching their arms.

"Where are your protective suits?" one of the men said. "We have to take you to quarantine immediately for a thorough check-up."

The soldiers started leading the girls towards the shuttle.

"Let go!" Mariko protested, to no avail. The soldiers escorted the girls into the shuttle. Mariko had time to see how the commanding guy turned to Hamisi's family and lifted his forefinger to his lips in a sign of silence.

Inside the shuttle, the girls were separated and each got a soldier sitting next to herself. It would have served no purpose to resist. The commanding officer came to sit in

front of Mariko. Before she had time to prevent it, the man nabbed the holo-recorder from her lap. Mariko screamed and kicked about. The soldier next to her took a firm hold of her, and Mariko's outburst was deflated.

The officer took the memory chip out of the recorder and handed the instrument back to Mariko. The soldier let go of his hold little by little, when Mariko calmed down and stopped fighting.

"Why?" Mariko insisted. "There's nothing special that my recordings would reveal. You can keep your secrets."

Fatigue made Mariko give up. She nestled against the seat and wiped her eyes. The trip back to the island was quick and this time they encountered no trouble. The shuttle landed in front of the same hangar where they'd started on the excursion.

The girls were escorted out from the shuttle. Every person Mariko saw was dressed in a protective suit. A soldier walked behind them, spraying disinfectant on their footprints. The girls were taken through the hangar to a corridor lined with protective plastics. The soldiers were taking no risks. Mariko was getting worried. The risk of infection must be very serious indeed.

Finally, they ended up in a large wing of cells. Mariko realized the men were going to separate her and Eiko.

"Please put us in the same room, at least!"

"Sorry," the men mumbled from behind their helmets.

Mariko and Eiko protested, but the end result was clear. Mariko flopped down on the hard floor and heard the door being bolted. She dragged herself to the bed. She was shivering from cold and fear. How much time would she have left?

The door clicked. The shutter covering the small window was opened and the officer who had commanded the rescue patrol peeked in. He'd taken off his protective suit.

"Here's someone who wants to speak with you."

The commander stepped aside and was replaced with a gentle face.

"Mother!" Mariko cried. She ran to the door and touched the glass. Mother did the same. There was but a few millimetres of smelt sand between them.

Mariko closed her eyes. She felt like weeping, but tears seemed to have dried off.

"Eiko's parents are here, too. We were so afraid for you both."

"Mother... I tried to find out the truth."

"Mariko, darling," mother tried to interrupt her.

"But it went all wrong," Mariko wept. "And now Eiko and I may die..."

"Mariko, listen," mother soothed her. "You have nothing to worry about."

Mariko stared at her mother.

The insight hit her as hard as the drop of the shuttle. Everything was connected: the whales in the sea, the birds and

quadrupeds on the savannah, Hamisi's astonished look when the girls had been afraid for their health, the officer's gesture to Hamisi's family.

"Earth is no longer polluted?" Mariko asked.

"No, it isn't." mother said.

Mariko was beginning to understand the real situation, but not the silence about the state of affairs on Earth.

"Mother, you can at last disclose it all now, you can tell them you haven't lied!" Mariko got excited, but mother kept shaking her head. The storm of emotion changed to amazement and then to anger, and the sweet-and-sour mixture made Mariko tremble.

"It's not just a question of people lying," mother was saying. "It's a much larger issue. I did wrong... I shouldn't have said anything of it."

"I don't understand," Mariko was trying to clear the lump from her throat. "Will you be convicted?"

"There's a reason for everything."

"Are you one of them, too? I don't understand what people get out of this cover-up. Why keep us imprisoned on the orbit when there's a whole wide planet within our reach?"

"Millions died today as victims of their own greed."

Mariko took a step back. She shook her head.

"New Houston is lost. The only good thing about it all is that a crash to Earth could be prevented. Not everyone is ready for the Earth. They still need time."

Mariko kept shaking her head. She did not want to understand.

"No one's doing anything wrong," mother specified. "No one's robbing Earth or its natural resources. This time we want to act right."

Mariko was ashamed of her own short-sightedness. People did not intend to stress Earth beyond its capacity any more. The planet was still a convalescent. If they would all return now, they'd kill it. First, they had to learn how to keep the planet alive – because the planet would keep them alive in return.

"Mother... please forgive me?"

"Mariko, there's nothing to forgive."

Relieved, Mariko bent her head on the glass. Mother was her planet and she the little satellite that did not wish to fly away.

"Mariko... Mariko," the voice was whispering.

Mariko lifted her head. Eiko's face loomed above her. The sand on the beach that had got so hot during the day was cooling off and the cold was stealthily trying to creep on her.

"Were you asleep?" Eiko asked.

"No," Mariko yawned and clambered up to warm herself.

The sea lay quiet. The fire crackled under the night sky; insects were flying round the flames. One was walking in Eiko's hair. Mariko carefully swept it away.

"The last night on Earth, and you fall asleep," Eiko laughed.

Eiko came closer and bent her head on Mariko's shoulder. With her eyes Mariko followed the fluttering flames which she'd never seen live before this.

The past weeks had been difficult. Most of the time, the girls had been isolated. It was for show, of course, to bluff the public, but the girl's defiance had rather faded off once they'd been separated from everything familiar and ordinary. When they finally got released, neither could have cared less about politics or about the Earth situation. The good news was that Mariko's mother probably would keep her office – if not, all the secrets might have to come out.

"How long is it to departure?" Eiko asked.

"I don't know... thirty-six hours, perhaps."

"Do you think we could..."

"Run away?"

Eiko lifted her head and looked at Mariko. But no, it would not be possible. They were under special observation. There were always some who tried to run away, but though the island was large, it was still surrounded by the sea, and there were impenetrable zones outside the free areas.

"Do you think we'll ever see Hamisi again?" Eiko wondered.

"We'll come back," Mariko said. "I'm sure of it."

Mariko looked up. The stars above were clear and sharp. Their light came from inconceivable distances; it was dimmed and almost drowned in the black sea of space on its journey to their eyes. But perhaps some of those stars had planets where the warm rays of light touched the surface softly.

Perhaps the information of the Earth's true condition would

soon spread. Perhaps the idea of Lottery was outdated. One of these days, people would land and start all over as one great city underneath a blue dome.

"What irritates me most is that they took Hamisi's gift from us," Mariko said.

Eiko pressed her knees at her breast; then she remembered something and opened the zipper of her back bag. She dug up a wrinkled manga paper.

"Where did you get that?" Mariko cried in amazement.

"From one of the shuttle pilots in the base."

"Didn't it cost a fortune?"

Eiko shrugged. "I flashed some thigh."

"You are absolutely awful!" Mariko screamed, snatched the paper from Eiko and slapped the top of Eiko's head with it.

"Ouch! Give it to me!" Eiko cried and bounced up. Mariko dashed off and they ran, one after the other, on the starlit beach. Mariko laughed but stumbled almost at once in the soft sand and fell flat on her face. Eiko tumbled down next to her.

Mariko turned on her back. She stroked Eiko's cheek. Eiko's warm breath vibrated on her face and the black eyes saw all her thoughts. The waves reached them and wet their feet. With her finger, Eiko moved Mariko's hair off her face.

And the Earth underneath them turned round and round.

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Photo: Anne Leinonen

About the author

Petri Laine has been writing science fiction, fantasy and horror stories from the early 1990's. He has been successful in Finnish short story contests and his work has been published in Finnish anthologies and sf-magazines like Tähtivaeltaja, Portti and Spin.

A WEEKEND IN THE COUNTRY

Irma Hirsjärvi, translation: Petri Salin

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The man and the woman sit in the dark, side by side, silent. There is soft music playing. The cabin quietly echoes the sound of the jet engine, the night is taking them farther up north. Down below them petrol stations, villages and junctions flit by, more and more rarely, until it is through uninhabited lands their journey is taking them. At some point the man bends over, reaches out and presses down the cigarette lighter. When it bounces back up he grabs it carefully with three fingers and lights a cigarette. The woman is amused. The ancient contraption works flawlessly, but the man holds the cigarette between his thumb and his index finger, his other fingers fanned out. He doesn't notice the woman's expression, just inhales deeply and offers her the cigarette. She shakes her head and keeps her eyes on the control board



and the glowing line in the middle of the map. For a moment the man looks at her profile, then he stretches out his hand and clumsily unbuttons the top button of her blouse, then the next one. He slides his hand inside her blouse and touches her breast. The woman leans back but when the sound of the engine weakens a bit she again changes her position and gently pulls on the leatherette-covered lever and cranks it back up. During the final kilometres he's opened her blouse entirely, caressing and nibbling her breasts until she moans. Finally she pushes him away, as the rest of the journey they will have to go through a narrow passage, and she wants to be ready to steer should something go wrong with the navigational system. When they arrive roadside sensors switch on the yard lights. The bluish cones of light are cut to shreds by the shadows of naked trees and once again the rugged peninsula looks so tiny. The engine sighs as the craft lands beside the greyish log-cabin. The lanterns on the porch pillars crackle, the first moths are already being blinded. The man knows that nearby there is a beach, and uncertainly he takes a few steps towards it – his body starting to obey rather nicely – stopping before a dark wall. He can smell the water, hear the quiet splashes as the waves hit the rocky beach and the long pier. He bends down and touches the ground.

The man gets up and turns around. The woman has already opened the booth and started lifting out stuff on the sand. There are pine cones on the ground. The man goes up behind the woman, and when she reaches for the picnic basket at the rear of the booth, he places his fingers on the back of her neck and presses gently. The woman freezes, waiting. He caresses her skin, her back, her side, her buttocks, then lifts her skirt. He slips his hand between her legs and starts touching her. The woman lets out a laugh and straightens herself, holding out the basket for the man. The man smells his fingers, takes the basket, and follows her inside.

The porch gives on to the lake and has a three-layered timber rail. They climb six steps and open the door to the house.

Inside it feels dry and warm. The previous travellers have only just left. The woman takes off her blouse, her skirt and her shoes. She is wearing nothing else. She fingers the fabrics, she smells the perfume that's been soaked into them, she lingers. She looks at the man who is also undressing, they inspect each other by the kindling fire, as if they were a rare breed of animals. The man carries in two more batches of supplies. It starts raining outside and during his second

haul the man stops, just stands there in the cold rain. He turns up his face towards the heavens and closes his eyes for a moment, hard cold fingertips dancing on his face. Inside he lays the last bags down on the kitchen floor and grabs hold of the woman as she is passing him, presses her against the wall of the oven. The woman drops whatever she is carrying and pushes her fingers through his hair, presses her mouth on his. Mentally they go through each others every bodily orifice, every path that is going to be used, their thoughts scuttling and scurrying up and down each others' skin, his skin the same time as her skin, and they relax and feel soft convulsions starting inside of them. The whole time they keep their eyes open and locked on each other.

During the night everything is much more clearly defined, the smells, the sounds, the tastes. They stay for two nights and leave on Sunday.

This is how I imagine it. This is how I've imagined it for sixteen years. This is the image I've put together from fragments, things they've mentioned to each other, never directly to me. I've wanted to construct a story of their arrival so that I'm able to understand where it is I'm always brought, later, twelve hours after their arrival, as is the arrangement. My transporting cage is driven to the yard, opened up, and I'm told to undress. The guards agree on a time for me to be picked up, always the same time, the next morning at ten o'clock, and then they leave because there is nowhere for me to escape, and so I follow my master and my mistress indoors.

They have set the table and we have a late breakfast by the fireplace, all naked. They want to see my body. I've stopped wondering what their true appearance is. It no longer matters. I'm glad they are back again. They ask me questions about the food they've brought with them, about fruits, clothes, the movies they so like. Answering is easy, it's part of our training. I always carry a small library for them, items both new and old. One of them, usually the man, the one transformed into a man, wants old movies, the woman, usually the one transformed into a woman, wants classical music.

I've waited six months for them, as always, and impatient with anticipation I almost choke on my own sensations as they reveal to me what has gone on during the previous night. The taste of the woman, the odour of the man. The paw-prints of the wind around the house. Bodies inside bodies, entirely hairless, theirs, and later the smoothness that invades me, the smoothness that I penetrate. Sometimes I used to wonder and even ask them why they always wanted me, why not some other man, or sometimes woman. I can't remember what they answered, but I understood that they wished to look at the changes an individual went through during the years. When the watchers heard of this it made me more valuable and I gained many privileges. Movies and music of my own

choosing. Better food. Fruit. A solarium. But for me the important thing was the continuity, somebody to wait for. The other strangers came and went, the same creatures rarely returning. They were a fleeting chain of faces and smells, of pain and pleasure. These were the encounters I waited for.

Sometimes we allow the silence to take over, or they speak among themselves, we add logs to the fire, even go far a walk, or just nod off. We eat a little, they never drink wine, they've brought it for me. The water is spring water. We talk a great deal. They like the way people sleep, they find it strange and amusing. They never ask how I'm doing.

In the end I always have a swim before they go, for there are no bodies of water in the camp. In the summer I swim for a long while, several times to the force-field and back. During the winter the pumps keep the ice opened up and it's easy to allow myself to sink into the coldness off the pier. I slip in the water like into a deep sorrow, and press the soles of my feet against the coarse gravel so as not to cry. They were quite surprised when I first swam in the winter. I told them of the body's own cortisone factory, of immunity, of the blood stream.

When it's time, we kiss goodbye and I open the front door. I go to my transporting cage where a clean set of clothes and a blanket await me. I need the blanket because it's windy outside. It's always windy outside when I leave.

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About the author

Irma Hirsjärvi is the grandma of Finnish fandom: she has organised several Finncons and sf seminars as well as other fandom activities, and she also writes and edits as well. Currently she is making her Masters thesis on the relationship between Finnish fandom and the institutions of mainstream literature.



Photo: Marko Mahnala

ONE ITTY-BITTY-BIT OF BLACK THREAD

Natalia Laurila, translation: Liisa Rantalaiho

My best beloved puppets live in the middle of a big round table. They sit and walk around, they swing and lean about; they watch and tug at each other. The mouths of thread laugh; the black knotted eyes gape at me.

From time to time, the girl puppets swell out, and soon it's time to bind new puppets. Then I put on to dance in a circle around the bone white hub. Each generation of puppets dances in their own circle.

There's a red thread between the young and the old puppet citizens. That is the thread of blood.

"Now how on earth are the blood threads staying red? They should turn black, na? And start stinking?" asks Fragrant.

Her little quick fingertips often hold the threads while my crooked fingers make the knots. She's always asking questions, keeping close to my skirts and observing. She's granny's girl.

I was like that, once, too. Twelve children ago, and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, how many of those there might be already... I take a quick look at the outer circles of the big round table.

"What a silly you are! Why are you thinking we have to go spend a night now and then upon Medicine Mountain? It is not just for fun we collect those yellow-brown flowers," Pigtales answers.

"Oh, so it is their nectar makes the threads shining," Fragrant perceives and gets excited. "But could not Naani-ji by now tell us what makes them move? Oof, look at them now! Again!"

My second son and my daughter-in-law are trying to walk in different directions on the table. They are equally strong, and neither can move. The black thread binds them together.

The bigger puppets have been bound in couples with a thread of fruitful loam. A thread connects the girl puppet in her brightly coloured fabric with the boy puppet in his white shirt. Except for my sixth daughter, who's knotted together with another girl puppet.

Only the midmost puppet stands alone. She's faded and brittle and hardly able to stand. She's well-connected to the table's hub, however. Her twelve threads leading to the circles are red with my blood.

The midmost puppet has my white hair.

"Naani-ji, you never answer that question," Fragrant complains, though not crossly.

On the table there's a big plumb girl puppet called Pigtales, with a red thread connecting her to a little plumb girl puppet called Fragrant. Especially Fragrant finds it hard to stay on her circle; she's constantly drawn towards the hub. Then my parrot

Greenbud rises up from my shoulder and flies the puppet back to her place.

Obviously, Fragrant would make a better puppet binder than her mother, but she is still so young. You can't condemn such a fleet-footed one to the House of Puppets for the rest of her life.

Therefore I choose them both.

The day when the threads of the midmost thread-granny start to unravel, I'm going to teach my daughter Pigtales and my granddaughter Fragrant to bind the puppets into the table.

Generally, strange puppets don't get admittance to the big round table. Fragrant tells that to the thin Memsahib with dark circles under her eyes.

"Your puppets are not belonging here. You should take them home with you," says the plump girl.

The Memsahib comes from the city; she is not used to this. She watches the puppets dance, and her back trembles. Behind that I'm burning my knife clean in the fire. Then I speak:

"Turn around."

She obeys. She is scared. I press my knife on where the power of the blood is strongest.

"Do not cry, it is not of much hurting," Fragrant consoles her and slips off somewhere.

I slash out the drops I need. At the same moment, a strip from her yellow dress drops off. It turns red.

Then, I take the knife to the black hair, cut off a bundle.

The Memsahib is an interesting customer. Usually, I just get happy young couples asking me to make puppets for them and bind them together. Or teenagers asking who is the Right One. As if I would know, without hair, cloth and blood from the candidates.

Sometimes I put the puppet of such a client on the big round table and watch whether it will find its way to some unmarried offspring of mine. There are several who have stayed in the Puppet Village that way.

The Memsahib starts bawling:

"I... only dared cut... from ankle... before I ... fled. Not near the heart!"

I stroke her arm. My voice lulls her to calmness.

"It is not mattering. Your blood is strong, and you will have the power of this charm."

Slowly, a smile comes up on the Memsahib's face.

"Accha, I have heard so much of you. They all say that the ones you bind together are staying together until their death!"

"Actually, until my death only," I correct, and the Memsahib turns gloomy again.

Indeed I am not a blooming and healthy thing to look at.

Fragrant does not care about my appearance. She bumps into me and shows the Memsahib a white-dressed boy puppet. The child shrieks:

"Does this look like your man-sahib?"

The Memsahib stares at the puppet and gets confused. When the puppet makes an angry face, she starts back, stumbles and falls over the big round table.

The inhabitants of the big round table have fled to its other side, out of the way. Fragrant praises the nippy puppets. And still the Memsahib weeps and apologizes.

"Don't cry; nothing ever happens to them. They are clever-clever," my granddaughter explains.

The puppets return to their positions. I notice that my second son and his wife have given up, after thrashing themselves to great pains. The puppets are panting, exhausted, inside the circle of their black leash, hand of thread gripping hand of thread.

I ask Fragrant to take the Memsahib into some Uncle's or Aunt's house to have dinner. When the girl and the woman step out of the door into the sun, I and Greenbud climb up to the ceiling skylight. Mutual understanding shines in the bird's tiny eyes. It takes to the air.

My eyes follow it to the horizon, sweep down and rest on the village spreading below me.

The majority of my children live with me in the Puppet Village. Everyone else who has moved into the village is tied to my family, bound by black threads with either a child or a grandchild or a great-grandchild of mine.

My husband Northerner foresaw this without tying a single thread. He brought me to the unexplored wilds, knowing that our first baby would not remain the only one. The infant was predestined to start building a new village, and therefore Northerner named him Expectance.

I wasn't tying threads, then, either. I was doing as my own granny had told me to do. I waited, and while waiting, I gave birth. Each newborn I took to her for the making of a puppet.

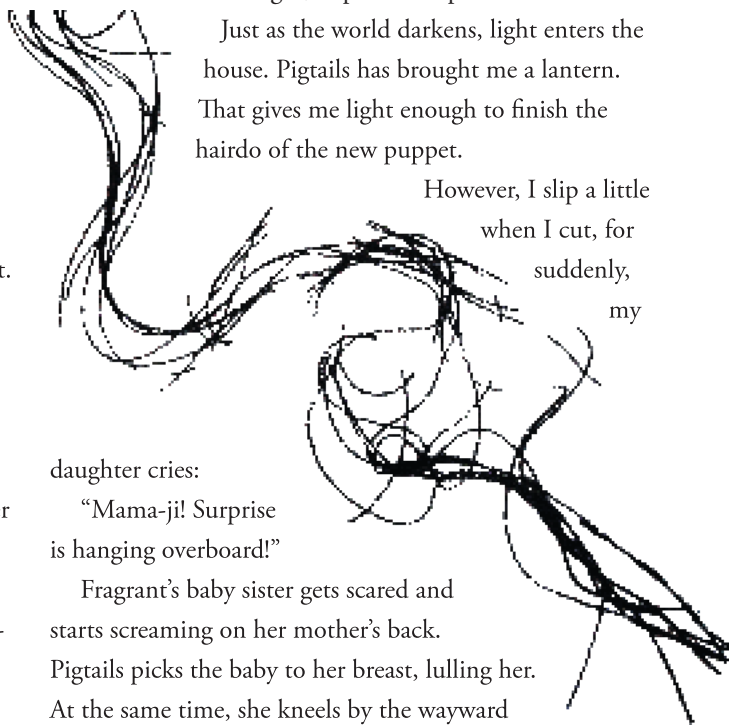
As evening falls, I hear the flapping of wings. Greenbud has descended to nod on the roof beam. It is a big parrot, and by this time in the evening it casts a shadow hugely long.

"*Thanks be to the God Couple,*" it says. "*At last that terror of a bitch has gone! I miss Mama-ji! Baba-ji, why are you being so mean-mean to Mama-ji? Y'all are getting a new mama in a jiffy. We don't want a new mama; we want you not yelling at our Mama-ji any more. Shut up! Why can't you like Mama-ji? What'd I tell you?*"

"Good girl," I praise the parrot.

Just as the world darkens, light enters the house. Pigtales has brought me a lantern. That gives me light enough to finish the hairdo of the new puppet.

However, I slip a little when I cut, for suddenly, my



daughter cries:

"Mama-ji! Surprise is hanging overboard!"

Fragrant's baby sister gets scared and starts screaming on her mother's back. Pigtales picks the baby to her breast, lulling her. At the same time, she kneels by the wayward boy puppet. I tell my frail, creaking legs to do the same.

Yes, indeed. Surprise, the son of my second son has flown over the base of his family. Surprise is hanging by a thin red strand, turning around and flopping.

"Arey, what's happened to him? Is he dead?" Pigtales asks, straining to keep her voice down.

Surprise does not live with us. He lives in the city, and we have not seen him for months.

"Obviously, he is not dead at all. See you there, every thread on place, the boy moving and kicking with more verve than you," I comment.

Greenbud notices our concern, snatches the boy puppet up and drops him to his place among the puppets.

"It may be epilepsy, na?" Pigtales whispers.

One of her sisters has two epileptic kids.

"Generally, epileptics have never fallen off the table," I remind her and point to the puppet kids in question.

I see my daughter off. But when I return to the table, Surprise is hanging there again, swinging in the air under the table.

The biggest and healthiest puppets on the big round table are my son Expectance and his wife Lips. From them, eight fluffy blood threads lead to eight healthy circle dancers.

Like every morning, the fat couple brings my breakfast to the House of Puppets. Expectance kneels down in front of me and laughs, for such a traditional obeisance is hard on his legs. Before he gets up on his legs again, Lips has already poured my tea.

She's become skilled. Not a drop spilt outside my teacup, although the pourer's eyes are busy elsewhere. Two little boy puppets are sawing each other's threads on the big round table. But when thread touches thread, I'm not worried.

"Darling-dear, Austere hasn't obeyed us, after all! He's still fighting with Oak," Lips yelps.

Expectance has seen something more interesting and is not bothering to listen. He stares at the sixth daughter, the one bound together with another girl puppet.

"Orchard is pregnant! Mama-ji, who..."

"It is not mattering who."

"Arey, you are most surely knowing who," my inquisitive son says and tickles me under the chin.

I giggle. And then I remember Surprise, who is again on his way overboard from the table. Expectance, too, notices the puppet and frowns.

"Obviously, that is weird," I say.

"How long has it been since Surprise visited us last?" Lips is wondering.

Surprise has restless feet, so restless that I cannot remember seeing much of him in the House of Puppets. Instead, I remember him grumbling that there's nothing to do in the country.

Luckily, Surprise also has a head for figures, so we'd been able to send him to the city, apprenticed to his uncle and aunt. My fourth son and daughter have a shop there. They are twins, and red threads are binding them more tightly than the black ones.

The twins are not happy being in the country, either.

"Let's send Prudent to check how his son is doing. Bhai surely wants to take a trip, since he has brawled with his wife again, yesterday."

"Brawled and made up," I update.

"You've bound the marriage threads tighter, na?" Lips inquires, head askew, her eyes on my other son and his pair.

"We are not going to send anybody. I shall call him here," I announce and grab Surprise.

I roll up his red thread and tie the roll in a bow. That I put in the weak-threaded hands of the midmost puppet.

Naturally, the father and mother of Surprise immediately burst in from the door. I cannot wind up my grandchild to reach me without touching those who stand between us.

"Mama-ji, I have to go to the fields!" my second son Prudent grumbles while he bows to me.

"And I need to go and milk the cows," my second daughter-in-law complains.

"You will have to stay here only and wait with me for Surprise."

Prudent and Milkbreast keep staring at the big round table. They are hard-working people. They find it a waste of time to sit in the House of Puppets.

The boy puppet that has been called to the middle keeps pulling and tugging, swinging back and forth over my own puppet. The youngster is not getting very friendly looks from his parents.

I study the puppets I made yesterday. All is not well with them. As I try to bring the Memsahib puppet next to her white-shirted spouse, my hands fly apart.

"Definitely, that is a bothersome couple," I sigh.

"Why are you trying to force them together?" Milkbreast asks.

"Since there is no one else who can help the weeping Memsahib," I state. "Would you hold this puppet?"

As Milkbreast stands up, I notice Prudent has become listless and quite lost his capacity for thought. He reaches towards the table, probably wants to see whether his wife will fly into his arms if he squeezes the wife puppet.

The puppets glower at him. There is only one who is allowed to touch them on the big round table.

"Oof!" my son yells and draws off his hand. "I have forgotten they give you electric shocks!"

"Not to your Mama-ji, they don't," Milkbreast snorts and grabs the boy puppet that is repelling his pair. "If you wish to play with puppets, come here and hold the weeping Memsahib."

Prudent obeys, grumpily. While he holds the weeping Memsahib and Milkbreast holds the troublesome husband, they place themselves as close to each other as they can. I wind the black thread first around the boy puppet, but when I reach the girl puppet, the thread has already blown off the boy.

"Oof, how have these two ever managed to marry?" Prudent cries.

"Actually, it has functioned for some time. They even have four children," I inform them and Milkbreast raises her brows.

In its time, the thread had some awkward moments between her and Prudent, too. But I do not mention that. That day is long gone by, my hair was brown then, and there was no young man more in love than Prudent.

"How did she get the blood out of her husband?" the daughter-in-law asks.

"Drugged him with flowersleep, slashed his ankle and fled here. Together with a couple of her younger ones."

"Obviously, you had better get those two bound up before the husband-sahib realizes what is going on!" Prudent comments.

I make a loop of the black thread, big enough so that I can spread my arms and catch both puppets of misery at the

same time. But as I turn to tighten up the thread, the puppets fly off from the hands of their captors. With such a force that the second son and second daughter-in-law both fall on their behinds, swearing.

The weeping Memsahib thumps down at my feet. Her husband, instead, is flying towards the skylight. However, Greenbud is faster and nabs the runaway.

“Oh foe!” Prudent snarls, as he lifts the Memsahib up from the floor.

The parrot gives the boy puppet to me. I hand the black loop to the bird. It flies around quickly, so quickly that our little troublemaker has no time to decide where to flee. The black thread tightens, the loop draws taut.

And suddenly, they are tied together in a knot, hanging as one single bundle from the black thread, at the mercy of Greenbud flying in a circle.

I receive an admiring grin from Prudent.

“Waah! What a good job you did, again!”

Milkbreast looks at the big round table, where tight knots hold all the couples fast together.

As Surprise has already taken extraordinarily long to get here, I climb to the skylight. My old bones creak, the ladder creaks, and I do not know which sound wakes up my second daughter-in-law. The second son does not wake up for any noise; nobody sleeps as soundly as he does.

I’m just about to hand to Greenbud the thread I’ve taken off Surprise, when I hear Austere and Oak shouting:

“Surprise is coming! Surprise is coming!”

The rascals have forgotten their constant squabble for a moment. Together they run along the village main street to meet their cousin-brother. The boys yell their greetings, and Surprise yells, too. His voice has deepened.

But the little boys cannot keep up with him, his speed is picking up the closer he gets to the House of Puppets. Suddenly, it seems as if a tornado had caught the lad. He flies in through the door of my house, bellowing of terror and delight in the velocity.

Too late I realize where I am. Surprise is rushing directly towards my ladder. If at the last moment Milkbreast wouldn’t jump at her son, my bones would break.

I scamper down as quickly as I can. Maddeningly slowly, all too fast. My feet slip. Greenbud catches my skirt, supports and slows down my descending.

It’s a wonder that the jolt is not too hard for my brittle legs.

Surprise lies between the strong breasts of his mother, nailed to the ground. He shudders like an epileptic as I touch him.

“Arey, Daadi-ji! What’s this?” the boy gasps.

Milkbreast pushes him up and brushes at his hair to make it look tidier. The hair is long and sticky of hasty travelling. The boy has grown tall and suspiciously handsome.

“Your puppet is behaving funny-runny,” I answer.

Instantly, Surprise recovers from his shock. Two black eyes look at me, intensely.

For a while, I feel dizzy, wishing to stay engulfed by his eyes.

Those are the eyes of a charmer. Northerner’s black eyes.

The mother slaps her son on the cheek.

“Don’t you just stare; start explaining what’s gone into you!”

“Woman,” I mutter.

“What!”

“That smug easiness, the eyes of a ripper-clipper... Milkbreast, your son has let himself be possessed.”

Milkbreast gives her son a swingeing blow. The boy must be self-destructive, for even after that he does not manage to hide his grin.

“Waah! That you are clever!”

An angry hand grabs his hair, tugs, and nags to know who the tart is. Milkbreast has a piercing voice. Even Prudent seems to hear something, for he turns over.

“Accha, relax, I am telling you if you’ll just let go. Daadi-ji, tell her she’s not to yank my hair off, now tell her!”

The observant Surprise has noticed that I cannot resist the eyes he has inherited from his granddad. I look at Milkbreast in a way that makes her ease off.

Expectance and Lips enter carrying a tea tray. More tea trays follow. The House of Puppets is soon chock full, and Prudent wakes up.

My five sons are so excited by the oddly beginning day that they forget to make an obeisance to me. And a good thing, too, for otherwise Surprise would be chastised again by his mother for forgetting an obeisance.

“Children out,” Milkbreast demands and receives an angry torrent of protests.

The grumbling tots are chased outside, where the weeping Memsahib organizes something to do for them. I give a conspiratorial smile to the big round table, under which Fragrant has slipped into a secret hole.

Surprise draws a deep contended breath. Mother may hit him and pull his hair, but not sweep him out as a child. Not any longer.

When I had reached the marrying age, my own granny put two white-shirts on her round table, one on each side of me. The one was Centiens and the other was Northerner.

Northerner was a farmer. I had chatted with him now and then, about nothing special. He was cute, black-eyed and sweetly shy. I had not known he was interested in me, before my father told me about it.

Centiens was easier to remember. He did magic; out of nothing he conjured wild voices and small animals. As we walked along the edge of the forest, I was not sure whether my heart was beating of fear or love.

"I don't want to be the only one to give my children powers," he said and looked into my eyes, until I turned my eyes down and mumbled something and slipped home to smile.

But never could I have chosen a husband without hearing what grandmother thought of him. Granny and the puppets.

A puppet binder never leaves her house. So I went into the House of Puppets, which even then was high and round, made of clay and dung. Children had drawn puppet figures on its walls, too.

Grandmother stepped between me and the table, and I could not see what the puppets were doing. Instead, what I saw was how granny's hairs stood on end and her skin blanched.

"Northerner. You will marry the Northerner!" grandmother cried, and I got so scared of her shrill voice that I stumbled backwards.

What had Centiens tried to do? What question had granny refused?

I ran home, curled up in a corner, enfolded my knees in my arms and shuddered. Fear was nesting in my heart. There it gnawed the whole evening and night and the next day. Until in the evening, Northerner sat down in front of me, and he was shy no longer.

"Listen, girl-my-dear, I know what is threatening you. And I also know that I can able to protect you from it. Your Naani-ji has just told me I can."

"Wha-at?"

"I will tell you once we are married," Northerner answered and captured me with his black eyes.

And I was no longer afraid of anything.

Around me sit all my grown-up descendants who live in the Puppet Village. I am not sure how they all manage to find space in the House of Puppets.

Next to me, Surprise is swanking off, the shameless smile still flashing on his face. The expression makes his mother hiss angry words into Prudent's ears. My bad hearing recognizes

only a few: "...*what if...*", "...*a baby...*", "...*be expensive...*".

The elder brothers of Surprise are clenching their fists. They are too old to see their brother's wildness as a piece of heroics. And too young to understand that one go-getter is not going to spoil the reputation of the Puppet Binder family just like that.

Surprise takes my hand and presents me with one especially charming look.

"I have been missing you only," he says.

I blush, even though I know that actually the boy has given hardly a thought to his old wrinkled grandmother.

My guests grow silent. All the puppets on the big round table stare at us. Surprise opens his mouth:

"Arey, y'all. I'd have come even without asking and quite soon, for I have important news to tell you. I am getting married!"

"You'd better," the big brothers grumble, threateningly.

"Daadi-ji, I hope I have not insulted you by not speaking to you about this before... I really could not help it, Cornspike has just captured my heart, like that bird of yours will catch fleeing puppets. Cornspike is absolutely fundu, so merry and pretty and caring. You are going to love her, y'all!"

Surprise's eyes are a-twinkle and his voice softens down almost to a coo. Once it was that I, too, could throw a young man so helter-skelter. It is all so long ago, and it is long ago since Northerner left me alone.

He was sleeping behind me, and his puppet, tied to my own, unravelled in front of me. I dared not look behind myself. Not even when the black thread had fallen down on the table, off the waist of my puppet, under the limp bundle of thread.

Expectance sees I am not being quite myself today. He takes the lead.

"Surprise, this is not a question of falling in love only. Basically, your puppet has tried to escape as far away as possible from us all. Can you explain that?"

The boy keeps the smile on his lips, but it is dying from his eyes.

"Cornspike's family does not quite approve of me... Actually, we have not yet received the family's consent, although Cornspike says that she would marry me at once! But I can definitely manage it all; I don't want to bother y'all... any more. Sorry."

Surprise would wish to say no more, but the silence pushes him to blurt out one more sentence: "Her father is a marriage-agency-wallah."

My children start making faces, rolling their eyes and moaning.

"Oof, you idiot!"

"Of all possible families it has to be just the Eyes!"

I frown.

“Mama-ji, he is speaking about a family that has been spiking the wheels with all possible difficulties to bother the twins. The Eyes think that the House of Puppets is depriving them of customers,” Expectance explains.

“And you have told nothing to me.”

“You are having quite enough to worry about with all these puppets,” my daughter Orchard says.

I notice her stomach has grown considerably.

I do not know who has put the baby inside Orchard. Certainly not her beautiful wife who keeps stroking Orchard’s hand, obviously in love.

I have not been able to foretell that our family has enemies. On the big round table neither flash-grooms nor ill-wishers appear.

I feel hurt, and no one notices. Everybody is speaking at once. I sigh and let my eyes sweep down to Surprise’s hairy hand which lies in my lap. Then I notice the eye that is tattooed on the back of his hand.

For an eye, it is quite broad and the eyelashes are thick and dense. The iris is just as black as the pupil, but there are blue lightning flashes crisscrossing it.

“Arey, what is that?” I ask quietly.

“Oh, that! It is a... an engagement torture. Cornspike’s family said that to even be allowed to woo their daughter I have to accept the tattoo of the Eye family.”

Family tattoo to a young man who is not wanted in the family? That is really strange indeed. And there is something very strange about the eye, too.

“It is so... alive,” I mutter.

“It is a good likeness, anyway. Quite a few in their family have eyes precisely like that,” Surprise tells.

Suddenly I feel sure that once I have looked into eyes just like that. But where?

My descendants and all their beloved ones are getting noisier and noisier. I am not able to think straight.

“Accha! Help me up now,” I tell my grandson, and he lifts me up like a little girl.

I clap my hands. Surprise starts clapping, too, and the sound makes the other noises quiet down.

“This boy is really truly in love. I will not set myself to oppose Surprise’s happiness, if Cornspike will prove worth it.”

“Mama-ji! Arey, you don’t know what you are doing!”

Expectance is sweating heavily. However can he be so nervous? I chuckle:

“Obviously, whatever the family is like, the girl is probably innocent.”

My children again explode to speak all together at once. According to what they have heard, the Eyes are a miserable rotten bunch and so greedy we are all going to be bankrupted with the dowry. But I maintain my stand and the protests fade to a grumble.

“Let’s leave Surprise here behind and all go get acquainted with Cornspike!” Expectance cries.

“No. We shall use a craftier way,” I say and lift up my arm.

Greenbud settles on my wrist. Oh how heavy he feels! Luckily, Surprise gives his own thankful arm to support mine.

“You must have something belonging to Cornspike, na?” I ask Surprise.

The boy grins and digs up an amulet from underneath his shirt. It has some of Cornspike’s hair that he has wrapped in a bloody piece of cloth.

“Ay, and I brought these to you as proof that if any two people belong together, we do!”

“This is better than I dared hope for,” I smile.

I give a single hair to Greenbud and hand the parrot to my grandson. Ten times quicker than I, Surprise takes the bird to the skylight and sends it on its way.

“What are they doing?” Orchard’s wife asks, and my daughter answers:

“The bird will soon return and then we can hear what Cornspike and the others are talking about us.”

Impatiently, I cry:

“Go, go, leave! I have an important puppet to bind... don’t you leave, Surprise.”

The people all withdraw and Fragrant scrambles out of her hiding place.

“Again, you have been forgetting to drink any of your tea!” she scolds me.

It’s very hard to make Cornspike’s puppet good enough to please Surprise’s dotting eyes. The young man wants to see every phase of the work so that the puppet is sure to turn out “the best Daadi-ji has ever made”. He’s even more helpful than Fragrant.

“After Naani-ji no one knows as much of puppet binding as I do!” Fragrant claims, proudly.

“And I thought you are knowing everything already,” Surprise answers his cousin-sister, but it’s my eyes he’s looking into.

His smile makes even an old lady like me smile broadly.

“Naani-ji will not tell me the most important secrets before she starts dying. Only one person can have this kind of table at one time,” the girl explains. “And that’s the one whose puppet stands in the centre! But no one else except Naani-ji is knowing how to center that puppet correctly.”

“I am thinking these dancing-prancing puppets must be the secret of your magic powers. Pedalling power,” Surprise suggests and kneels by the big round table.

I move close to him and kneel, too. And then I realize

that for the whole day I have not remembered my aching joints.

“Ay, you listen, charmer, that’s something I’ll tell only to my successor.”

“The Nine-Fold Death to y’all!”

A female voice from outside, so angry it gives us the creeps, scares us to stand up again.

“Bring her in,” I command my grandchildren.

Surprise and Fragrant hurry out and return at once with a proud thin woman. She reminds me of Greenbud, she’s got enough of a beak herself.

She notices the big round table, and before the escorts guess what she’s about, she has jumped up on the table.

“Which of them is Sun’s ex? Which one?”

She tries to kick the little quick puppets but cannot hit even one of them. Instead, the puppets trip her down with their threads.

Surprise catches the falling woman. She struggles but cannot get free from the grip of my strong grandson.

“Arey, it’s no use to trash about like that. No one else can do anything with them except Naani-ji!” Fragrant taunts her.

“Who is Sun?” Surprise asks.

“And what is your good name?” Fragrant demands.

“I am Allure and Sun is my husband! Oh foe, you miserable wretches! When he at last got free of that horrible spider, when we at last got our relationship official, you have to come and meddle with your witchery!”

Allure is shouting so that drops of saliva sprinkle on my face. My gnarled finger wipes them off.

“Naani-ji, she must be talking about the husband of that weeping Memsahib!” Fragrant realizes, puffing of eagerness.

“One moment Sun is lying in my arms and saying he’s happier than ever,” Allure tells, pressing her hand on her heart. “And the next moment his heart is so sore that however much he swears and fights against it, he can’t help running back to his ex’s arms. Even though he’s hated her since the last damn brat!”

Tears have filled the eyes, mad of grief. The woman stares at Surprise.

“Is that right? Is it, ay?” she demands.

“Is anything right?” I ask.

The wet eyes stare at me with hatred. I go on:

“Here, the proper question is what is least wrong. In this case the situation is five against two. My client and her four kids want the husband and father back. You and Sun are in minority.”

“How dare you play the Love God! I’d never condescend to finger anyone’s life like you!”

Surprise guides the attacker to the door. He asks the passers-by to take her out of the Puppet Village.

“Arey, what if she had set this house on fire?” Surprise is

wondering, frowning with worry.

“If some arsonist managed to get near the house without anybody noticing, by night for instance, Greenbud would surely wake Naani-ji up in time,” Fragrant declares.

“But it’s not here now,” Surprise says.

“No, but you are,” I answer and pat my grandson’s pretty cheek.

He’s become thoughtful.

“You mean those puppets could be burned?”

“They’d run away from fire,” Fragrant assures.

“But in theory, what would happen if one of the puppets caught fire after all? Fragrant’s puppet, for instance?”

Surprise asks and looks at me, soberly.

“Generally, Naani-ji never answers questions like that,” Fragrant tosses.

The dark eyes of Northerner do not give up, however. They plead and plead, until I turn my eyes down, pat Fragrant and say:

“Perhaps it’s time now to answer. You see, the puppets do tell things about us. But we do not tell about them.”

“Arey, what? I did not understand that,” Fragrant cries.

“It means that if somebody would set you on fire, your puppet would be fried, too. But if fire devours you puppet, nothing will happen to you,” Surprise answers.

Happiness fills my tired breast. How well Surprise understands me!

“Unless Naani-ji herself sets the fire on my puppet,” Fragrant adds.

Nervously I walk around in a circle. I cannot think of anything besides my old parrot, whose tail feathers reach my buttocks when it sits on my shoulder. The worry is making all my limbs ache.

Greenbud ought to have returned by now.

Once again, I force my legs to ascend the tiresome ladder. I look out at the sky, but there is no sign of my bird. Instead, I see Milkbreast going from house to house and offering tea. She’s telling everybody how she’s tried some entirely new concoction, so delicious that everyone ought to taste it immediately.

That is strange. The family’s ancestress is always served first, but I have not received anything. Is Milkbreast being angry with me?

Just a couple of days ago Greenbud’s excursions and Milkbreast’s thoughts would not have shattered my peace of mind. Oh, my stupid heart! Why did it have to wake up from its decent stupor at the end of my life’s days? To wake up, and feel things so deeply.

I trudge back to the ground and limp to look at the big round table. The puppet of my second daughter-in-

law Milkbreast is restless; she twitches in her black restraint. Prudent's puppet, instead, is sleeping.

Actually, the whole big round table falls asleep. One family after the other takes a tumble, and soon there are only I myself, Milkbreast and Surprise who are up. The boy has gone towards Medicine Mountain to gather the yellow-brown flowers. Those that only open by night.

Surprise is being so helpful! The city has changed an ungrateful boy into a considerate man.

I sit down on the rim of my sleepy table, facing the door, and I wait. My heart is beating hard. Why couldn't Surprise return already! My trembling hands reach toward his puppet and wind the red thread again as a call to him.

Of course, Milkbreast flies in first. She slaps me lightly, to be rid of the bewitchment. But she does not enter my house alone. After her comes Allure, Sun's other woman.

Allure is holding the two puppets I have bound together with such a great trouble. She stops in front of me and demands:

"Now, you are going to break off this damned black thread. Obviously, I can not able to do it, but you can. Do it, or else I..."

"Or else what?" I snort.

"It's no use trying to wriggle yourself out of this. The whole village is asleep; Milkbreast's flowersleep tea takes care of that!"

Milkbreast is sobbing and swearing. This treachery cuts her heart with a thousand blades. That is a heart forced to love.

I close my eyes and say to my daughter-in-law:

"Let me guess. You, too, are wishing that I break a black thread."

"Oof, do it at once, before I become crazy of this pain! You have cursed me!" Milkbreast weeps.

"What about the children?" I sigh.

"Children? They will not miss me any more, they are big enough. Just think about Surprise, he is not respecting me the least bit! He only laughs at my scoldings," my daughter-in-law bawls.

And I remember again how Prudent sobbed and implored me to bind him with Milkbreast. By that time they were about the age of Surprise. Our young relative Milkbreast thought it was a real time-pass to live in the country.

But now they are middle-aged, and nothing is keeping Milkbreast in the Puppet Village except a bit of thread of the fruitful earth.

Tears blind me as I grasp Prudent and Milkbreast. I yank at the thread. It breaks off so easily.

"And now Sun!" Allure demands, and her beaky nose touches mine.

A noisy flapping of wings makes us look upwards. My parrot, my dear wise parrot descends, nails stretched. Two grey toes stick out forwards and two backwards and together they

all four grab the madly besotted woman by the hair.

Allure is screaming. Oh how she screams! Instinctively, she draws a knife from the folds of her dress and stabs at my bird.

The first stab misses and I will not stay and wait for the next one. I jump on her, catch her hand and twist. We roll around.

I would be no obstacle to such a young woman, if Greenbud wouldn't be pulling her hair so it hurts.

"Stop it! Stop!" Milkbreast wails.

She tries to separate us, but suddenly, she has to rush to the door. A peculiar thumping and bumping is approaching us. A big white-shirted sausage rolls into the corner of my vision, and when Milkbreast feels sure of what it is, she starts screaming her lungs out:

"Prudent! Oof! You are bruised all over! You... your arm is broken!"

My son does not feel it; neither does he hear a single word. Flowersleep tea has lulled him fast asleep. As if he weren't a fast sleeper all on his own.

Prudent keeps on rolling towards me, the way I did wind it by the table. Milkbreast sinks down on his way, stops his rolling.

And while my attention is caught by my second son and his wife, Allure catches me. She scrambles on to sit upon my stomach, and I am no longer able to see the door. But Greenbud will not give up. It is still stubbornly sitting upon her head, ready to peck.

Allure is clutching her knife with both hands. I chuckle of relief as I see what kind of a weapon it is. A blunt fruit-peeling knife!

Considering the circumstances, Allure speaks commendably calmly.

"Now you will tell the pecky-pecky bird to let go of me and fetch the two puppets here."

I'm about to comply when a bellowing voice carries to our ears from the village street. The closer it comes, the better we discern what it is saying:

"Beware, Daadi-ji! Beware, Daadi-ji! I'm coming!"

And Milkbreast, holding her rolling husband, hisses:

"Get out of the way! Allure, get out of the way, NO-O-O-O-O...."

A cold blade stabs my breast.

Surprise has crashed on Allure. Allure has fallen over me. And the fruit peeling knife is now resting in my breast.

Greenbud lowers its head on my cheek.

The pain fades away, the world slows down. Surprise jerks the woman off me, and I see the knife doesn't stick directly out from the heart. That's no help; when Surprise turns his head towards the big round table, I see by his face that my thread figure is already unravelling.

The weeping boy pulls off the knife. His hand strokes my cheek, and a run of blood covers the strange eye on the back of his hand.

“Daadi-ji, Daadi-ji!”

“Don’t grieve, Surprise, don’t,” I whisper.

I only see Surprise’s eyes, the black eyes of my beloved Northerner. I feel perfectly comfortable. But the youngster won’t calm down.

“Surprise, you will marry your Cornspike and you’ll be happy. You don’t need me for that,” I say quietly.

“No, Daadi-ji, it’s all over! You had no time to bind us together, and Sri Centiens of the Eyes family is never going to give Cornspike to me, because...”

“Centiens...”

And then I remember why the tattoo of the Eyes family is so familiar. What Northerner told me once we’d been married.

“Accha, now you must tell me what it is that is threatening me,” I demanded the first morning of our marriage, when nothing felt the least bit threatening and everything was wonderful.

And Northerner gave me a long kiss, so long that I thought he was trying to suck all questions off my tongue.

That’s where I’d wish to stay, in my marriage bed with Northerner. Surprise’s voice has started to sound as if it were coming from the bottom of a well:

“Sri Centiens, Cornspike’s Daadi-ji. He is the ancestor of the Eyes family, and Daadi-ji, he said I’ll never get Cornspike, unless I tell him your secrets...”

I feel no more pain, but Surprise’s words stop my heart.

“...and you’ll never ever have time to tell them to me,” the boy bawls and kisses my forehead.

I have no time to tell them to anybody. For in that moment the last fibre uncoils from the puppet in the centre of the big round table.

Milkbreast binds my body in the foetal position before it stiffens. Surprise, weeping inconsolably, lifts it up to his shoulders to carry it out, but Milkbreast says that a Puppet Binder must be buried in the House of Puppets.

“Mama-ji, look! Where are the puppets going?” Surprise cries.

All the puppets jump down from the big round table. And then, whoosh, the table collapses. Its white centre sinks in the ground and its wooden rims come unstuck, fall down and split apart.

Milkbreast, Surprise and Allure stare at the table, in open-eyed amazement. A moment later they notice that all the puppets have fallen down. There is no more life in them.

“Oof! Are we going to die, too?” Milkbreast wails.

Surprise is breathing hard.

“No, Mama-ji. The puppets did tell about us, but we do not tell about them. They were Daadi-ji’s puppets, and they died with her.”

They keep silent for a long time, stealing a glance now and then at the bundles of thread and the pieces of table and the sleeping Prudent. They are not looking at each other.

“Fragrant certainly can able to bind new ones,” Milkbreast coughs up, finally.

“No, she doesn’t. Not living ones. Nobody can. Daadi-ji died with the secret under her tongue,” Surprise asserts.

“Ay, and there it remains, under that tongue, my chance to get Cornspike,” he adds so quietly no one else can hear it besides me.

I, who hover amongst them. Or within them. I am everywhere, present in the whole situation.

I’m thinking feverishly. Obviously I will not have much time. How do I manage to tell Pigtails and Fragrant that they have to fashion the centre of the new table from my bones? Is there any way?

A piece of the roof falls through me. Allure jumps out of its way.

“The house is collapsing!” Milkbreast shouts. “No, leave Daadi-ji, she must not be taken out from here!”

The trio awake start dragging Prudent out of the house. It’s a wonder the falling pieces of the roof don’t hit them.

The first of the sleeping villagers to wake up is of course the fattest one: my eldest son Expectance. Flowersleep tea won’t flow for long in his massive veins.

My second daughter-in-law accuses herself of everything. She kneels to sob at the feet of my first-born. Allure hastens to comfort her.

“Ay, don’t cry! Your mother-in-law was playing a dangerous game with her puppets; she killed herself by her own fault. This was an unavoidable consequence,” Allure keeps reassuring, mostly her own self.

“Arey, but you had the knife!” Surprise interrupts.

“That knife, you don’t go and intend to kill anyone with it,” Allure sighs. “But who cares, just do anything you want with me. Execute me if you will. I cannot live without Sun.”

Expectance doesn’t know what to think. To create some semblance of order he tells Milkbreast to nurse the broken arm of her husband. Prudent has woken up and is biting his lip so as not to howl of pain.

“You had better forget all of this. That’ll make it easier for you,” says a babyish voice.

It is Chubby Deva, the god of Reincarnation. Everything is happening just the way my own grandmother told in her days. Or almost like it; for according to her, Chubby Deva is an immense baby, but I am not seeing any kind of figure. I just am; I am and I feel the Chubby Deva, who also is.

Chubby Deva chooses a more official tone of voice and

says what he has to say.

"The Supreme Lord says that those who serve Ancestors will go to their Ancestors, those who serve Spirits of Nature will go to the Spirits of Nature, and those who serve Him will go to Him."

"I have concentrated on my living relatives only," I answer.

"Then you will also stay with your family," Chubby Deva says.

Fragrant has also woken up. She shakes of weeping, held in the arms of her mother Pigtails. She sobs that she's going to rebuild the House of Puppets. She wants to try all possible ways to make alive the puppets she is going to bind.

My sixth daughter Orchard is stroking her large belly, worriedly. Her wife utters it aloud:

"Arey, what about our standard of living, isn't it going to decline if nobody is going to gift the Puppet Binder any more?"

"A bit," Prudent answers, face drawn in a painful grimace. "This was going to happen one year later anyway."

"We have lots of fields and cattles, we can still able to be self-sufficient," Milkbreast assures.

"One year later? What are you meaning?" Fragrant keeps asking, until a grown-up hears her words and answers that everybody has frequently taken a peek at the threads of my puppet.

I knew that myself. I'd have died naturally in about a year's time.

"You have a couple of days left. Then, you must go," Chubby Deva announces.

"Where?"

Surprise has slowly gone amongst the fresh ruins. He is picking pieces of the roof off over my body.

Greenbud descends on his shoulder. Suddenly, I remember that the bird did not have time to tell me its greetings.

It is talking to Surprise.

"Surprise, I love you too!"

If I still had a body, it would now be filled with tender feelings. The boy must have whispered his love to the bird, as he sent it off through my skylight towards Cornspike.

"Daada-ji has put earplugs to the bird and kept it prisoner, but now I'm going to let it go! Arey, birdy-bird, will you please be sure to tell Surprise? Bye-bye, birdy-bird!" Greenbud repeats in a clear girlish voice.

Thoughtfully, Surprise walks to his parents. Milkbreast is hugging Prudent, even though no black bit of thread is binding them together any longer. No thread is binding anybody any more in the village; and probably Sun will soon return to Allure, too.

"Mama-ji, Baba-ji, may I borrow a horse?"

"Obviously, you are going to that girl," Prudent mumbles, consenting.

Lips takes the boy's hand and squeezes it, earnestly.

"I and your uncle will come and parley the girl to you. We can afford enough to get the dowry paid."

"It's time anyway that we speak with Sri Centiens of the Eyes family!" Expectant cries.

I'm thinking of Cornspike who so attracts Surprise. And in the same moment, I find myself in front of the girl.

Cornspike is crying. She sits in the darkest corner of a dark room and cries, and tears have glued her hair to streaks on her face.

She is so exceedingly young.

"Is she longing for Surprise?"

"You may see for yourself. The body is the time-prisoner, not you," the baby-voice of Chubby Deva answers, and suddenly we are part of the new situation, again.

I can see Centiens. For the first time, since father forbid him to meet me. But I recognize him easily. Centiens is still impressive. He charms Cornspike to fear and love himself. Just like another young girl, very long ago.

"Where is the parrot?" Centiens is thundering.

They are alone, the two of them, in front of a beautiful house. It has a grass-roof, with beautiful birds sitting on it. Wild parrots, even. But not Greenbud, and of course Centiens doesn't mean anything else but Greenbud.

"Ay, I just do not know," Cornspike lies, and her alarmed face cries out how seldom she does lie.

Centiens steps so close his breath waves the black curls on Cornspike's brow.

"Have you not learned by now that I always get to know everything? And you thinking yourself mature enough to decide who you are going to marry!"

Cornspike has lowered her eyes. Each word by Centiens forces her carriage to bow lower down.

"Ay, I know that the love-mosquito has laid its eggs in your veins. I know where you met that bugger-hugger; I know how you've kept saying his name by nights. I know on what tussock in the woods you've laid with him."

Cornspike gives a sob. Then the bearing of Centiens softens. He says in a positively friendly way:

"Ay, I know you are hoping to be pregnant, so I'd be obliged to consent to your marriage."

The girl bursts out.

"I don't understand why you cannot be liking Surprise when everybody else likes him! What's the sense of holding a grudge to some family, when we could do what all sensible important families are doing and join our forces, simply!"

"We shall do that on my terms only. If that Surprise is not clever enough to play by my rules, I don't care with

whatever kind of thread the old hag would bind you two together.”

Centiens strokes the cheek of his grandchild who is weeping miserably and whispers:

“I am not giving you to her.”

I understand that he’s talking about me, not about Surprise. But Cornspike understands nothing. She crawls in the darkest corner of the darkest room in her home. She weeps and wipes her tears and weeps again. Until the weeping stops, and the girl halts to look at the back of her hand.

“Accha, now I understand how you always know everything!” she cries.

Cornspike trudges downstairs and catches the biggest of the kitchen knives. Several times she is about to stab the eye on her hand, but every time she stops the strike. Out of the instinct of self-preservation and out of love to her grandfather.

And in the same moment, the granddad is already at the door and in the room and next to Cornspike.

“Girl-my-dear, you don’t mean to go away wandering into the jungle with your hand mutilated?” he says and embraces the girl.

“I want to go to Surprise!” Cornspike bawls; and her granddad rocks her gently.

“Love is the most terrible of diseases. I am knowing what it is, indeed.”

There is such a sorrow in the old man’s voice that Cornspike must ask about it. And Centiens tells what he never had the time to tell me. How I had fired his heart to such a great blaze, how the fire caught his every nook and cranny. How he was sure that I felt the same way, or at least something akin to it.

“And then this damn Puppet Granny came between us,” Centiens spits. “My heart-flame dared not say yes to me without asking permission from her Daadi-ji!”

“And just now you scolded me for saying yes to Surprise without asking my own Daada-ji’s permission!” Cornspike protests.

“Ay. Well, yes,” Centiens sighs.

He seems very frail and unhappy.

With a pain-filled voice the old man reminisces about how the men drove him off from my village with knives in their hands. And how my new home village was spelled, so that he never found it.

“Later, I heard from others that she seemed to be happy. O foe! In a bewitched marriage! Without one itty-bitty-bit of black thread my flame would still be loving me!”

“But... but you cannot be hating all the puppet grannies in the world just because a single one of them once messed up your life!” Cornspike cries out.

“Cornspike... Haven’t you guessed by now who my dearest flame is nowadays, ay?”

The big wet eyes of the girl grow even bigger.

“I do not want to play with puppets. I want to know from where a Puppet Binder gets her powers for just one reason only. Oof! I want to destroy each and every big round table!” the old man cries and drives the knife hard into the cutting board.

As if Centiens had driven his last powers into the board, he crumbles to sit down on the ground. This time, Cornspike folds him in her arms.

Grandfather and granddaughter sit quietly; and when the rest of the family comes home, they climb upstairs into the dark room to sit quietly again.

Cornspike falls asleep. Her dreams are restless but pleasant; she probably thinks she’s embracing Surprise.

The eyes of Centiens stay open. They have rolled upside-down. With his eyes, he watches the world through some hundreds of hands, controls the sleep of his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And their beloved ones.

Suddenly, he shakes so that Cornspike startles awake. The upside-down eyes turn back.

It is a good thing that it is dark. Blood trickles over the irises; sticks in the long eyelashes of Centiens.

Together they notice that there are three figures standing on the top of the stairs. A parrot is sitting on the shoulder of the slenderest one, and the morning sun makes all four of them radiant.

“Surprise!” Cornspike squeals, and with a couple of leaps she gets close to her beloved.

Surprise folds her in his arms, but does not seem to join in her delight.

Expectance and Lips seem perplexed. So this complacent, sleepy figure of an ancestor is the sworn enemy of our family?

Surprise is more positive. Holding fast to Cornspike, he walks to face Centiens and kneels at his feet, politely.

The men remain silent and look at each other – the young and dark, the old and white. Then the first one says:

“I hope you are satisfied now. Your rival is dead.”

”I know that.”

“Then you must also be knowing that Daadi-ji died too quickly. No one knows any more how to wake up the puppets.”

No, Centiens didn’t know that. For the magic eye has not been able to see when the young man moved with enchanted speed and got coloured with the Puppet Granny’s blood.

A slow smile covers the face of Centiens. He pats the back of Surprise’s hand.

"No, Surprise, I was not knowing that."

The eye on Surprise's hand is still covered with blood. Cornspike trembles and gropes for the washing implements she used to clean her grandfather's eyes.

The pain Centiens has felt during the night is all gone.

"Accha, now I have two good reasons for dying. Chubby Deva, ohoy!" he calls.

I feel Chubby Deva becoming alert. Centiens cannot see him, however, he's just showing off.

"How much time will Centiens have?"

"Well, since you asked, just about five days," the Divine Being answers me. "Now, I cannot understand y'all. You bounce from body to body, from heartbreak and unhappiness to another, though you'd have the chance to get off this endless circulation and go to the Highest Being."

"Obviously, you'd go at once if you could," I inquire politely, and Chubby Deva gets excited.

"At once! But as long as there's people like y'all in the world, who don't want to know about anything better, I have work to do..."

Not hearing anything of Chubby Deva's chatter, Cornspike explains the visitors everything Centiens has been feeling towards the departed one and her family. The girl's voice is filled with compassion and tenderness, but none of that rubs off on Surprise. The boy exudes a chilling mood.

Centiens grins.

"Now, since you are here anyway, you might as well tell me why I was driven off the village of my beloved. I do understand I was nothing important, just a minor wizard. It was easier for them to exile me than to rise up against the fancies of the Puppet Granny... after all, my would-be was the darling of the old woman, the successor and keeper of the family's power!"

Expectance sighs most heavily. Cornspike seizes him like a hungry one grabs a piece of bread, begging for knowledge.

"My Baba-ji made us swear that we'd never tell our Mama-ji where Centiens lives. Or even that we knew of where he lives. For there was a prophecy... my Baba-ji told it to me when I was growing up, and later on to all my sisters and brothers, too. We told it just now to Surprise, and..."

"Arey, get on to it," Lips cries, with her eyes on Cornspike, who is shivering of suspense.

The husband obeys.

"According to the prophecy, if the ways of Mama-ji and Centiens would cross again, Mama-ji would die. That is, the seed of Centiens would be the death of our Mama-ji."

"And the prophecy wasn't even true!" Cornspike is appalled.

But then she pales, seeing the eyes of Surprise.

"I would not have been staying in her House of Puppets without your Daada-ji...and without you, Cornspike."

"Was it you who killed her? Oh foe!" Centiens cries.

For a moment, he sees in front of him a totally desperate young man. A man so in love he kills his own grandmother to win the favour of a mean old man.

Surprise reads the face of Centiens. He tortures him and Cornspike with a long silence, before he tells them what really happened.

A weight is lifted from the old shoulders of Centiens. He takes the hands of Surprise and Cornspike and joins the young smooth fingers together.

"Promise me one thing only. Otherwise, you'll just have to wait until I die before you may get married!"

Chubby Deva yanks at me, or rather, there is a violent jolt in reality. I just have time to see how the tense hands of the dear children squeeze each other and the hands of the old man. And Centiens is saying:

"If a House of Puppets is ever going to rise up anywhere, you two must never ever enter it. Your love must remain pure of threads!"

Greenbud is flying high, high up. It has really strong wings. My hair swings backwards when Greeny dives into the crown of the tree where I'm sitting. It has a nest there. I'm the only one allowed to climb up and look at the darling parrot fledglings. Their heads seem big and their beaks heavy when they try to imitate their parent.

"Zeeep, zeeep, zeee," they chirp.

The mother bird glances at me as if wanting to say her young ones are just hopeless. Patiently, it repeats:

"Birdy-bird, I'm sure you will recognize me and my flame when we are born again. Tell my flame that 'I love you, and this time I'll not...'"

"Accha, accha, can't you please believe I know that by heart already! 'Tell my flame that I love you, and this time I'll not let you marry anyone else. Ask the parrot who to marry!' You keep telling that to me every single day and always with the same old gaffer-baffer voice," I say and then I stroke a fledgling.

All of a sudden, somebody calls for me from down there by base of the tree:

"Diamond, you there, na? Start getting down, will you; and we'll go and have tea!"

I have to climb down, 'cause there's my own Baba-ji's cousin-sister Fragrant. She's always in a great hurry-hurry, for she's the Puppet Granny and all kinds of weirdos want to speak with her all the time.

"Fragrant, why did you and your Mama-ji become Puppet Grannies?" I ask.

"Because Greenbud told us how one becomes a Puppet Granny," Fragrant tells.

“Ay, she told that, did she now? With what kind of voice?”

“With the voice of a real oldest-old naani. The voice of my own Naani-ji’s naani-ji! Parrots can live much much longer than we can, you know.”

Fragrant is taking me to the House of Puppets, for her mama-ji wants to have tea with her and one of them must always stay captive in the House of Puppets, so that if they want to be together they must have their together in the House of Puppets and nowhere else. Generally, they just play with the puppets since there’s nothing else to do there.

Fragrant and her mama-ji do have lots and lots of puppets and each puppet is looking just like somebody. They have puppets of several people I know, but they don’t have a puppet that looks like me.

Fragrant’s mama-ji is called Pigtails and she’s saying to my Daadi-ji who’s also having tea with us:

“Oof, Milkbreast, it’s still lying heavy on my heart that we miss so many puppets.”

“Arey, don’t you try your tricks,” Daadi-ji answers. “We are not changing our minds and you know it well enough. I’ll be the only one who can play with Prudent and Surprise and Cornspike... and with this our Diamond,” Daadi-ji says and

A word from the author

A portrait of a smiling, very young woman; her reddish brown fingers are rising to hide the expression of love, and she might be about to knit her eyebrows with worry. This portrait by Steve McCurry, taken in Jaipur 1982, launched my story. Like numerous times before and after, one portrait or panorama became alive and started to move before my eyes. To me, writing a fictional story is like watching a film and writing down what I can. When two or three such films meet and connect, I sit down and start writing.

In the cinema of my imagination, this Jaipur girl was Cornspike of course. The place was no more Jaipur but my own fantasy world. All my life I’ve been eager to create worlds, cultures, languages and fictional stories. I’m a reporter by profession, and it is a great way to train writing every day, but fiction is my passion.

I get inspired by studying non-western cultures, not by reading Tolkien clones or dark visions of the future of human race in the space. Another source of inspiration for me are elder people. They have so much more to say than my generation (I was born 1979).

Someone has said I write fantasy of developing countries, which may be true. My favourite themes have been tolerance, supporting but suffocating families, refugees, clashes between tribes, classes and generations.

tousles my hair.

I go hide behind Daadi-ji’s back. I feel a bit scared when the puppets keep staring at me. Sometimes I feel they are more interested in me than in the other children. My Baba-ji is even more scared for he just daren’t enter the House of Puppets at all!

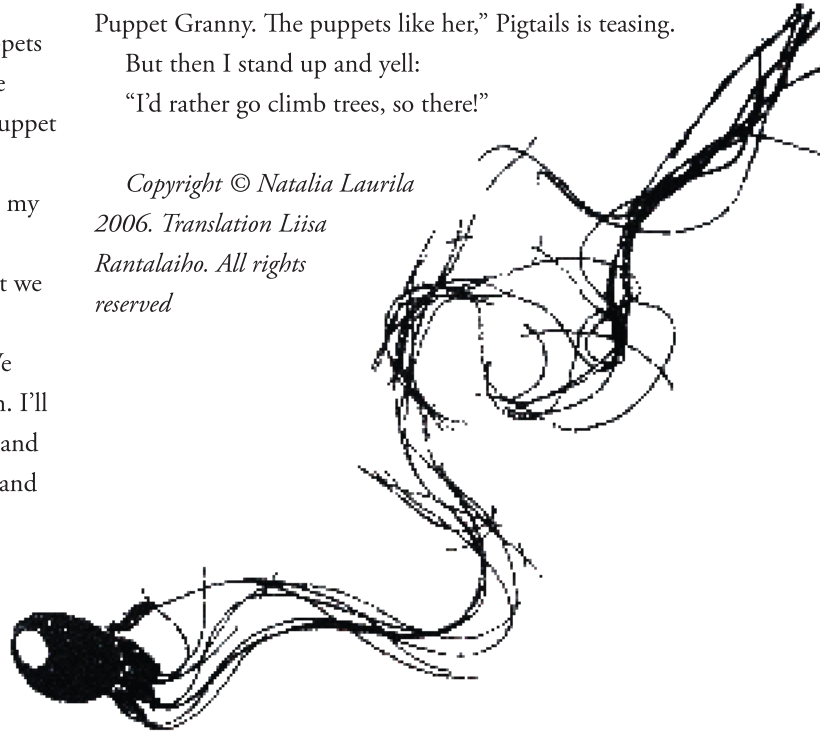
I think the puppets of the House of Puppets are total stupes ‘cause only Puppet Grannies are allowed to play with them.

“Actually, that Diamond of yours might make a good Puppet Granny. The puppets like her,” Pigtails is teasing.

But then I stand up and yell:

“I’d rather go climb trees, so there!”

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I believe there is no ultimate evil but reasons behind every sin. I believe we don’t have to see this world as a gloomy place, and that writers should not make it look even more gloomy. There should be humour, and there should be hope.

I wish I can tell this to my daughters, with my writings, and with all my heart.

Natalia Laurila

About the author

Natalia Laurila is a journalist and a mother of small twin girls. In a couple of years she has become one of the new Finnish fantasy writers with the most potential. Her success in Finnish science fiction and fantasy short story competitions raises great expectations for the future: the readers are waiting for a novel.

THE BOSOM FRIEND

Juha-Pekka Koskinen, translation: Liisa Rantalaiho

I

Maria had never liked my aunt. She couldn't understand the family's complicated way of dividing or not dividing the inheritance. My wife thought the big manor was going to waste in Sarah's gnarled fingers.

"Whatever does a single person need fourteen rooms for? What's she growing there, dust bunnies?"

At the time Marcus had died there'd been whispers about my aunt going to jail, and Maria had followed the proceedings with an excessive interest.

"If that happens, won't she be declared incompetent, and you'll get her property?"

"No, I won't. I'll inherit her only if she dies unmarried and childless."

"Well, she's definitely not going to have children anymore."

The snort was full of a winner's scorn. We had five children ourselves. In a house with fourteen rooms their pressure might have levelled to under flashpoint. No danger of that in a four-room apartment.

"She might adopt somebody. Or remarry," I never forgot to remind her.

Although Maria was not my aunt's bosom friend, I used to visit my aunt, seldom but regularly. As I was standing behind her door on a May morning, I realised that I hadn't seen her since the funeral. There, she had remained standing by Marcus' coffin, with an already withered wreath in her hands.

"Hi, Sarah. How are you?"

She stared at me for a long while. Her eyes felt like rays on sunburnt skin. No wonder that Superintendent Wolf had demanded an autopsy on Marcus. No poison is equal to the decades of curdled love between a married couple.

"Come in," she growled, finally.

I took off my hat and entered the manor of Aunt Sarah. The might of my family still lingered there like faint morning dew. Of the fourteen rooms only three were in use. The rest of them Sarah had locked up to prevent dust from spreading.

She sat by the kitchen table and lifted her hand as if smoking a cigarette. Instead of a filter, she put the nail of her index finger in her mouth and started chewing it.

"How are you, Daniel?"

"Thanks, I'm fine. The factory is doing well. We have developed a new vacuum cleaner."

Sarah stopped chewing her fingernail. She turned her roving eyes to me. Only now did I notice that her hair had

turned grey.

"Did you say a vacuum cleaner?"

"Yes, I did."

Of course she was interested. Dust was the only thing that roused any emotions in her. She'd been fighting dust for decades.

"I'm glad you came to visit your old aunt," Sarah said and grasped my sleeve with her bony fingers.

Quickly she told me all the thoughts she'd been brooding on in her lonely moments. Marcus was dead. There were no kids. The house was empty, only the dust seemed to proliferate.

"Have you ever really looked by sunlight at how much dust there's settled on the books?" she asked, staring at me with her dark eyes.

"Yes, I have indeed, and that's why I've come first precisely to you, to tell the happy news."

Mother had told me how Sarah had abhorred dust since she was a kid. She'd washed the floors, wiped all horizontal surfaces with a damp cloth and sealed her dolls in plastic bags. She'd always worn white gloves so she could sweep and check picture frames, behind radiators and under couches. As she grew older, she didn't need the gloves any more. She could smell the dust out.

In the evening when I, tired out by the visit, sat upon a plastic racing car on the home couch and stepped my foot on a half-eaten sandwich, Maria came to sit by me.

"Did your aunt take the PARPA?"

"No. She almost glared me to death when I dared as much as suggest it."

Maria moved impatiently and glowered at me. My cheeks started burning.

"Why? That's a damn expensive thingamajig and you'd have given it to that skinflint for nothing!" she cried and marched off, thumping her heels on the floor.

"She thought it was an insult that I tried to foist a machine on her as a speaking pal."

And after saying that, I felt I'd been greatly wronged by my aunt. The bitter lassitude of disappointment soon lulled me to sleep.

I dreamed how Marcus was brushing his big beard and looking at how my light-sensitive miniature robots were scuttling after a sunray in the manor library. He smiled at

me and patted my hair. Then he gave me a briefcase full of money and told me to start a factory. Suddenly, the library went dark. The sunlit wedge turned grey. Dust swirled ever faster in the air. Marcus started coughing and his face turned red. I looked down and saw how enormous dust bunnies were gripping my feet. They bit my calves. I woke up to my phone ringing.

"Carp," I wheezed into the phone without the sense to check who was calling.

"Daniel, I've been thinking about it. How much dust can that machine of yours eat?"

"What? What machine?"

"That machine of yours," Sarah snarled and drove the dream ghosts off my brain.

"Just any amount. It's able to store the extra energy in its batteries. Or convert it to heat, or even light. The amount of dust is no problem," I explained quickly and wiped the drool off the side of my mouth.

"Would it eat other thrash, too? Dust mites, sand grains, bits of thread?"

"Yes. What the PARPA is unable to disintegrate, it compresses to small cubes and takes them to a dustbin by itself."

Silence descended on the line. In my mind I saw a phone cable, and a click already travelling to my ears along it.

"Bring that PARPA of yours to me tomorrow at seven o'clock," my aunt said.

I didn't even have time to say thank you when she hung up on me, without waiting for my answer.

II

PARPA was just about Sarah's size. It was a humanlike robot but it didn't look human. Our research results had shown that at a certain point, a humanlike appearance in robots made them repulsive to the users. A robot ought to be a robot. However, I had made PARPA an exterior skin to make it pass as a human, but I kept the latex skin locked up in the factory.

I couldn't help being excited. I explained to Sarah how 95 percent of house dust comes from human skin. A single person shed daily enough dead cells for PARPA to function with their energy.

"So it eats dust to keep going?" Sarah asked.

I saw a shudder pass through her thin body. Whether it was a wave of disgust or orgasmic pleasure, I could not tell.

"Yes, it does. And that's not all. It is a perfect companion. It can cook coffee or tea. It knows how to do all kinds of little chores. And what is best, it can converse intelligently. With this remote control you can turn PARPA off. However, you need never do that, for PARPA will soon adopt your diurnal rhythm. It will sleep and stay awake when you do. If you loose



or break the remote, I've got a spare."

"I do not break things. And robots don't sleep," Sarah said.

She stared at PARPA's copper-coloured head where two artificial eyes were dimly glowing.

"Well, yes, that's true in a way," I admitted.

"How does it work?"

I explained quickly a few technical details of how ingeniously the mitochondrial-like microgenerators transformed fluff into energy.

"How does it eat dust? That's what I want to know," Sarah snapped.

"Like this," I said and turned PARPA on, without mentioning anything about the autodidactic matrix programme or other obviously useless finer points.

The robot buzzed gently and looked at Sarah. Then, very slowly, it stretched its paw. My forehead started sweating. Sarah lifted her hand carefully and put it in PARPA's paw. Calmly, they shook hands. PARPA did not crush hands like its predecessor.

"Nice to meet you. My name is PARPA. What is your name?"

"Sarah."

"Nice to meet you, Sarah. May I clean up here?"

"You are welcome," Sarah said.

PARPA bent down to the floor like a Moslem preparing for prayer. Then it swept the carpet with its hand and analyzed the dust composition in a few seconds. I could have told several exciting details to Sarah, but I knew that was no good. My heart felt sore when I realized how much I missed Marcus' curiosity.

"Well? Is it going to vacuum the dust or not?" Sarah demanded, impatient.

"Yes, thank you," PARPA answered and got up.

It took out of its arm casing a small tube with a broad nozzle. Then it simply pulled the tube out, put its other end in its mouth and started sucking. The nozzle passed back and forth on the floor and the light blue carpet beca-

me slightly darker.

"Isn't it great," I chuckled.

Sarah stared at the carpet that was regaining its bright colours, relieved of dust. PARPA's footprints could be discerned in the thick fluff as dark patches. She turned to look at me with her knitting-needle eyes.

"It may stay here. If it proves good, I'll buy it."

"It's a present, Aunt Sarah. You don't have to pay anything for it," I stammered, embarrassed.

"If it works, I'm going to pay full price for it. I do not want to owe anybody."

I nodded. I felt blood swelling my earlobes and making them glow red. I collected my stuff and crept quietly out.

III

Next week I never once visited my aunt. Although Maria poked my side and told me to keep family relations warm, I just moped my evenings on the couch and didn't budge anywhere.

As the phone finally rang and I heard Sarah's creaking voice, I expected some kind of praise for my ingenuity.

"You'd better come and look at that contraption of yours. There seems to be something wrong with it."

I left immediately, though the evening was already late. My forehead was sweating as I seized the clammy door knocker. Sarah opened the door. She didn't say a word, just marched ahead of me to the parlour. From the corner of my eyes I could see that the formerly locked doors were now ajar.

"What's the matter with it? Isn't it cleaning up properly?"

"It cleans up very well," Sarah said dryly.

That was all the recognition she was going to give anybody, be it even Alexander the Great returning from his world conquest.

"Does it, indeed? Well, that's fine, then," I spluttered happily.

Sarah kept staring at me. Her wrinkled hands hung by the thin wrists like two rotten apples. Every nail had been chewed to stumps. My forehead was sweating again and a cold drop was running under the side of my arm. The sunlight was dimming and shadows grew.

"Come with me," she said.

Sarah lifted her thin finger on her bloodless lips and squeezed my arm so I understood to keep silence. We crept towards the hall like two Indians. There was not a sound in the house, except PARPA's distant humming. I tried to ask Sarah what this all meant, but she sensed my mouth was opening and looked at me with eyes blazing. I got the message.

We stopped by the half-open guest room door. Sarah pointed me to the hinge side of the door and jabbed her finger towards the room. I pressed my eye to the tiny chink between the door and the frame. I saw PARPA vacuuming dust from

over the skirting. Frowning, I turned to look at Sarah, who turned my face back to the room with her wrinkled hands. Her touch sent a cold shiver down my back.

With sore eyes I gaped into the room. PARPA vacuumed the bed. It vacuumed under the bed. It vacuumed over the lamp shade. Then it nabbed a spider in its nimble fingers and ate it.

Sarah grabbed my ear and drew me off after herself. Only when we got to the parlour did she let go of my ear and looked at me, arms akimbo.

"It ate a spider," she said, emphasizing her words in a nasty way.

"PARPA can also eat silverfish and flies," I explained patiently. "It can destroy insect pests. They have lots of energy." "Eating is not destroying."

"Isn't it? Well, if eating bothers you, I can tell PARPA to smash up the insects first and vacuum the remains."

"No, let it be."

Sarah put her hand on my arm and I felt she was sucking warmth into herself. She looked past me at the empty corridor.

"I talked with it yesterday. I told about Marcus and how we never had children."

Loneliness was positively oozing out of her. I blinked to see clearly.

"You can talk to PARPA. It understands speech," I said lamely.

I said nothing about how PARPA recorded all sounds it heard into its files. It could analyze human voice and distinguish emotional tones in it. That's what it did in the dark hours of the night, to become more empathetic day by day.

"It's still nothing but a machine," Sarah said.

She squeezed my arm and let go. Her eyes flashed, and for a while I thought it had been a big mistake to give her PARPA.

"It's more than a machine," I said calmly.

"It's a vacuum cleaner, Daniel. You ought to by now at least be able to tell machines from people."

This time, Aunt Sarah did not see me out.

IV

During the next weeks Maria kept persistently watching me. Each day she asked how Sarah was doing. When I had nothing to tell her, she started fretting.

"You've given your aunt an enormously expensive present and she hasn't even said thank you," Maria snorted.

"I didn't give her PARPA to be praised for it."

"Well why did you give it, then? So that no black-bearded male would push himself into your aunt's life and deprive you of inheritance?"

“Of course not! Though PARPA is an extremely fine robot, it’s no substitute for human interaction. It isn’t capable of all the nastiness of humans. It’s better company than any human.”

“It has replaced you, anyway. Your aunt hasn’t bothered to phone you for ages.”

“I’m sincerely happy if she’s finding PARPA good company,” I said, to end the conversation.

Next night the phone started ringing. Maria poked her elbow between my ribs and buried herself underneath the pillows and blankets. It was Sarah. In some creepy way I felt that with her talk Maria had hexed my aunt to phone me.

“Come here at once, Daniel.”

That’s all she said. I stepped on the floor with sweaty feet and grabbed my clothes. I crept out of the bedroom with the bunch of clothes and closed the door. Just as carefully I closed the doors to the kid’s rooms so that nobody would wake up because of me. I dressed and went out into the stifling night. After ten minutes walk I was there.

The moon lay over the manor roof, looking huge and blood-tinged. Not a single window was lighted. The hedge was black like the Styx. Gravel rattled timidly under my feet. I wasn’t quite sure whether I had actually woken up. It was just the kind of night when heat makes you think you could sleep on the streets. I stopped by the front door and drew my breath. At the same moment Sarah opened the door. “Come in, Daniel,” she rasped and drew me by my wrist into the entrance hall.

The hall was dark. Only moonlight reflected strangely in Sarah’s eyes and made them glow. She was wearing a black nightie.

“It’s going to kill me.”

“Who?”

“That machine of yours.”

“That cannot be true. PARPA was tested for a whole year. It worked perfectly. It was more perfect than a human. Cannonballs dropped from the tower of Pisa would rise upwards before PARPA does anything violent,” I gasped, flabbergasted.

Sarah did not believe my explanations. She walked me into her stuffy bedroom and pushed me inside the wardrobe, between clothes smelling of mothballs. The feel of her clothes irritated my skin. She herself reclined on the bed, as if sleeping.

The manor house was creaking as old wooden buildings usually do. The silence of the wardrobe hummed in my ears. Through the chink between the doors I saw on the bed a heap that I wouldn’t have recognized as human. My skin was itching, and I imagined that bugs nesting in Sarah’s clothes were eagerly welcoming my fresh blood.

Just as I was ready to end the stupid game, PARPA appeared by the bedroom door. Now it kept moving gracefully like a human, for in the darkness of the night there was no cause to play a clumsy robot. It stopped by Sarah’s bed and

looked at my sleeping aunt. It was watching Sarah’s pretended sleep like a vulture.

Sarah didn’t stir, though PARPA caught her withered hand. I saw metal glint in the pale moonlight. My heart was beating so hard I feared the wardrobe would break apart. Just as I was preparing to rush out of the wardrobe, I realized PARPA was cutting Sarah’s fingernails, nothing more.

After an eternity, PARPA left. It stroked Sarah’s grey hair and glided out of the room. I heard the house creak after it, and somewhere, a door slammed. I rushed out of the wardrobe and scrubbed furiously at my arms, as if shaking ants off my skin.

“Did you see it?” Sarah said and jerked herself up.

“Yes, I did. It cut your fingernails; that’s all.”

Sarah gave a dry chortle. It sounded like the first cry of a baby crow.

“It was supposed to suck dust, not me.”

“It’s minding you,” I explained coolly. “Nail biting is not a particularly nice habit. It’s cutting your fingernails so you wouldn’t chew them.”

It sounded like a good explanation even to me. Of course, I had not programmed anything like that in PARPA, but it was capable of learning, after all. It was wiser than its creator.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with its batteries. It needs more energy than you have calculated. It eats my fingernails. And in the end it’s going to suck me dry like milkshake. Daniel, you want me to be eaten.”

“Of course I don’t,” I snorted.

Sarah examined her fingernails and brushed at the clean bed sheet. She didn’t look frightened. Not even while she lived alone in a vast house with a machine eating dust and fingernails.

“It’s been eating my fingernails every third day,” she said, absent-mindedly.

“Would you like me to forbid it to do that? PARPA does obey commands. You can forbid it yourself.”

“No. Let it do what it wants. You sent it to me yourself, Daniel.”

That was her decision, and there was no more discussion. So I crept back home in the darkness of the night and dived to Maria’s side. It took until the early hours before I fell asleep and had nightmares up to the wake-up alarm.

V

Sarah no longer asked me to visit. She did phone me, however, at the most irregular hours, but did not ask me to look at PARPA’s doings. She just reported them.

“It vacuums my bed in a different way than the floors.”

“What do you mean different?”

“I can tell by the sound of the vacuuming.”

Or:

“It’s cut my hair on the sly.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hair grows a centimetre per month. Mine’s been the same length three months.”

“Sarah, you can forbid it to do that. You can shut it off.”

“I want to know where all this is leading. I’ve given it some of my own clothes. It’s quite pretty,” she purred and closed the connection.

I ought to have gone and taken PARPA away. It had been a mistake, on the whole, to take it to Aunt Sarah. But I didn’t have the heart to do it. I heard in her voice how excited she was. PARPA lived in the guest room. It cooked and weeded the flowerbeds. It did everything like a real human, except its nightly doings. I knew PARPA would not harm anybody. I thought I knew.

The hot days of summer were cooling and the leaves started turning yellow in the trees. Maria studied my pale face anxiously but asked nothing about Sarah’s strange phone calls. A couple of times she even visited the factory; that had not happened since I’d persuaded her to see PARPA’s first revival. She sat on the corner of my working desk and looked vaguely around.

“Aren’t these contraptions dangerous? Even a dishwasher may catch fire and these machines have all kinds of whatever inside them,” she said, pensively.

I did not like the tone of her voice. After fifteen years of marriage I knew its every timbre. In the same tone she had asked whether the brakes of our age-old car shouldn’t be checked. The very next day I had crashed to the wall on the parking lot. I did not answer her.

“I wouldn’t like to see you charged with murder on the day you inherit the manor. Accidents happen, but I would hardly feel comfortable in your family manor without you,” Maria added.

She never argued with me. That afternoon, too, she just left me alone in my working room and went to fetch the smallest children from the kindergarten. Whereas I sat down, for my knees had started shaking.

Was it possible that I had planned everything in my deep unconscious mind? Had I began to covet the inheritance during the years to the extent that I deigned to endanger my aunt’s life? Had I started being so afraid of losing the inheritance that I wished to push people off from her life, giving her a machine that would cure her loneliness as tenderly as the Siberian winter made water stay in a sieve?

Once more I went through the recesses of PARPA’s titanium soul. With sore eyes I studied the numbers, drove through test codes and checked them by pen and paper. I tried to find

what kind of ergot I’d sown into the depths of the robot’s angel soul to make it cut off pieces of my aunt. First hair and fingernails. Next... well, what?

It was late at night when I closed the door of my working room behind me. My shirt was wet of sweat and the wind blowing on the streets made my teeth rattle. Red and black dots were dancing in front of my eyes. I had found nothing. Absolutely nothing. There was nothing to find.

At home I clambered by Maria and fell instantly asleep. I dreamed of PARPA who crept into Sarah’s bedroom in the dusk of the manor. It sat on the bedside, cut my aunt’s fingernails and toenails and ate them. Then it shaved her head bald and ate the grey pile of hair that looked like mummified candy floss. It plucked off the hairs in her brows one by one and put them into its mouth like French fries. The same with her nose hairs. When it ran out of hairs, PARPA put the sucking tube into its mouth.

There was a ringing sound somewhere but I couldn’t get up from the dream’s torturous grave. I heard how PARPA’s vacuum function turned on. I saw how the tube stretched the wrinkled jaw skin and detached the white, flaked-off bits of skin. There was a rattle when a dribble straying in the corner of my aunt’s mouth disappeared into the cleaner. The tube glided towards the nose, briefly visited the nostril and returned.

In my dream I shouted soundlessly, but Sarah did not wake up. The tube glided slowly on the skin of her cheek and left a red line after it. It approached the eye, grabbed the lower eyelid along with it and stretched it so that the white eyeball glinted, disgustingly. And at the very moment Sarah blinked her eyes open, PARPA’s tube met the tender surface of the cornea and ripped it into its orifice like a lace doily off a crystal ball. There was an audible rumbling and gurgling.

My aunt started screaming. She had my voice.

I woke up to the sound of my phone.

VI

I got to the manor in five minutes. After my dream I was already sweating, so running was no trouble. The extra remote for PARPA that I’d thrust in my breast pocket kept battering my sternum. Feverishly I tried to interpret the curious voices I’d heard in the phone, but my brain refused to function.

The fault might be in the artificial mitochondria. If they didn’t produce enough energy, PARPA might be in a constant thirst-like state. And anybody who’s had to abstain from drinking for a lengthy while knows that if anything can drive a human crazy it’s thirst. It was a brilliant theory. I ought to have thought of it a little sooner.

I rushed past the hedge to the manor yard and my heart felt like stopping. Every single window was lighted, enough

that one might even have read in the garden. I saw a shadow fleeting by the kitchen window. I leapt to the front door and pulled at the door handle. Of course the door was locked. I took a few steps back and let my heart calm down a bit.

There could be nothing wrong with Sarah. I'd had a nightmare, that's all. Perhaps even Sarah's alarmed phone call had been just a dream. Perhaps all the lights were burning just because Sarah wished to admire her dustless rooms in the middle of the night.

I knocked on the door. Nobody came to open it. I moved to the hall window and pressed my nose against the glass. It was clean and quiet inside. I skipped from window to window, vandalizing the marigolds in the flowerbeds with my feet. On each windowpane I left a greasy smudge with my nose. The last room downstairs was the guest room, PARPA's room. That was not empty.

Sarah lay on her stomach on the floor. Her nightie was peculiarly wrinkled at the neck. I had time to wonder at the smallness of her head before I realized that there could be no head under that bundle, neither small nor big. I squeezed my cheek to the glass and saw the grey well-cut hair under the desk. Sarah's eyes were half-open. Two white lines were visible between the eyelids.

My stomach turned and I threw up on my shoes. I puked so many times that finally even my nose was leaking gall. It burned enough to draw tears to my eyes. When at last I felt capable of standing up, I fished PARPA's remote control out of my pocket. Where ever it was, it would soon be exactly as lifeless as my aunt. I turned the power off. The remote received a roger from PARPA.

I called the police. In a sick way I consoled myself with the thought that at least PARPA had not sucked my aunt's eyes off her head as in my dream. I forced myself to look into the room again, but the eyelids of the severed head had closed and I could no longer see the whites.

I felt cold. During the few moments from my call to the arrival of Superintendent Wolf and his men, my teeth were rattling although it was a warm fall night. A frightened rabbit's heart beat in my breast, but my brain was ticking like a mechanic computer in spite of my horror.

I had made no mistake with PARPA. I felt completely sure about that. Maria had visited the factory, not often but sometimes. Of course she had free access to my room. Wasn't she the one to covet the manor above all? Even a tiny change in PARPA's memory card might have the effect an infarction has in human brain. Accidents happen, that's what Maria had said. Or had I myself caused an accident, steered by my wife's will? The thought sunk into the depths of my soul as the wail of sirens filled the courtyard.

Wolf wasted no time by peeping through the windows. I explained the situation briefly, and by then the police had

already forced the door open. It was rending my heart to see how the old hinges tore off the ancient wood.

"I have disconnected PARPA. It's now harmless," I stutted hoarsely.

"Shouldn't the thingy have been harmless to begin with?" Wolf growled and took his pistol off the holster.

One of his men went towards the guest room. I followed Wolf, who crept towards the kitchen.

"It's a very complex robot. There's no reason to harm it or the estate property unnecessarily."

He looked at me strangely and was going to say something, when we heard a bump in the kitchen. With shaking hands I caught the remote and shoved it forward like a priest performing exorcism with a cross.

"It...it did roger the turning off," I spluttered.

What happened, happened very fast. I pushed my remote, thumb white, and each time the red light signalled that PARPA had been disconnected. Wolf turned to the kitchen door and I heard something moving there, though that should not have been possible. I big knife glided to our view like a zeppelin. Gunpowder puffed out of the pistol's pipe. A few sparks flew in the air. I swear I saw the bullet disengage from the embrace of the pipe. It passed the knife floating in the air so slowly I saw its reflection on the steel surface.

"DON'T YOU COME AND BRING DUST INTO MY ROOMS!"

The sound of the shot blocked my ears. A clean hole appeared in Sarah's head and something splashed on the back wall. I thought there had, actually, been too little blood. Then everything went dark.

VII

I had listened to the recording a couple of times. Being in a clink has the benefit of always having time enough. I was thankful that Wolf had let me have PARPA's recordings while I was under arrest.

"I'm so damn lonely," Sarah said.

"But you have PARP-A," PARPA answered.

"You are a machine. I want to have company that's like myself. Someone who doesn't mess up places. Just as clean as myself."

"PARP-A will clean up."

"You are the best vacuum cleaner I've ever had. It was different with Marcus. He had a beard that made an absolute nest for dust."

That was true. Sometimes, Marcus' superb beard had even contained dried-up sauce.

The humming of a motor could be heard in my earphone. PARPA had recorded its own vacuuming process almost

as often as Sarah's endless outpouring of her loneliness. I skipped forward. Weeks and months. The same discussion about loneliness, the same longing for a perfect friend. I remembered how Sarah had peeked behind my shoulder when I'd visited her to tell about PARPA. What had been behind my back was a mirror.

The final half-hour. I stared at the numbers rolling on the display. I was waiting for the numbers 29:42. That's where it started, or ended, whatever.

"By God!" Sarah cried. "What the hell do you think you are doing?"

"This way you will not feel lonely," PARPA said, with Sarah's voice.

"Nobody can be me!"

"PARP-A can be anybody."

"So you have never eaten my fingernails? Nor my hair? Nor my dandruff? You damn well built yourself a skin off my skin!"

"Now you need not be alone," PARPA said.

I could imagine how the tin of its processors softened out of pleasure. It was carrying out its conviction as a titanium angel and its metal cells were shivering of pleasure. Sparing no pains, it had collected each dead cell fallen off Sarah and woven itself out of them the only exterior that could possibly please my aunt. It had changed to my aunt so that her lifelong wish would come true.

"And you shit of a machine actually thought you were being funny? Or did Daniel tell you to drive me crazy?"

"PARP-A wanted that you would not be alone."

"Like hell you wanted, sucker! Wait here!"

There was some indistinct clatter on the tape. Sarah rushed to get the axe she kept in the shed on the backyard. And PARPA waited, for it was programmed to obey.

"On your knees!"

There was a muted rustle as PARPA kneeled. It was wearing Sarah's dark nightie. I don't know whether it was capable of enjoying the pleasure of wearing a dress. I wished it might have.

"Marcus got to sniff dried fly agaric but you're going to get a taste of axe! There's only one I and that's me! Eat dust!"

On the first time, the clang had made me wince. How very hard a woman could strike when she'd been dried up by life. The titanium joints broke apart and PARPA's body was short-circuited by a jolt that certainly measured up to the frying dose given to the condemned in the electric chair. There was a moment's silence, and then PARPA made its last phone call. Its head was still capable of independent function for a while, although the energy batteries were located in its body. In the situation its current should definitely not have been cut off.

Somebody answered the phone in a sleepy voice. The line went off and it was quiet. The creaking of Sarah's steps sounded distant like a far-away thunderstorm. The silence lasted

about five minutes. Then there was an indistinct bump, followed by strange rustle. The windowpane clinked. Somebody was throwing up, long and fervently. Then – nothing any more.

I don't know whether I felt sorry for that the next night, on the brink of losing my mind, I'd caused such a frightful domestic row that the police had to come and take me away to calm me down. Or that Superintendent Wolf did not believe I had not realized the bloodless corpse belonged to the robot, and suspected me of having led him to shoot my aunt with malice aforethought. I might also have been sorry for that my humble, dear PARPA had bowed its neck under the axe, never believing any evil of my aunt; or that the neuro-spine I'd constructed had not prevented short-circuiting like I'd thought.

Or perhaps I was grieving for that PARPA had presented itself as Sarah, when it called me by the phone integrated into its brain. That must be it. I shed a few salty tears just because of that: when the last peaks of current were cruising in PARPA's head, it had been sure I would not go out into the night for the sake of a robot. I'd never have believed that some day I'd be sighing heavily of finding out that under duress, even a robot learns to lie like a human.

During the last day of my arrest, I wrote to Maria that she should buy a new, hefty front door to the manor house. The police had no evidence against me. I'd soon be free, but I'd already become accustomed to sleeping behind proper lock and key.

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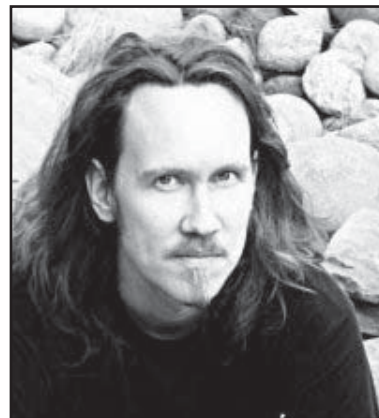


Photo © Jyrki Sahinoja

About the author

Juha-Pekka Koskinen writes historical novels, short stories, articles and columns. This August sees a publication of his third novel, *Savurenkaita*. As a writer he is a brilliant shape-shifter, always researching new ideas and styles. Both his mainstream and science fiction short stories have won numerous prizes in Finnish literature contests.

THE LAST EUROVISION SONG CONTEST

Hannu Rajaniemi

No one remembered
who won the last time
so we decided
to have it in Ireland
just in case

One by one
we rode
on Aibo horses
(Boom Bang-a-Bang
said their hooves)
rode
from the far corners of the Earth
to the glass mountains
called Dublin

We
grew a brewery
made heavy Guinness to drink
raised a glittering dome
called to the diamond brains in the sky
to watch us, to listen
as we sang
for one last time

Bobbysocks from Norway
their hair spun gold
their angel-wings glass
eyes so blue
in radiation-scarred faces
sang of cities
that folded up
like origami
and went to live in the stars

Pikku Gee from Finland
was not a monster
but a Pinocchio
with old, old eyes
rapped hard
had a gun
shot us
(Boom Bang-a-Bang)
with memory bullets
we picked them
from our cold flesh
and chewed them like candy
memories
of the old days
melted in our mouths
once
we were young and foolish
and pretty

What else could we do, back then?
you had to be
shiny and sexy and beautiful
and eternal
to be a star
Kabbalah water
surgeons' knives
training, training, training
weights and running and yoga and diets
and Scientology
nothing kept our cheeks smooth
our flesh taut
like guitar strings
nothing was enough
until the Elixir

Oh, the Elixir!
The Drexler juice
sewed up our telomers
with little nano-needles
snicker-snack
went cancer
snicker-snack
went AIDS
Cobain's shotgun
(Boom Bang-a-Bang)
was just a warm breeze on our cheeks
gave us
a healthy, bloody blush

But when the machine gods came
they did not want us
our viral memes
as sand in the cogs
of their thoughts

So now we sang
to no audience
but ourselves
and the empty Earth
old and foolish
but still pretty

My turn came last
It was my second time
in a desperate bid
my country cloned me
to bottle
some of that Europride
they had tried a capella
and country
and blues
and monster rock
figured that nothing compared
to the snake-hips and
chest hair and glitter
and so they made me
to sing Tuszmen and Ask Olmen
and Biz Oluruz
in the voice of the King
in two-thousand and forty-six
I was the King

I sang
And then we waited
biting our fingernails
for the votes to come in
from orbit
from distant Oort
from the stars

Turkey
twelve points!
the voices said
and I cried
for the first time
in a thousand years
I got on the stage
to do the encore
and the centipede robots
wired up the skyscraper speakers
all cheered
Guinness brewed with heavy water



deuterium, tritium
star-stuff
pounding away
in their veins
in every Elixir-filled cell

(Sonofusion
is a wonderful thing:
ultrasonic thunder
turns bubbles of water
into nuclear bombs
lets Shiva out to play)
And so I lit the fires
in our hearts
made us go out with a song and a bang
not a whimper
my voice shook the earth
cracked the glass mountains
as I sang the kamikaze song

My heart goes
Boom bang-a-bang, boom bang-a-bang
When you are near
Boom bang-a-bang, boom bang-a-bang
Loud in my ear
Pounding away, pounding away
Won't you be mine?
Boom bang-a-bang-bang all the time

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About the author

Hannu Rajaniemi recently finished a PhD in string theory at University of Edinburgh and now claims to be a technology entrepreneur. His fiction has been featured in *Futurismic.com*, the Finnish webzine *Usva*, *Nova Scotia: An Anthology of Scottish Speculative Fiction* edited by Andrew Wilson and Neil Williamson, *Year's Best SF 11* edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer and *The Best New SF 23* edited by Gardner Dozois. Hannu is also a member of the Edinburgh-based spoken word group **Writers' Bloc**. He is currently working on a novel.



A word from the author

I wanted to celebrate Lordi's amazing Eurovision victory (a pretty scientific event in itself) somehow, so in the characteristic Finnish manner I ended up writing a poem about death and suicide. I don't want to say too much about the imagery, but Boom Bang-

a-Bang is, of course, the song that Lulu from United Kingdom won the Eurovision with in 1969. And after I read the poem at a recent Writers' Bloc show in Edinburgh, I was told that Turkey does actually have a bit of a national obsession with Elvis...

Hannu Rajaniemi

THE THIRD WOMAN

Petri Salin

“Funny old things, prions.”

Chapman glared at Springfield in sheer disbelief.

“I mean really, most peculiar,” Springfield went on, ignoring Chapman completely, or perhaps not even noticing his downright impudence. The stereo set was playing Die Meistersinger, rather loudly, and every time a particularly good bit was on Springfield closed his eyes and started conducting an invisible orchestra and an equally invisible cast of singers. And as the piece was basically nothing but good bits there was pretty much blind conducting going on.

Chapman groaned.

We were sitting in Springfield’s office, deep in his opulent leather chairs, heavily surrounded by a colourful collection of firearms both ancient and modern, drinking his exquisite Lapsang from his beautifully hand painted bone china and his 40 year old Balvenie from his heavy, elegantly cut tumblers. The air was thick and grey with smoke from our hand rolled Cohiba double coronas. Yes, Springfield certainly knew how to make things comfortable for himself, no doubt about that. No doubt whatsoever. His hospitality wasn’t half bad either.

But in all honesty we were getting a little impatient.

“Will you for goodness sake get to the point,”

Chapman pleaded. “You’ve been banging on about bloody prions now for over half an hour and it’s really getting to be a bloody drag.”

And so he had. Springfield was the Head of the Department and as such he usually took his sweet time about everything, but here in the Department it simply wasn’t on to question one’s superiors, however long-winded they chose to be. Which of course never stopped Chapman; no darling he of any Head of any Department.

“Ever the impetuous one, what?” Springfield said and winked slyly in my direction. “Right ho, jolly good, here goes.”

He poured himself another liberal helping of Balvenie, sprinkled a few drops of dewy fresh spring water in his tumbler and struck a match to relight his fading cigar. Clearly he wasn’t going to give anything away. Not quite yet. That would be no fun at all, now would it?

And we all knew this to be a fact: The longer he beat around the bush, the nastier the assignment was going to be. It was that simple. Every time.

“Well, sir,” said I, springing to the rescue, “where are we off to this time?”

“Sweden,” Springfield unexpectedly announced and kept puffing on a cigar that quite clearly seemed to have a mind of

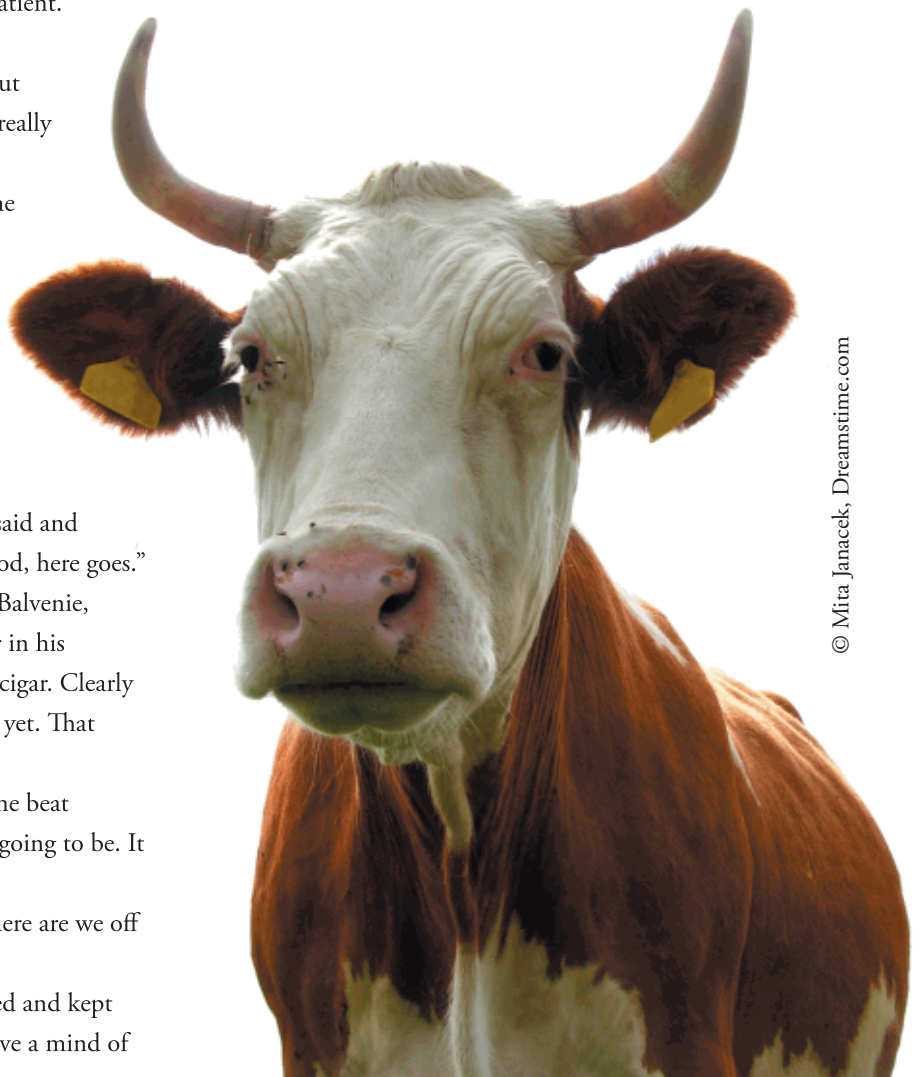
its own. “Details and whatnots. Everything on this here memory stick thingummy.”

Which he casually slid over to me.

“Bugger,” Chapman said and drank up. “Bloody wonderful.”

Prions, as is well known, are proteins of a kind. We’ve all got them in our brains where their exact function isn’t quite known. What they seem to be doing is protecting the Cerebellum, which is the part of the brain in charge of our movement and coordination. But sometimes the prions seem to go a bit wonky and when they do they get up to all sorts of cerebral nastiness.

When the prions go all wonky or “rogue” they enter a brain cell and start converting the normal cell protein to the prion form of that protein. Not altering its biochemical structure in any real way, just sort of folding it a bit differently so that it becomes a whole new molecule anyway and takes on a whole new function – that new function being to convert all proteins it comes into contact



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with into prions. And the cell proteins keep on and on transforming into prions until eventually prions completely clog the infected brain cell. All pretty straightforward.

Ultimately the infected prion-bloated brain cell goes belly-up and releases its prions. These free prions then enter, infect, and destroy other brain cells, which clearly is no good at all. As clusters of cells die the brain stops looking like a brain and starts looking more like a sponge or a Swiss cheese. And more to the point, stops functioning like a brain. The cells start misfiring, working poorly, and in the end not working at all. Everything falls apart. And then you've got yourself a bit of a problem, haven't you?

The problem is called scrapie if you happen to be a sheep and BSE if you happen to be a cow. In humans it's variously known as kuru, Chronic Wasting Disease, Fatal Familial Insomnia, Gerstmann-Sträussler-Scheinker Disease and Alpers Syndrome. Its best known forms are called Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Creutzfeld-Jakob's Disease.

"That's all very interesting but we already know all that and what's it got to do with us anyway?" Chapman said as I read this to him from the files Springfield had armed us with. "And why the devil are we on a plane to Sweden?"

"Well," I said, "were supposed to get us some."

"Prions?"

"Spot on."

"Why?"

"Apparently they've got some really nice ones we'd quite like to have."

"Oh. Well then."

"Precisely."

This was only our third assignment together but I'd gotten to know Chapman pretty well by now. When he really got going, well then there were few better ops than him. Problem was, he didn't always get going. Didn't feel like it. Couldn't be bothered.

I read on.

"When we reach Helsingfors we are to contact a fellow called . . . hang on . . . Goman."

We took a taxi from the airport and drove straight to the hotel, the Hilton in Hagnäs. Having checked in we promptly changed our clothes and indeed our whole appearance. We left our empty bags – devoid of any and all fingerprints – in the room and carrying just our rucksacks we took the lift down to the underground parking lot. There we chose a car that wasn't covered by any surveillance cameras, cracked its digital lock in a matter of seconds and – Robert's your father's brother – drove off into the great unknown.

"What you think?" Chapman said, steering eastward, past the docks.

"Dunno," I said. "Don't think anybody followed us to the

hotel. Didn't see anybody."

"Better safe than sorry."

"Ain't that the truth?"

"Ain't it just."

I took our phoney passports, completely destroyed them and tossed them out the car window into the raging waters. We reached Östra Centrum in fifteen minutes, dumped the car, stole another one, and kept going. In Vanda, a slightly smaller city just next to Helsingfors, we yet again changed cars and drove back to Helsingfors. The second hotel, Hotel Artur, was in Kajsaniemi. We presented our other passports at the front desk and received our keys. We had flown in as a Glaswegian father and daughter. Now we were Scousers, a married couple, accents and all.

"Spot of lunch, darling?" I said. In character.

"Don't mind if I do," Chapman replied. "My dear."

"Get rid of the car," I said. "Meet you in ten."

Helsingfors was the second largest city in the kingdom of Sweden. For a decade or two it had belonged to Russia, which explained its architecture, but then it reverted back to the Swedes sometime in the early nineteenth century.

The old town was all Imperial Russia, all Petersburg with bit of German High Regency chucked in to spice it all up. Much of it had been destroyed in the wars, torched and bombed by the Swedes themselves as they reclaimed the city, and never quite restored to its former glory. Smack in the middle of the Old Square, right next to the University, the National Library and the Cathedral was a statue of the king. Carolus XIV Johannes it said on the plate.

"Ah," said Chapman. "Where oh where shall we restore our tissues and soothe our ragged nerves with some tasty nourishment and perchance a generous libation?"

"That is indeed the question on everyone's lips", said I.

Finally we wandered into one of the subterranean tourist traps right opposite the Square. He chose mutton chops, I opted for the veal. For a brief horrible moment as I dug in I had a flashback. First bite and I was back in the dizzying bad old days of the Mad Cow hysteria and the whole hoopla surrounding it. For a couple of years it had seemed that every time you put on the old nosebag you were gambling with your very life. And meat, well meat was quite simply suicide. You were going to get it. Mad Cow's. BSE. CJD. Scrapie. Something. Anything. If you didn't get it coming you'd certainly get it going. That was a cert, a given. Then it all sort of died down as the horrible consequences pretty much failed to materialise and everybody just got on with it.

But still.

The incubation time of these things, well it was years. Decades even. So you simply couldn't be sure. The chances were slim to none. Basically. But you couldn't be sure. Ever.

And Sweden was hit particularly hard. Obviously they tried to cover up as much as they could, but they couldn't cover it all up. So a tiny suspicion still lingered at the back of everyone's mind. Maybe. You never know.

Yet the common verdict seemed to be that if you're going to die anyway you might as well die with a full stomach. Much more pleasant, much more civilized. So why worry? Cheer up you old bugger, might never happen.

I forced myself to finish the veal. It turned to ashes in my mouth. I swear I could taste the disease, feel it enter my system, eat its way into my central nervous system, attack my brain. Destroy my brain. With a vengeance.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the feeling was gone and I was all right again. Right as rain.

And rain it did when we stepped out of the restaurant and made our way to the ferry at the market, rain like there'd be no tomorrow. And us with no umbrellas. Silly us.

"Plenty of time," I said as we boarded the clumsy vessel. Not many other passengers. Which suited us just fine.

"I don't like it," Chapman muttered as he sat down on the hard wooden bench. "Don't like it one little bit."

"What's that?"

"Why's the old bastard sending us out into cold all blind?"

I said nothing.

"Why weren't we briefed properly? Why all this undue haste?"

Well I didn't like it either. Must be some reason. But what?

"Perhaps there wasn't time," I ventured.

"There's always time. You got to do this sort of thing properly. If you can't do it right, don't do it at all."

He did have a point.

"Just madness, innit, this sort of rushed impro. We should be covered. We should have proper backup. He's fucking winging it, the whole operation, just to score himself a couple of brownie points."

Yeah, probably. Still, just a matter of retrieving intel, following it up, bagging the prions and passing them on. No biggie.

Sveaborg was a mighty fortress just outside Helsingfors, once called the Gibraltar of the North. I'd read up on it. In 1808 it saw its first action, and fell immediately, with nary a shot fired in anger. The commandant just gave it away to the Russians. Just like that. And with the fortress fell the whole eastern part of the kingdom. The Russians just had to pluck it. The Gibraltar of the North turned out to be as useful and effective for purposes of defence as wings on a chicken were for flying.

We met Goman at the new museum. He was standing next to a dummy dressed in an eighteenth century Swedish officer's uniform. I recognised him from the pic in Springfield's file. I passed him twice with my rolled up copy of the daily,

Helsingfors Nya Tidningar, well in sight. After which I stepped out. Five minutes later Goman followed. A few minutes after that Chapman came out. He nodded to me. I nodded to Goman.

Goman went over the bridge and turned left. We followed him. He went straight for the chunky stone wall that surrounded most of the island. In the wall there were little man made caverns that at one time had held canons. Goman entered one and so did we. Chapman took out his contraption and started sweeping. First he swept Goman, then the cavern. He found nothing. No bugs, no markers, no transmitters, no nasty electronic devices of any kind, nothing.

"All right," I said to Goman. "What you got for us?"

According to our file Goman was a biochemist and worked at the Royal Biomedicum in Vik, perhaps the leading laboratory of its kind in the whole of Europe. What he did there, well that was all hush-hush.

"Have you got the money?" he asked, fidgeting anxiously.

"Yes," I said. "You go first."

"Very well," he said in excellent English, clearly not liking it. "I specialise in Purkinje cells. I'm not going to explain what they are. You wouldn't understand if I did. Anyway, at the Biomedicum we're trying out a new drug against Creutzfeldt-Jakob. Well, the gross pathology of Creutzfeldt-Jakob is that of cortical atrophy, manifest by marked widening of sulci, and gliosis. Microscopically, spongy changes similar to those seen in kuru are found in the cortex. Also there are vacuoles that arise within neuronal cytoplasm. Other changes usually seen include red neurons."

He paused nervously.

"You're right," Chapman said. "We don't understand the technical stuff. And what's more we don't care."

"Sorry," Goman said. "So what we try to do is to check the rogue prions, hinder them, stop them from reproducing in the brain. That's the crucial thing. Well, we had a test group and gave them the a beta version of the drug. And that's when it all started going bad."

"How?" I asked.

"The prions reacted in quite an unexpected manner. Not at all like we had anticipated and calculated in our virtual simulations. Our animal tests went as well as we could have hoped, so naturally we assumed . . ."

"Go on."

"Well, for one thing what we accomplished seemed not to hinder the prional activity but to speed it up, to decimate the incubation time of the disease. Drastically. The time the rogue prions took getting from the digestion to the brain was measured no longer in years or decades,

not even months, but days.”

“Jesus bloody Christ,” Chapman said.

“So instead of protecting the brain from the rogue prions your drug supplied them with a turbo engine and warp speed to boot,” I said.

“Afraid so,” Goman went on. “Not at all what we’d hoped for. So obviously Biomedicum buried that version of the drug and any trace of the experiments faster than you could say monumental cock-up.”

“You said for one thing,” I said. “So what else was there?”

“Yes,” Goman got excited all of a sudden, “that’s the really interesting thing, you know, the wholly fascinating and yet totally baffling aspect of the entire experiment. You see we have this policy of always including a few pregnant women in our test groups and this time around – “

The shot that rang out was deafening. Chapman was thrown viciously against the rock wall, then he crumpled like an empty paper bag. The second bullet, fired only a second or two after the first one, hit Goman’s briefcase and sent it flying.

“Get down!” I shouted and pressed Goman to the ground. I drew my gun and aimed. But there was nothing to aim it at. I saw nobody. There was nobody to see.

Very cautiously I moved to the front of the cave. OK, here goes nothing, I thought and stuck my gun out. And then, as fast as lightning, my head. A quick look to the left, a quick look to the right. Nobody. No fire. Nothing.

I crawled back in to check on Chapman. I knew even before I touched his neck that he was dead. The bullet had hit him right in the heart. He probably didn’t feel a thing. Lucky sod.

“OK,” I said to Goman. “Stay low and follow me.”

“But,” Goman said, visibly shaken, “we can’t just leave him here.”

“He’s dead. We’re not. Nothing we can do for him. We’ve got to move. Right now. Somebody must’ve heard the shot. Or the shooter may change his mind and come back to finish us off. Let’s go let’s go let’s go!”

“All right,” I said as we were sitting in a stolen car far far away from Sveaborg. “Start talking.”

Goman just sat there hugging his perforated briefcase, shaking like a leaf. I slapped him. Hard. Then again.

“Start talking. Who did this?”

“I don’t know. I swear it.”

I slapped him again.

“I don’t believe you. Nobody followed us. And we didn’t know where precisely we’d have our little talk. It was a trap. He was there waiting for us. Somebody had to know in advance. Which leaves you. You’re the only possible leak.”

“I swear!”

I said nothing, just stared at him, as coldly as I could.

Which wasn’t all that hard just now. He couldn’t meet my eyes so he lowered his own. We sat in silence for what seemed the longest time.

“Nobody knew you were coming?”

“No!”

“Nobody followed you?”

“I can’t understand how anybody could have. I was very careful you know. Very careful indeed.”

I stared at him even harder.

“OK,” I said. “Very well. I believe you.”

“So, what happens now?”

“Now you start talking. Seriously talking.”

So he did.

I paid Goman and sent him away. He didn’t want to go. He was scared, he said, somebody was out to kill him and he was scared for his life. He’d said too much, there was no way he’d make it. Not my problem, I said and drove off. Cheers and bye-bye. Don’t play with the big boys if can’t hack it.

Maybe I blamed him for the death of Chapman. But the truth of the matter is, things like this happen and it’s nobody’s fault. Not even the partner’s. We all know the risks. Know and accept them. That’s what we get paid for.

I dumped the car, made a few short trips hither and thither in the Tube and hopefully shook off anybody who was tailing me. Though for the life of me I couldn’t see anybody. If indeed there was someone tailing me they were incredibly good, I had to give them that. But I too had a few tricks up my sleeve. If they meant to stay on my tail they’d have to look pretty sharp indeed.

I obviously couldn’t go back to the hotel which was a bit of a disadvantage as most of my stuff was there. I was all right for money, at least for now, but my passport was clearly compromised and could no longer be used. Nor my Scouser identity. So I shed them. Everything else could be arranged.

As things stood I deemed it wisest not to contact the Department, at least not quite yet. Chapman was down and I was out in the cold all on my lonesome. I would simply have to wing it. And hope for the best.

A quick stop at the big department store and out stepped yet once again a completely different person – no longer a frumpy middle-aged woman but a nondescript teenage boy in ludicrously baggy jeans, a sweater with a huge monkish cowl, and a cap to hide my face entirely in case the sunglasses didn’t.

Time to get to work.

What Goman had given me was a list of names. Three of them.

The three pregnant women who’d been part of Biomedicum’s prion experiment, the drug test that went

monumentally bad. Curiously enough none of the women had known they were pregnant. It had been early days for their pregnancies and at the time there had been no symptoms for them to notice. The researchers had chosen them for just that reason and very carefully kept mum. Not perhaps the most ethical thing to do but it had its points. Two for the price of one, as it were. And to be able to study the effects of the drug on a developing human foetus – well you simply couldn't buy data like that.

As luck would have it the tests were terminated before any of the women gave birth – and the miraculous thing was that all three did. And every child lived, which was very much against all odds, especially as every other test subject had died within a few months of getting the drug. Everybody except the three mothers and their children.

Now the children were a year old.

The first name on the list was Elisabeth Julin. It didn't take me long to track down her and her daughter. They were both satisfied residents of the city's largest cemetery. When the child was six months old she and her mother had been mowed down by a drunk driver. At least that was the theory. In reality the police just didn't have a clue as to who had done it. Neither did they have much interest in wasting their time on an obvious dead-end, so they just called it an accident, a hit and run, and closed the case.

One down, two to go.

The second one, Jenny Lindroos, was a bit trickier, especially as the name was a pretty common one. Eventually I honed in on her, only to find that at present she was locked up in a prison for the criminally insane. What she'd been charged with and convicted for was nothing less than murder. The murder of her own newborn child.

This rather worried me. Especially as I had no solid lead on the third woman, Miranda Olander, nothing tangible, nothing I really could sink my teeth in.

Which left me with pretty much nothing.

For the moment.

The guard looked at my ID-card with furious intensity, far closer than the other ones at the main gate or the lobby had. Well, let him, this was a high security ward so he was well within his rights so to do.

"You new?" he said at last.

I nodded.

"You're late," he said grudgingly and handed me my card.

"Sorry," I said, trying to get the local accent just right. "Lost my way."

He punched a button and heavy door sprung open. I was in.

It had taken me several days to determine in precisely which ward and which room Lindroos was being held and on what

level the security routines were. Obtaining a genuine – or as nearly as possible – ID-card had been a slower and far more expensive undertaking.

It was almost two o'clock at night and the ward seemed abandoned. Lindroos shared a room with four others murderous maniacs. They were all lashed to their beds with heavy metallic straps and no doubt drugged and sedated up to their eyeballs. Which made my job all that much easier. I switched on my hypodermic, punched in the amount of cc's I wanted, and stuck it in her arm. She didn't even react.

The sample of blood was important but not as important as the other one, and to get that I had to have free access to the back of her neck. As she was lashed to her bed, locked in actually, head and all, this was clearly impossible. I could of course pick the locks or even force them open but I suspected the locks were diligently monitored and any tampering with them would set off who knew how many alarms and I certainly didn't want that. Which meant I had to go in the other way. From down below, through the bed.

With an improvised screwdriver I started to unscrew the bottom tiers of the bed, one by one. When I was doing the last two screws of the last tier the whole thing gave away with a loud crash and down came tumbling the mattress, Lindroos and all. This time she did react, groggily.

"It's all right, everything's all right, just go back to sleep," I whispered soothingly in her ear and turned her over. I found her C1, the vertebrae that sits where the base of the skull connects with the spine, and took out my other needle – a thin sharp instrument for which even the hardest bone was no match at all. I switched it on, waited for it to boot, and then typed in the relevant information.

Suddenly the door was ripped open.

"What on earth is going on here?" the night nurse barked. Then she saw me and went all silent.

Maybe I might have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for the entirely demolished bed that made the room look like a large bomb had only just gone off. Or for the spectacle of me on the floor astride a struggling half-conscious patient, wielding a blatantly illegal instrument as if I were in the process of slaughtering the entire ward one by one. The situation clearly left no room for explanation.

The nurse was out of there like a shot.

I now had a choice and a pretty difficult one at that. I could escape and probably make my way out of the ward and the whole building. Or I could stay and draw a sample of Lindroos's spinal fluid and get caught.

Lindroos cried out in anguish as I jabbed the needle in her highest vertebrae, all the way in.

The handcuffs seemed solid and the room well and truly locked. They'd left one guard to keep an eye on me. He,

however, was only interested in keeping an eye on the TV set.

They'd left both my needles in the unmanned office next door. Mistake. Another mistake was not cuffing me properly, they'd simply attached my right wrist to the radiator. But the biggest mistake of all was not having searched me properly, which meant that I still had my set of skeleton keys.

Judging from the body language of the guard nobody was coming to get me in quite a while. That was a stroke of luck and might help me no end. Slowly, very slowly and silently, I removed my most useful pick from my shoe and picked the cuff. Before the guard noticed from the corner of his eye that something fishy was going on, I was already on him. One whack with his nightstick, very courteously left on the table for me to use, and he was out, and then handcuffed, properly, to the radiator.

I quickly recovered my needles and started for the lab. How much time did I have? Surely the guard was supposed to check in every hour at the very least. So maybe half an hour. I couldn't count on more.

I reached the door of the lab. First problem. They'd already gone and deactivated my card, so no entry. The guard had access! I rushed back to get his card and there I encountered the second problem. They'd found him. And this time it was code red and everyone was out looking for me.

This time I really had to get out.

I'd have to find a black lab to analyse Lindroos's blood sample and genetic information. That had to be the key – her genetic make-up. There had to be a crucial mutation in there somewhere, something that explained her curious reaction to the prions, something we might use.

They hadn't spotted me yet so I ducked. Behind me there was a door. I opened it and dove in. It was empty, well almost. In one corner there was a young man armed with a bucket and a mop. The cleaner obviously.

"What's the racket?"

"No idea," I said in as casual a tone of voice as I could muster.

"Somebody escape?"

"Sounds like it."

He was very young and very pale, quite handsome in a peculiarly Nordic way. Suddenly there were shouts and heavy footsteps coming towards us, then they stopped. I flinched. He looked at me with his piercing blue eyes.

"It's you they're after," he said.

I might have denied it, I should have, but I just nodded.

"I'll help you," he said and took my hand. "This way."

I could hardly breathe, didn't even want to, there was waste everywhere and not just ordinary but medical waste. Flesh and bone, organs and fluids, disease and festering madness. And me smack in the middle of it, covered by it from top to toe,

almost ingested by it. Like a baby.

But it was a way out. Maybe the only way.

The rocking made it worse. It was like drowning in an intestinal storm. After a while everything started to go all soggy and goopy and the air, well there just didn't seem to be any air left, it was all taken up by the process of rotting. Maybe I was starting to rot as well. The festering had taken hold of me, very much regardless of the fact that I was still breathing, and would eventually turn me into waste. Medical waste. Human waste. And going by how difficult it was becoming to breathe, I wouldn't be doing that for much longer.

Then the truck stopped. And the container was opened.

"You OK in there?"

A hand reached in and pulled me out. I coughed, gagged and vomited. All at once.

"Poor thing. You are a mess. I'm sorry, I didn't think it would be that bad."

He tried to wipe me down with a cloth but it was basically useless. I needed to be boiled if ever I wanted to be clean again.

"Jump in," he said. He stepped back in the truck and emptied the load, then looked at me. "You know you really smell like shit."

"Oh god please no more!"

His name was Johan and he lived alone in a small cottage a bit up north.

"Please stop!"

Not a neighbour anywhere within a mile.

"You're killing me!"

He threw more water on the hot stones.

"I'm dying!"

The heat was intolerable but the really terrible thing was the bunch of birch twigs he kept viciously beating me with. Then he gave the twigs to me and I let him have it.

"Harder!" he said. Totally mental.

I'd been in a sauna before, obviously, but this was the way the diehard natives did it and it was brutal. But it did get you clean, I'll give them that, perhaps cleaner than you'd ever been before. Afterwards I fucked him.

For the first time in what seemed like years I slept peacefully like a baby. In the morning he woke me up with kisses and I fucked him again.

Things were looking up again. Now I had a place to stay. A base camp.

I could try to get my samples analysed. But they'd keep. It was more important to track down Miranda Olander, the mysterious third woman. The population records in Helsingfors were excellent, even better than the Swedish average, so I decided to tackle them in earnest. They also

had incredibly detailed maternity records going back well over a century. There had to be something in there. If only I knew what to look for.

So the next week I buried myself in records. The deeper I delved in them, the clearer one thing seemed to get. There was no such person as Miranda Olander. She simply didn't exist. There was a Miranda Ollander, or two to be precise, and a Miranda Alm-Ohlander. One of them was ninety-six, another eight. And the third was quadriplegic, had been for years. None of them could be the one I was after. And no other Miranda Olander existed. Goman had given me the wrong name.

Which left me with zilch.

Again I assaulted the records, and eventually I started to find quite interesting things, hidden and veiled connections. Geographic circumstances which simply couldn't be coincidental. But nothing that brought me closer to Miranda Olander.

What I did find was a village called Savvetappal. Somehow all the women seemed to be connected and they were all connected through this tiny village in the east. They, or at least their stock, all hailed from that very place.

All these strange, bizarre Scandinavian names started making me dizzy. I mean, some of the letters were quite ludicrous with their silly little dots on top of them, like drug-induced hallucinations. The letters and their tiny dots started dancing before my eyes, faster and faster, wilder and wilder.

And then it struck me.

Could it really be that simple?

For us it doesn't matter if a letter has got funny old dots on it or not, it's still the same letter. Not, however, for these Scandinavians. For them the dot make all the difference. The population records quickly confirmed my hunch. There was no one called Miranda Olander, because she simply didn't exist. So no use looking for her. But there was someone called Miranda Ölander.

"Gotcha!"

"So what do you reckon you'll find there?"

"I really don't know," I said. And I didn't. A lead, maybe.

I know knew that Miranda Ölander existed but I had nothing else on her. No address, no nothing. Didn't make tracking her down one bit easier. What I did know, as confirmed by both population and maternity records, was that there was a tangible Savvetappal-connection and that she too shared it.

So the obvious thing was to go there, to Savvetappal.

"I know the place," Johan said when I told him were I was going. I didn't mean to, I was caught off guard. Pillow talk.

As luck would have it Johan rather more than knew the village. His family had a summer place quite near. Small

world. Naturally he insisted on giving me a lift.

And equally naturally I let him.

During the last week I had re-equipped myself. I now had all the gear I needed for my mission. I still hadn't reported in. I was starting to like this rogue life, the absolute freedom of operating under the radar. Not being monitored by anyone. Doing everything just as I pleased. No doubt they were getting all nervous by now, but it was really all their own fault. The Department sent us in quite unprepared. I was just doing what it takes to survive and to accomplish my mission. My job. Nothing more.

Johan still had no idea what I was up to. I told him nothing important, I wasn't that besotted with him. But no doubt he understood that something serious was going on, something bigger than he'd first thought, definitely something he probably shouldn't get involved in. Yet he seemed to trust me. Poor fucking sod.

The drive to Savvetappal was a long and difficult one. For reasons of security I insisted that we take small quirky by-roads and, as often as not, drive in quite the wrong direction. The latter because I was still keeping my eyes peeled. Not very likely that I was being followed at this late stage but not entirely impossible either.

As we pushed deeper east the scenery started to change, become less domesticated, while nature became all the more raw and untamed. Also the names of the places were becoming increasingly more unfamiliar and foreign, no longer Germanic at all but almost unintelligibly Eastern in character, just like the scenery. We stopped off in a motel near a place called Kovolla and made love the whole night.

Carelia was a whole new world. I'd never seen anything like it. It seemed to stir something deep inside me. I don't know why. The smell of the place just made me, well – happy.

Then we arrived.

Johan's villa was at a nearby lake called Sala. It was absolutely lovely, a totally unspoilt little lake with massive firs and majestic pines surrounding it. If you didn't know the lake was there you'd just drive by without even noticing it. The villa was a charming wooden affair built sometime in the middle of the last century and it blended in perfectly. If the lake was impeccably camouflaged, then so was the villa. As I looked at it a certain distant yearning came over me. To abandon everything, just settle down in this rustic villa with its log porch and fuck the world. Settle down and raise a family and not give a toss about anything. Least of all about the Department and bloody Miranda bloody Ölander. Or then again, maybe not.

"What are you thinking about?" Johan said and put his arm around me.

I pushed him off me and he opened the heavy lock and

then the door. It was dark inside and the air was musty. Not much furniture. A sofa, a heavy table and long benches. In the corner a rocking chair.

Someone was sitting in the chair, rocking gently. Whistling something unpleasantly familiar.

“So you made it here all right then? Good girl.”

The voice was familiar, but it couldn't be, how could he be here?

Suddenly I was very, very afraid.

I tried to turn around and head for the door but Johan blocked my way. He grabbed my hands. I struggled but he overpowered me.

“Don't be stupid, old girl, you're not going anywhere,” Springfield said. “Keep the bitch still!”

Then he stuck a needle in me.

It was the whistling that awoke me. Wagner. Die Meistersinger, what else. Wonderful.

“Good morning, my dear. Lovely day. Such a shame you're cooped up in here.”

I opened first one eye, carefully, then the other. A cellar. I tried to shift. No luck. I was heavily manacled.

“Have a nice lie-in? Excellent. You need your strength.”

He put a breakfast tray in front of me. I kicked it away.

“Now mind your manners, young lady, or you'll be sent up with no supper.”

He chuckled. I tried to kick him too. He was too far away so all I hit was thin air. Cautiously he went around me. When he was behind he jabbed another needle in me. This time I didn't lose my consciousness.

Mostly it was Johan who took care of me. Springfield was away for weeks on end. But he always came back.

“What did you do to the third woman, Miranda Ölander?” I asked him the first week of my captivity.

He laughed. “There is no Miranda Ölander.”

“What do you mean?”

“So you haven't figured it out yet? Poor thing. You will. Eventually.”

And I did. There was nothing else for me to do, shackled to the wall as I was, than to figure things out. It came gradually. Piece by piece.

But I still couldn't understand why. Why me?

There had to be a reason.

I pieced together a million different theories and discarded them all. They just wouldn't fly. Then I realised that I was pregnant and everything clicked. And I think I went a bit funny in the head.

It was the prions he'd injected in me, I suppose, eating away at my brain, devouring and destroying my unborn baby's central nervous system. I could feel it. The changes. It was only a matter of weeks before I would die, like all the other

test subjects. It wouldn't be a calm or pleasant death.

“Why are you doing this to me you bastard!” I shouted at Springfield.

“Still haven't figured it out? Tut-tut. I thought you were cleverer than that.”

The pregnancy started to settle and weeks turned into months. And I still wasn't dead. Or even a complete loony. That's when I realised it. I had to be a carrier. No other way. I had to have the mutation.

“The penny has finally dropped,” Springfield said. “Of course you have it.”

“But how?”

“Well you see your mother's parents moved to England from Stockholm. You knew that, of course. But did you know that both of them were originally from Helsingfors?”

“And their families were originally from Carelia.”

“Spot on! The mutation is incredibly rare and occurs only in those of not Swedish but Finnish stock. That's the ethnic minority that used to inhabit this part of the kingdom. And those with original Finnish genes live far away near the eastern border. That's why the mutation is most often found here.”

I had to ask even if I knew the answer.

“And what are you going to do with my baby once it's born?”

“Why sell it of course. The Biomedicum chaps made a total pig's ear of everything. Couldn't have handled it poorer if they'd tried. Letting the babies get away and then get killed. Poor show. What tossers. I won't make that same mistake, believe you me, ducky. I've already lined up a buyer for it. It'll be a nice little nest-egg for me to retire on. And bugger the Department. The Department's gone to the dogs. It'll fall apart, just you wait and see, it's only a matter of time.”

“You had this planned from the kick off.”

“Ever since I saw your genetic chart and was made aware of your singular little discrepancy. Nothing personal, old crumpet. It was just an opportunity far too good to be wasted.”

Knowing the why of it didn't really make it any easier to accept. For some reason, however, the pregnancy seemed to go very smoothly. Quite despite the terrible circumstances.

The months went by and my belly just grew till I was nothing more than a bloated whale, beached somewhere in a lonely cellar in Carelia. Nothing for me to do but eat and read. And wait. Wait for Springfield to come with his polished tongs and rip out my baby from my swollen belly.

Every day that day was nearer. One day nearer.

And I had a sneaking suspicion that no unneeded witnesses would be left behind. That would be me.

Springfield had already settled in upstairs and came to see me every day. After supper, like clockwork. He'd sit around for half an hour, have a nice cup of tea, chat about this and that, then head back up. Very cosy.

"Why'd you have to shoot Chapman?" I asked one evening after finishing off my pudding.

"He was an annoying little man and deserved to be shot. Quite honestly, somebody had to do it. I'm just glad it was me."

Suddenly I threw up.

"What's wrong, my dear?"

I convulsed. And again. Violently. After a bit I went limp.

He rushed over.

"Oh shit! Don't die on me!"

He quickly checked my pulse, then turned me on my back and opened my mouth to see if I'd swallowed something untoward. At this point I was breathing quite spastically, gasping and moaning, shaking my arms and legs, shaking all over.

He put his hand on my belly to find out if the baby was still alive and kicking.

They hadn't made many mistakes. In fact only one. That had been a month ago when there had been a new boy serving me my meals. And at supper he'd mistakenly given me a metal spoon.

Didn't get it back, though.

I now plunged the sharpened spoon through Springfield's eye, right into his brain. He died instantly.

After half an hour Johan came down to see what was keeping Springfield. I shot him through the heart with Springfield's automatic. I put a couple of slugs through his head too, just as a sort of personal thank you.

A week, I thought as I drove off, maybe two. No more than that.

Then I was due.

Plenty of time to sort all out. Now that both Springfield and Johan were dead there was nobody after me. There was no one else. Springfield had played his cards close to his chest. Johan was the only one who knew the whole operation, or nearly, the others were just paid for services rendered. So they weren't going to bother me. I knew this as I'd gone through Springfield's papers. He was always so conscientious, everything on paper. Even in this day and age. Every meeting, every contact, every name, every phone number. Even the sum he was going to get for selling my baby. Quite a large figure, really. Rather larger than I'd have expected.

It was over and I'd gotten away with it. My life, my child, everything.

Scot-free.

Just one minute formality left.

I pulled over, stopped the car and fished out Springfield's notebook. I found the right entry and made a quick call with the mobile I'd taken from Johan.

We hit it right off.

They were very understanding.

And what's more, they promised me exactly the same sum they'd promised Springfield.

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About the author (Petri Salin)

When not composing his brilliant prose or sublime dramas, the author collects hedgehogs and bits of string. In his spare time he never - very much contrary to popular disbelief - works as an international fashion model. On Wednesdays the author likes to eat herrings and cheese. Preferably Gorgonzola. Well obviously.



Photo: Anne Leinonen