

The New Orphic Review

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of thirty books. The most recent are *The Shipwrecked Heart*, *Exhuming Carl Jung*, *The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn*, *The Radio Interview*, *The Clown Act*, *Harbinger of Fall*, *The Well*, *The Lambing*, *Man's Sadness*, *Sometimes I Have These Incendiary Dreams*, *The Island of Winged Wonders*, *Dementia Island* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*.

Resiliently Yours

Ernest Hekkanen

BECAUSE MY FAMILY had been so well assimilated into mainstream American society, I grew up thinking I was as red, white and blue as anyone else in the United States. Even though I witnessed some odd displays of behavior being indulged in by members of my extended family – for instance, my grandfather eating a raw saltfish; he and my father conversing in what seemed to be gibberish, at least to my ears; sweating in the sauna on my Uncle Matti's dairy farm, where even more gibberish was spoken – I thought such displays of behavior were well within the parameters of American culture; that is, behavior that every family engaged in from time to time.

Only during the Cuban missile crisis, when I was singled out for being someone of Russian descent and therefore worthy of disdain by my school peers, did I learn from my father that I was someone of Finnish ancestry and that Finns would fight to the death not to be assimilated by the Russians – a point I had trouble digesting at the time, even though I was fifteen years of age. Something seemed to be out of context, you see.

Later, I came to learn that *I* was the one who was out of context. I didn't readily fit in. I preferred silence to frivolous communication. I worked best when I worked alone. I liked to pit my will against the odds; when I was told that this or that was impossible to achieve, well, I tried to achieve it, regardless. I preferred being the underdog; I avoided celebrating my achievements, thinking if I brought too much attention to them I would end up discrediting them in some odd fashion. I worked extremely hard. Now and again, I succumbed to horrible, ex-

cruciating states of despair. Later, I would come to have an unhealthy propensity for alcoholic beverages, which I have since learned to avoid. My father instilled in me a respect for education – in particular, for literature – a respect that seemed rather odd, coming from someone who had been the son of a coal miner and was so poorly read himself. My father suffered from the need to document things. Not one to elaborate in written language, he chose to take moving pictures of his children from the time they were very young to the time they moved away from home – thinking the films would become worthwhile archival material, no doubt.

Even though I suffered from a mild form of dyslexia and was forced to endure one remedial reading program after another – none of which helped the least little bit, by the way – I was smitten by the need to start documenting my life and times. I thought it was a personal imperative; I thought it was something idiosyncratic to me, but I have since learned that it is an obsession with the Finns. Indeed, the Finns have one of the largest collections of archival material in the national archives of Canada.

Only in my mid-forties, when I met Osmo and Henry Lahti – who encouraged me to first join the Finnish Organization of Canada, and later the Canadian Friends of Finland – did I become the least bit interested in exploring my Finnish roots. At that point, things started to make sense. Even though I no longer spoke my father's original tongue, Finnish imprints had been left behind in my psyche. Those imprints could be seen in my outlook, behavior, attitude and vision, and they were stubborn imprints, too, ones that resisted acculturation to American society.

My grandfather was one of three brothers who came to the New World in the early part of the 20th Century. One brother went back to Finland. In 1995, I attended FinnFest in Portland, Oregon, where I was scheduled to give a couple of readings. Moments before I got up to read, a short, blond man of athletic build approached me and said, in heavily accented English, that he thought we might be related. His name was Tauno Hekkanen and he was performing with the *Katirilli* folkdancers of Los Angeles. His wife, Pirkko, was the director of the troupe. Tauno turned out to be the grandson of the brother who had gone back to Finland and, for some strange reason, I found myself overjoyed – in ways that did not make immediate sense to me. It was the joy of connectedness.

I thought, when I first announced that I was going to be producing a Special Finnish Issue of *The New Orphic Review*, that I would be inundated with material. That turned out not to be the case. In addition to suffering from the need to document the most infinitesimal facts of Finnish life, the Finns suffer from a kind of reticence. I asked for translations of Finnish literature from the original Finnish or Swedish and/or literature written by individuals of Finnish ancestry here in North

America, and I am herein publishing just about everything that arrived in the mail. Not a very representative sampling, I would think. However, in these stories and poems, some of which have been translated by members of the Finnish American Translators Association, founded in 1989, you will discover certain recognizable Finnish traits: obstinacy to the point of death, pride in eccentric behavior, angst up the old yin-yang, existential doubt, slapstick humor of a low-brow nature, and that very important quality known as *sisu* – which allows one to go on despite the odds and in the face of one's enormous doubts.

I want to thank all the contributors. In a world dominated by literature from a handful of countries, it is wonderful to experience another point of view.

In the mid-1960s, PEKKA SALMI emigrated with his parents and sister to Canada. “Winnipeg, Manitoba was the face of the moon to me, but I soon got over the shock.” After completing a B.A. degree at Simon Fraser University, he bummed around for many years, working at various odd jobs. Now a resident of Medicine Hat, Alberta, he works as a stringer for a newspaper. *The Stool Diviner* is excerpted from a novel by the same title; it is looking for a publisher.

The Stool Diviner

Pekka Salmi

1

HERE, IN OUR TOWN, the man known as the stool diviner appeared as though out of nowhere, and with a reputation that seemed to have preceded him. No one could place his origin, and he was reluctant to divulge it himself. When asked where he hailed from, he would smile in a faintly bemused fashion, as though humoring an idiot’s request, then reply, “From away.”

Yrjö Perälä’s appearance suggested that he might have come from the northeastern part of the country. Dressed in loose felt trousers, tall leather boots, a dilapidated fur coat fashioned out of the hides of various wild animals and a floppy leather hat that resembled a round mortar board, below which deep-set eyes peered out from a rugged, bearded face, he gave the impression that he had walked out of the wilderness – with a pack and a three-legged stool strapped to his back.

And yet, he spoke a dialect that recalled that of the Upper Lake District. When I made inquiries, I discovered there were reports of him having been seen in Dry Rapids, Never Thaws, and Gone Beyond; however, no one in any of those villages was inclined to claim him as a son. Indeed, a newspaper colleague of mine reported that the stool diviner “simply showed up one day, as though out of the blue.”

“Would you concur that his reputation seemed to precede him?”

“Yes, in a strange way, it did. In particular, among a certain clique of women – the socially well-to-do set, that is. One would expect such women to have a little more sense in their heads, but obviously that’s not the case.”

2

I first glimpsed the stool diviner in the afternoon, when I left the newspaper office and headed down the street to City Hall, where a protest rally was being held. I saw him sitting on a three-legged stool in the shade of a doorway, pulling at his beard with the grimy fingers of his left hand and lifting a paper cup of coffee to his lips with the other. Upon the middle finger of his right hand was a rather large gold ring. The ring caught my attention because it was on the hand that clasped the coffee cup; there was a geometric symbol on it, with a scarab in the center.

Giving him a cursory glance, I hurried around the corner and down the cobblestone street to City Hall. Every dog owner from near and far had gathered in the street outside the cut-granite building erected in 1883. The dogs were as noisy as their owners, who, at appropriate moments during a speech given by Mr. Eino Savola of the ad hoc committee, *Dogs Have Rights, Too*, would send up howls of affirmation or condemnation.

“Just because man’s best friend has four legs instead of two is no excuse to ban him from the downtown area of By the Lake. What the officials of our fair town are trying to do is an outrage, I say. An outrage!”

Two issues tend to occupy our attention here in By the Lake: dogs in the downtown core and whether we need a new civic center. Each year our town councilmen and -women vote to enlarge the No Dogs zone and each year they force us to go to the polls to vote on whether we want a new civic center – usually one of grandiose design that we can’t possibly afford. The No Dogs by-law is presented to us as a *fait accompli*. We, on the other hand, roundly defeat each proposal for a new civic center.

As you might have guessed, we lead rather placid lives here in By the Lake. That, unfortunately, makes a newspaper reporter’s job a difficult one, for there are few stories worthy of investigation. In the winter, we wait for news of skiers being consumed by avalanches; in the spring, we concern ourselves with run-off and possible flooding; in the summer, we wait with bated breath for the first forest fire of the season; and in the fall, we write volumes about pollution caused by wood smoke – when, at the first sign of really cold weather, we jointly stoke our stoves.

In other words, the stool diviner came as a welcome diversion.

I was sitting at my desk in one corner of the newsroom, writing yet another story that had to do with the dog restrictions and the rally that had taken place in front of City Hall – in record time, too, for the copy deadline was minutes away – when I was interrupted by Hilma Tuori. Hilma’s job is to flesh out the society page, usually with trivia about who is marrying whom; or, if anyone of any renown happens to wander through town – let’s say, a famous actor, composer, or author – to interview them.

“Guess who landed in town today?” she announced.

I continued writing my story, one eye on the computer screen and the other on Hilma. Today, she was wearing a strawberry scent. I’ve written the No Dogs story so many times I can do it in my sleep.

“Who?” I inquired.

“The stool diviner.”

“The stool diviner?” At that time, I had no idea whom she was talking about. “I don’t know this ... *stool diviner*. You’ll have to fill me in.”

“He’s famous, Pekka. Absolutely famous. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of him.”

“Well, obviously, he isn’t so famous he has come to *my* attention.”

“He’s a beast of a man.”

“A beast of a man?”

“Yes, and he can tell you all sorts of things about yourself. That’s what makes him a diviner – his preternatural ability to see into your future.”

“Yet another charlatan, in other words?”

“If so, he hasn’t made a fortune by it.”

“Oh, no?”

“No – because he looks like a tramp, apparently.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “Just let me complete this piece, and I’ll get right back to you.”

I finished typing the last few words of the No Dogs story, printed it and took it into the editor-in-chief’s office. “I don’t need to see it, Pekka. It’s bound to be like all the other ones. Just zap it on over to the press room. I’ve reserved a place for it on page one.”

“Yes, sir.”

When I got back to my desk, Hilma had placed her bottom on the desk top next to mine and was filing her fingernails. The strawberry scent was stronger. At least, it seemed that way to me.

“So, this stool diviner looks like a tramp, does he?”

“Yes, he wears a coat made out of furs, and he has this stool strapped to his back – apparently.”

“You’ve not seen him yourself?”

“No, I’ve only heard rumors about him. I have yet to feast my eyes on the man.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it.” I recalled the man I had seen sitting on the stool in the shade of the doorway. “You know, I think I might have seen your stool diviner – today, when I went to take in the protest rally at City Hall. Anyway, this fellow strongly resembles your description.”

“Oh, yeah, what was he doing?”

“Sitting on a stool near the Java Joint, drinking a cup of coffee and looking off into the distance.”

“Do you think he might still be there?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I think I’ll go see.”

“I’ll come with you.”

4

When we got to the Java Joint, we found the stool diviner was no longer sitting on his stool, staring off into space. We went up and down the main streets of town, hoping to find him – without having any luck.

Because it was late in the afternoon, and all our deadlines had been met, I invited Hilma to join me for an early dinner at the By the Lake Diner. We found a place to sit down on the patio facing the street and began to chat – about office politics and the like.

I was well into my pasta, when I happened to look up and spy a man in a fur coat and knee-high boots standing near the intersection, looking around as though he expected someone to show up. A stool dangled from his right hand.

“Oh, look,” I said, pointing with my fork, “there’s the fellow we’ve been looking for.”

“Where?”

“On that corner, there.”

Hilma turned to look, just as an early model Mercedes-Benz pulled up at the corner. The back door opened wide and the stool diviner ducked down to look inside the car.

“I wonder who’s picking him up?” Hilma said.

I jotted down the license plate number on a paper napkin. “Shouldn’t be too hard to find out.”

Taking out my Nokia, I called the newspaper office and asked to be put through to research. “This is Pekka. I’d like you to dig up the owner of a car for me – a Mercedes-Benz, by the way. The license plate number is”

There are only five Mercedes-Benzes in our town, and one of them has been sitting on blocks in a makeshift garage constructed out of rough-hewn poles and a corrugated aluminum roof for over ten years. It didn't take a lot of guesswork to figure out who owned the early model Mercedes-Benz that had picked up the stool diviner, but I like to cross-check to make sure about such things.

The Mercedes did, indeed, belong to the composer, Emil Ahlqvist.

Hilma and I returned to the newspaper building, hopped on our motor scooters and headed up the hill to Ahlqvist's house. The climb is a long, steep one that not only tests the resilience of a motor scooter, but also the navigational skills of the driver. One must take a route that isn't straight up, for fear of taxing the small engine beyond endurance. All the while, I kept amusing myself with possible reasons why the country's second-best composer was in need of a diviner.

Was it to divine which score to next compose? Was it to find out when fate would elevate him to the position of best composer?

Emil Ahlqvist's house sits on a prominent outcrop above the town. The tall floor-to-ceiling windows catch the sunshine and seem to set the house ablaze. Because it was a few days past the summer solstice, the sun didn't completely set – with the result that the composer's house was wrapped in phantasmagoric flames for nearly twenty hours a day.

Hilma and I pulled our motor scooters into the carport next to the Mercedes-Benz that had picked up the stool diviner and switched off our engines.

"Would you like to knock?" I asked Hilma.

"I would prefer not to aggravate Mr. Ahlqvist, to tell you the truth."

"Okay, then I shall do it."

A large brass lion with its teeth clamped down on a heavy brass ring served as the knocker. I banged the device several times and patiently waited for the door to be opened. Above me, to my right, I heard a mechanical noise and, looking up, saw the eye of a camera turning to scrutinize us.

"Smile," I told Hilma. "We're being watched."

After about ten seconds, a maid came to the door. "Yes?"

"I know this might not be the best time for such things," I told her, "but I have an urgent message to pass on to the householder."

"Mr. and Mrs. Ahlqvist are having dinner with a guest and do not wish to be disturbed, I'm afraid."

"Not even if the message is quite urgent?"

"If it is so urgent, write it down on a piece of paper and I will see that Mr. Ahlqvist gets it."

I wrote on a leaf in my notepad: "Urgent message having to do with the stool diviner. Pekka Nurmi of the *By the Lake Times*."

I ripped the leaf from the notepad, folded it in half and gave it to the maid. “Should I expect to receive a reply?”

“It is up to Mr. Ahlqvist, whether or not he wishes to reply,” and she closed the door in our faces.

Shrugging our shoulders at each other, Hilma and I sat down on the concrete slab outside the door. The maid returned much sooner than I expected. She tossed the note at us before we could rise to our feet and accept it.

Printed on the back of the note that I had written to Ahlqvist, was the message: “Get lost!”

6

When someone tells me to get lost, I find my curiosity begins to run rampant and, as a consequence, I redouble my efforts to get in touch with the person I am trying to see.

“Let’s go around the house and see if we can spy them through the tall front windows,” I told Hilma.

“Not I. I don’t want to annoy Mr. Ahlqvist.”

“You’ll never become a seasoned reporter – not with an attitude like that.”

I headed around the house to where the tall windows make the composer’s house look as if it is wrapped in flames. Luck was on my side. I found the composer and his wife having dinner with their guest, the stool diviner, on the patio in the garden.

It was an exquisite-looking meal, served on sparkling china and eaten with well-polished silverware. A seven-armed candleholder stood on the round table, wagging tongues of flame that were barely visible in the sunshine. A wine bottle leaned on its side in an embossed container beside the table. A tuxedoed waiter stood in attendance.

The stool diviner was no longer wearing his fur coat. He had on a beige shirt embroidered with blue cornflowers; the plentiful sleeves tapered to cuffs replete with lapis lazuli cufflinks. A cloth serviette dangled from below his beard. He was leaning forward, lustily slurping what my sensitive olfactories informed me was fish soup. He was in bad need of the serviette, for a lot of soup was being spilled on it.

When I approached the table, everyone glanced at me, spoons suspended in midair. The composer immediately rose to his feet.

“This is an outrage, young man. Who do you think you are, walking in on our meal like this?”

“I’m pleased to meet you, too, Mr. Ahlqvist. Let me introduce myself. I’m Pekka Nurmi – of the *By the Lake Times*.”

The composer flushed down to the collar of his shirt. “Didn’t my note make my feelings quite clear? I told you to, get lost.”

“That’s what I am – lost. Perhaps you could direct me back to the driveway? I seem to have lost my way.”

“Just turn around and retrace your steps. It’s that way,” he said, shaking with rage as he pointed with the index finger of his right hand.

“Fortissimo to you, too,” I told him, turning on my heels and walking backwards now. “This way, you mean?”

“No, from whence you came, you idiot!”

“Sorry. I have an awfully short memory. Which way was that, again?” I continued to back up. My calves bumped up against an empty chair and I sat down on the seat. The composer’s wife was smiling behind the cloth serviette that she was using to dab at her mouth, and the stool diviner, who seemed to take what was going on for a normal occurrence, spooned fish soup into his none-too-handsome mug. “Oh, my, look at this! I seem to have been invited for dinner. Could this be true?”

The country’s second-best composer rushed around the table, grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and tried to yank me up off the chair. The shirt was soon up around my neck.

At that point, the stool diviner wiped his mouth on the cloth serviette that dangled from the neck of his tunic.

“Calm yourself, Emil. There are better ways of dealing with an annoying horsefly than by resorting to the use of brute force.”

“What ways are those, pray tell?”

“Let me demonstrate, please.” The stool diviner looked at me with riveting brown eyes. “I realize you have come here out of curiosity, young man – but this is neither the time nor the place to satisfy your curiosity. It is better if you get up from the chair you are seated on and head back around the house. I shall meet with you later. Perhaps, tomorrow. Perhaps, the day after that.”

His gaze seemed to engage something in my will. I rose to my feet beside the table, despite my intentions to impinge upon the meal.

“That’s more like it,” he said. “We’ll meet on some other occasion. Now, go.”

7

“Well,” Hilma said, “did you get to meet the stool diviner?”

“Yes, and no.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He and the Ahlqvists were having dinner together,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“What’s the matter, Pekka? Previously, you were so dead set on drumming up a story?”

“I’ll try to explain – later on! Right now, let’s get out of here.”

The feeling that I should flee, and flee quickly, was incomprehensible. My reporter's mind felt as though it had been disengaged. I felt impelled to leave, and leave at once. Swinging my motor scooter in a tight arc, I pushed it out to the street and looked back to make certain Hilma was following me. She was.

Halfway down the hill to the center of town, the urgent need to flee began to lessen. I pulled the motor scooter over to the curb. Moments later, Hilma pulled hers up next to mine.

"I have something I must tell you," I said, "something that has to do with the stool diviner."

"What?" she said over the sound of our motor scooters.

"Let's have a drink at the Bumper Crop. I'll talk to you about it there."

8

During the season of the midnight sun, life in our small northern community gets rather frenetic, perhaps because, during the long winter months, we see so little sunlight. The inhabitants try to make up for the lack by rounding out every hour of a summer's day.

The Bumper Crop was located on the town flat beside Mirror Lake. It was a hubbub of activity. As soon as one band fell by the wayside due to exhaustion, another band got up on stage and began to play the tango.

Here, in our town, we are tango crazy, especially when we are under the spell of the midnight sun. We tango twenty-four hours a day. Indeed, By the Lake is now being touted as the Tango Capital of the World. Tourists flock here to join in what was once only a local form of madness. Now our national airlines, acting in concert with big hotel chains and the tourist industry, advertise our crazed condition in foreign countries.

The brochures shout: "Come and join the madness in this northern community, where the locals dance until they drop!"

More often than not, it is a tourist who will dance until he drops. We who live in By the Lake have enough sense to lie down in a pool of shade and snooze for a few hours each day. Shade can be conveniently found on the south side of every tree or building.

Hilma and I found an empty table near the guard rail that keeps revelers from precipitating into the lake. From there we had a good view of the second-best composer's house up on the hill. The tall windows were aflame in the sunshine.

"What do you mean, the stool diviner commanded you to leave – simply by looking at you?" Hilma asked.

“I don’t know how he managed to do it, but my will was deactivated. However, that isn’t quite right, either, now that I think about it. It was more like having my attention redirected – similar to the way a T’ai Chi master might redirect an assailant’s energy, but without any visible gestures – and, of course, where my attention went, so did my will. It was odd, really.”

“You sound like you’ve been convinced,” Hilma said.

“Convinced of what?”

“Of his preternatural abilities....”

I drank from my beer glass. “If he can command me in such a manner – someone who is basically pretty skeptical about most things, especially when it comes to the esoteric arts – what sort of command might he exert over someone else?”

“Over Ahlqvist, for instance?”

“Over anybody – absolutely anybody!” I took another drink. “The thing is, I felt like an accomplice. That’s what disturbs me.”

“An accomplice?”

“Yes, an accomplice. I can’t explain it any better than that.”

Hilma sipped at her rum and coke. “I wonder if other people feel the same way?”

“No idea, my dear. No idea.”

I glanced at Ahlqvist’s house on the hill. The windows glinted so brightly I had to squint.

“What do you say – shall we get up and dance?” I asked Hilma.

“Does our star reporter know how to dance the tango?”

“I’ve lived here for nearly seven years. I’ve had to learn it in order to blend in.”

“Okay, let’s see how well you’ve come to blend in, then.”

Every time I went around the dance floor, I glanced in the direction of the house on the hill and was nearly blinded by the glinting windows.

9

A few days passed before I next ran into the stool diviner. He was seated on the patio of a restaurant known as Lemminkäinen’s, in the company of seven women and one man. The man was Anselm Taipalus, the sculptor. A perpetual frown knits the forehead of that world-famous artist, making him look as though he is sizing up potential subjects. His sculptures, even when they are done in miniature, have a monumental feeling to them, not unlike those of Auguste Rodin.

Anselm was peering across the table at the stool diviner. The stool diviner’s lovely female companions – which included the sculptor’s

wife, by the way – were fawning over him. Their laughter was of the heady variety often heard during the summer of the midnight sun.

I had just finished writing an article based on a ribbon-cutting ceremony in which the mayor had unveiled a life-size sculpture of himself in the municipal park – in the section known as the Avenue of the Honored. The sculpture had been executed by Anselm Taipalus.

After completing the story I had felt the need to wash down the saccharine verbiage with a tall glass of bitters and was on my way to the tavern to do just that. When I saw the party going on at Lemminkäinen's, I decided to head across the street to the opposite sidewalk; however, I stopped in my tracks, when I heard the stool diviner hail me from the patio.

"Pekka, my boy. Pekka Nurmi. Come on over here. I want to speak to you."

It was not the refined voice I had heard at Emil Ahlqvist's. On the contrary, it was the rough, loud voice of a peasant who has gotten into his master's wine cellar. When I turned to glance in the direction of Lemminkäinen's, I saw that the stool diviner had gotten to his feet and was now waving at me. His gesture encouraged me to join him and his friends at the restaurant.

The story I had written about the mayor had left me in a foul mood. I wished to be alone – not in the company of others. However, my reporter's nose led me over to the patio, in the hopes of getting a story.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" I asked.

"My name's Yrjö Perälä," he announced, "and I am officially inviting you to join us for a little drink here at –" he turned to read the sign arcing over the main entrance – "here at Lemminkäinen's. Please, join us."

Judging from the bottles that stood in full view on the table, he had indulged in more than a few glasses of Madeira.

"I'm sorry. I'm not in the best of moods, right now."

"Your mother?" he asked, suddenly a portrait of sympathy.

"My mother?" I rejoined. "What has my mother got to do with anything?"

"She is ill, is she not?"

"Yes, but..."

"From Parkinson's," he said, cutting me off, "a very sad disease, that one. The mind stays limber and alert, but the body rigidifies. I will see what I can do to relieve her suffering."

I was baffled. My mother did have Parkinson's disease, but the drugs she was taking had stabilized her condition. I couldn't fathom how the stool diviner had come to know about her illness. I must have been wearing a baffled expression, though, for he next said:

"Oh, I'm very sorry." His less than handsome face now reflected shock. "You haven't heard, yet."

"Heard what?"

“That her condition has deteriorated. I advise you to go home and call your father. He’s been trying to get in touch with you.”

“Is that why you called me over – to give me this news?”

“No, that just occurred to me – at this very moment,” he said. “You are very close to your mother and you worry you might come down with the same disease. Don’t bother yourself with such thoughts, because you won’t.” He drank from a glass half-full of Madeira. “I will see you tomorrow. Where would you like to meet – at the newspaper building?”

“I guess that could be arranged, yes.”

“Good. I will see you there,” he told me, “between ten and eleven. Meanwhile, if I were you, I would go home and take that call from your father. Not to worry, though. I will see what I can do for your mother – long distance.”

10

Being a man of skeptical disposition, I was less than inclined to believe what the stool diviner had just told me. However, there was little doubt that he possessed some knowledge about my mother’s health, whether he had come by it due to someone having told him or having done some research of his own. My curiosity had been piqued. Rather than going to the tavern to have a beer, I headed straight home.

I rent a walk-up flat in a house built in 1904. The house had been renovated to accommodate several suites. Mine was directly below the roof and was rather hot during the summer of the midnight sun. I kept all the windows open, but even that measure didn’t cool the place off very much.

When I keyed open the door, I heard my father’s voice leaving a salutation on the answering machine. I ran to pick up the receiver, but got there too late to intercept the call. When I played back the message – one of three that my father had left that day – I heard him explain how my mother had been rushed to the hospital after having choked on some food.

Immediately, I phoned my father in Angel Rock. He sounded tired and emotionally drained.

“It happened around noon. She had had such a good morning I decided to take her out for lunch – at the Pince-nez Restaurant – you know, that bistro where all the waiters wear those outrageous eyeglasses, whether they need them or not. She decided on having the chicken paprika and, well, she choked on it. Although I managed to dislodge the offending piece of chicken, she was embarrassed and started complaining how hard it was for her to swallow. Thinking she might have herniated her esophagus or something like that, I took her to the hospital.

The doctor told me it was a further sign of her deterioration – nothing more than that.”

“Is she able to talk?”

“Right now, she’s resting. It might be beneficial, if you were to pay her a visit one of these days, though. I’m sure it would cheer her up.”

“I’ll come down on Friday – on the late train.”

“Wonderful. I’ll advise her to that effect.”

Hanging up the receiver, I fell to thinking, not about my mother, but rather about what the stool diviner had told me at Lemminkäinen’s. How had he known that my father had left the messages on my answering machine? How had he known that my mother’s condition had deteriorated?

11

The following morning, I was late getting up and going to work. The previous evening I had had trouble falling to sleep. As a consequence, I had sat in a picnic chair on my diminutive balcony and stared in a mindless torpor at the little slice of lake visible through the trees. The sun had left a scarlet sheen on the water. It had mesmerized me so thoroughly I had forgotten about the time.

For breakfast, I had my usual porridge and coffee and then set off down the hill to the newspaper office. Still in a groggy condition, I decided to have a cappuccino at the Java Joint. Hilma Tuori was sitting on a tall stool in the corner, staring out the window at the street, looking as if she were trying to recover from a hangover.

“A midsummer carouse?” I asked her.

She gave me a pallorous look. “No, opening night of the Kullervo opera – down at the Lakeside Amphitheater.”

“Oh, so that’s what I kept hearing last night. Every now and then, a breeze would carry the music up to my place.”

“It was actually quite good. The director timed it so that Kullervo would go on his killing rampage just as the sun began to roll across the mountaintop on the other side of the lake.”

“You enjoyed it, then?”

“Immensely. Unfortunately, after interviewing Jukka Uotinen – who made an excellent Kullervo, by the way – I was so awash with excitement I didn’t get to bed until five this morning.”

“As I said, a midsummer carouse.”

“Yes, I guess it did turn into something like that, all right.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’m in much the same condition, even though I didn’t have anything to drink.”

“Oh, yeah. What’s your excuse?”

I related what the stool diviner had told me at Lemminkäinen's and then how I had gone home to find my father's messages on the answering machine. "He's supposed to drop by the newsroom this morning."

"Who is – the stool diviner?"

I watched, as curiosity transformed her face. Soon, nearly every trace of late-night dissipation had been replaced by an animated look of interest. Several times she flipped her blonde bangs away from her face.

"Would you mind if I sat in on your little talk?"

"How do you know it's going to be a little talk? Maybe, it will be a lengthy one."

"You know what I mean, Pekka. Can I be there? Can I listen in?"

"I would hate to see you fall under the stool diviner's thrall, Hilma."

"Me! What about you? You're the one who seems to have an abnormal interest in him."

"Mine *isn't* an abnormal interest."

"Ha! It is, too."

"On the contrary, Hilma. I simply want to know what it is about the man that has allowed him to gain the confidence of people like Ahlqvist, Taipalus and now our mayor, Mr. Otto Niemelä."

"How do you know he has gained the mayor's confidence?"

"I suspect he has – judging from how close he was standing to the mayor at the unveiling of the latter's statue."

"I wasn't there to take it in, unfortunately."

"Check out this morning's newspaper. There will be a photograph of the ceremony – on page one. You'll see our stool diviner standing off to one side of Niemelä."

"An interesting development, that," she said.

"Isn't it?"

12

By ten fifty-five, I was beginning to think the stool diviner had stood me up. If by eleven o'clock he failed to arrive at the office, I intended to head out of town, to Long Slow Creek, to interview a fourteen year-old boy who had gone fishing, only to discover that his favorite creek had run dry and all the fish were lying on the rocky bottom – either dead or in the throes of dying. The boy's father had phoned the incident in to the newspaper; he claimed that the creek had run dry due to a neighbor having diverted the flow of the water.

At two minutes to eleven o'clock, the newsroom door opened and in walked the stool diviner.

“Good morning, one and all. Good morning. Anyone want a bite of garlic sausage?”

He held up a long garlic sausage and grinned ghoulishly. I wondered how a man of such uncouth behavior could have had his way with as many women as he was purported to have had his way with.

“What, no takers?” he shouted. “No one wants to join me in a bite?” He bit off a hunk of sausage and chewed with obvious relish. “It’s very good. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

By now, the editor-in-chief had come from his office to find out what the ruckus was all about. “May I ask you, sir, what your business is?”

The stool diviner pointed the sausage at me. “To talk to that young man over there. He’s going to interview me, I suspect, but not before I’ve spoken to him about his mother – who is doing much better this morning, thanks to me.”

“I’ll handle this,” I told the editor-in-chief, slipping on my sports jacket and going over to the front desk.

“I thought you were working on that creek story?” Paavo Aho asked me.

“I’m heading out that way after lunch.”

“And this?” he said, jerking his head in the stool diviner’s direction.

“This is Mr. Yrjö Perälä, the stool diviner. I’m going to be doing a feature on him – for the Saturday edition.”

“Oh, I see.” Paavo squinted at Perälä. “Carry on, then.”

I offered my right hand to Perälä. He looked at it as if he were wondering what my hand was for. Moments later he put the sausage in his left hand, wiped his right palm on his pant leg and gripped my hand with so much force I felt like wincing, but didn’t.

“Let’s go to the café around the corner,” I suggested. “We’ll disturb the newsroom if we discuss things in here.”

Hilma stuck out her tongue at me – dartingly, like a naughty child.

13

“First,” I said, sipping at my iced latte, “tell me where you come from.”

“Come from?”

“Yes, where were you born – in which town, in what part of the country?”

He gave me a bemused-looking smile. “Why is that so important? What has that got to do with anything?”

“I’m trying to get a little background material on you, that’s all.”

“Not important,” he said, rather gruffly, biting off another hunk of garlic sausage. “And, anyway, I don’t think my birth was registered anywhere. My father was a Sami and my mother a gypsy. They were

nearly always on the go. Itinerant people, you know. Fixers of pots and curers of hides.”

Yrjö was seated on his three-legged stool, leaning back against the outside of the café. Whenever a comely woman went by he would follow her with his gaze. Sometimes the woman would turn to look back at him. And smile. I suspected that he was in his mid-fifties, but it was difficult to tell for sure. His unhandsome face might have made him look a lot older than he actually was.

“So, how long have you traveled around with that milking stool of yours?” I inquired.

“Many, many years. All my life, in fact.”

“Even when you had to do your military service?”

“What military service?”

“The military service that all of us men are obliged to do....”

“That you and your friends are obliged to do,” he corrected me. “Me, I am my own man. I do exactly what I like. The nation doesn’t tell me what to do. You see, I am my own force – my own force!”

“I see.”

He turned to look at me. His gaze didn’t exactly fasten on my face. “What do you see, young man? Tell me. What do you *see*? And how?”

“It was an expression. I meant to say, I see what you mean. I get your drift.”

“I am a man who sees!” He tapped his breast bone with the middle finger of his right hand. “As a child, I could see. Growing up, I could see. As a young man, I could see even better. Everywhere I go, I can’t help but see. It is my fate – my fate!”

“This time I won’t say, I see,” I told him.

He chuckled. “Good. That is settled, then. That is out of the way.”

I sipped at my latte as I watched his every move. It is a technique I employ when an interview isn’t going well. I simply look at the person. It makes them so uneasy, they begin to talk of their own accord.

Yrjö opened his pack and tossed the garlic sausage inside. “Rather than doing what you are trying to do, I would ask about my mother – if I were you.”

“What about my mother?” I said.

“She is doing much better this morning. Also, she is looking forward to your visit on the weekend.”

“How did you know I was going to visit her on the weekend?”

“I already told you – *it is my fate to see!* I can’t help it.”

“Is it the stool that allows you to see?”

He gave a raucous laugh. “Pekka, you are a strange young man. Very strange,” he said, tapping his right temple. “No, this stool is my examination stool.”

“Your examination stool?”

“Yes, for when I do an in-depth divination.”

“What does that entail, exactly?”

“I don’t air my trade secrets in public. It is better for the curious to find out firsthand – in private. That is what convinces the disbeliever, I find.”

“Would you be willing to give me an in-depth divination?”

“Provided you have a newspaper and a place where we won’t be disturbed by this maddening crowd.”

He gave me a level, unwavering stare that caused a shiver to go down my spine. I writhed in the chair – minutely.

“How long would it take?” I asked him.

“An hour. No more.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a try. Just let me pick up a newspaper at the office.”

I picked up a copy of the *By the Lake Times*. On page one was the photo of the mayor unveiling his statue in the park; to his right stood the stool diviner.

“Hey, look at this,” I said, slapping the newspaper. “You’re on page one.”

He glowered at the picture. “So I am, so I am. I never read the newspaper, myself. It’s such a waste of time.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I know what has gone on, already,” he said. “Sometimes I know it before it has even happened.”

14

“Spread the newspaper on the floor. I suggest you do it in the kitchen, where the tiles are.”

“Why on the floor?”

“Because you’re going to shit on that newspaper.”

“You’re joking, of course?”

“I’m not.” He threw back his shoulders and smoothed down his unruly beard. “Yrjö never jokes about such things, my friend.”

“I thought you would use a crystal ball or something like that.”

“Crystal balls are what they use in the movies. This isn’t a movie. This is real.”

I unfolded the newspaper. “Do all your clients have to shit on a newspaper?”

“If they want Yrjö’s predictions, they do – for that is how I come by them – by peering into what is left behind.”

“But what if your client has already taken a shit that day?”

“There is always more shit coming down the line. Either we wait for it, or I help matters along by doing some abdominal massage.”

“I see.”

“No, you mean, *I* see. You do the shitting.”

I spread the newspaper on the kitchen floor, thinking I would make the photograph of the mayor's unveiling of the statue of himself my target of choice. The stool diviner set down the three-legged stool, not far from what would become the site of impact.

"Are you going to need some help?" he asked, "or have you got a movement under way?"

"I don't feel one coming on," I admitted.

He sat down on the stool. "Okay, then lie down here before me – on your back, please. I will help to get things moving."

I resisted his suggestion. "Where are you going to be when I take this shit?"

"Right here on this stool – watching."

"You mean, I have to squat here right, in front of you?"

"Don't worry. You won't be facing me. You will be turned the other way around – so I can watch it come out."

I stood looking at him – in mild shock. "You're sure this is how it is done?" I inquired. "You're not just trying to make a fool out of me – because I'm a reporter?"

"All my clients must do this."

"High and low alike?"

"Everyone the same. Everyone." He gave me a piercing look that engaged something deep in my will. "So, will you require me to facilitate things or can you accomplish this feat on your own?"

"I don't feel a shit coming on."

"Then lie down here before me." His gaze drew an invisible line from my nose to the floor in front of him. "You might want to take off your trousers, for there won't be too much time, once things get moving."

I stepped out of my trousers and lay down on my back. He put his large hand on my lower abdomen and looked toward the heavens, his irises rolling up into his eye sockets. "Ah, yes, there is plenty to work with here. Plenty. You do not starve yourself, young man. You have a healthy appetite. I would suggest an occasional fast, though, to lighten things up, now and then."

Pushing down heavily with his hand, he kneaded my lower abdomen as if it were a mound of dough. Heat infused my belly and soon things began to stir. I felt as if I had drunk a cupful of castor oil. My guts went into peristaltic convulsions. Then he took his hand away.

"I would prepare myself," he said, "for it won't be very long now."

I felt the gripe coming on fast and furiously. The cramps were almost too much to be endured. They made it difficult to stand up.

"If I were you I would turn around and squat very quickly – right here in front of me – before you fill your underpants." He cleared his throat. "No, the other way around – like I told you."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot."

I barely had time to turn around and squat over the photo of the mayor unveiling his own statue. Wrenching cramps emptied my bowels – not just once, but many times – accompanied by a cacophony of grunts, groans, splutters and splats. Behind me, the stool diviner mumbled as though he hadn't any sense in his head. His moans and mutters were punctuated by words like: “Yes ... I see ... it is coming to me now ... yes ... we're getting to the source of things ... yes, yes, go on ... relieve yourself ... let everything go.”

15

Even after I had pulled up my trousers and buckled my belt, Yrjö Perälä continued to sit on his three-legged stool and stare as though in a trance at my stool on the newspaper. The corn I had eaten the previous evening was clearly visible in the brown pile and I wondered if it would have an impact on his predictions.

After staring at my shit for about twenty minutes, the stool diviner bolted to the bathroom and began to vomit – deep, wrenching regurgitations that resounded throughout the flat. When that was over he staggered out of the bathroom and down the hallway to the living room where he sank down in an armchair and looked off into space, sweat dripping from his face into his beard.

“When you were four years of age, you put your hands on an airtight stove and burned them very badly and, indeed, to this day, you bear a scar on your left forearm. At nine, you fell out of a tree and broke a collar bone. You intended to become a man of literature, but settled for being a journalist – one who barely makes enough money to afford the place he's living in. Your younger brother died five years ago – in a car accident – and that seemed to precipitate your mother's poor health. Your father was a school teacher whose subject was history, although he wanted to become a musician. Not too long from now, you will go on a journey – at the request of someone you will continue to regard with a certain amount of suspicion. You will become his publicist. You will watch him tread as lightly as he can the corridors of power and, in the end, you will see him assassinated. The assassinated one will be me.”

BRENT MAALLINEN lives in Moscow, Idaho and attends Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. He writes poems when he is not studying for a major in psychology and a minor in literature.

Three Poems / Brent Maallinen

Louhi's Child

On this day wound down from nothing
birds escape the flow of time
by winging edgewise into light;

Gone, they are – so instantly, I feel
I have blinked them out of existence.
I wander these murderous city streets, alone

wearing marks that betray my origin
in the far Northland where Louhi
obstinately defends her kingdom
even to this day.

I have in my pocket a fragment
of the original Sampo. Yes, I will survive
my sojourn in these southern climes,
where people walk like pillars of salt –
salt which threatens to spill out of them
a grain at a time.

Indirect Seeing

There is something to be said
for the sun that never descends
on these long summer nights.

It fills me to bursting
with the need to shine,
and later that will let me
illuminate the nights
which linger as firmly
as eternity.

Then, I will use peripheral vision
More than direct seeing.

The Moon is Wrong

Tonight, the moon is wrong.
It should be rolling
like a round amulet
across the mountain range
to the southwest of here.

Instead, it is dancing
like Väinämöinen's drum,
and the tattoo beaten upon it
makes it jump so frenetically,
I am dizzied in my soul.

LEENA KROHN (b. Helsinki 1947) is known for her depictions of unusual truths and states of being. The two selections which follow are from an early work entitled *Stories* (1976). She has written books which pit the idyllic world of children against the destruction wrought by technology, and her explorations of life's phenomena include *Tainaron*, a novel set in the world of insects.

Since retiring as an English professor, RICHARD IMPOLA has been translating Finnish literature. His publications include Aleksis Kivi's *Seven Brothers* and the first three novels of Kalle Päätalo's *Koillismaa* series. His current project is the Väinö Linna trilogy, *Under the North Star*, the first volume of which is now in print (Aspasia Books, 2001).

King of the Island

Leena Krohn

translated by Richard Impola

IT'S TWENTY YEARS now since we met. I was then four-foot-six, and you were known as the *King of the Island*. You were the smallest of kings, and your kingdom a speck of sea-swept rock. Only birch and juniper on a granite crag, of no consequence. An island in the same sense that you were a king and the fisherman's hut you lived in a castle. No one could enter its door without stooping, except the head of the realm, for you were so slight of stature that you needed not bow anywhere to anyone. And then, you had only one arm – the war had taken the other.

That was how you came home. Many a slight acquaintance consoled you by saying, "Lucky it wasn't the right." But then you would turn your head away. For you were born left-handed.

Before the war, you were considered the better of the community's two shoemakers, but after the war, you no longer needed your awl and shoe thread. Nor did the other shoemaker need them for long. The new age came to the community too, bringing machines, special glues, and replacement heels.

It was then you began to avoid company, and people began to think you a little touched. Talk went around that the war had stolen more than an arm from you, as indeed it had. Never again did you lean against the dusty windowsill in your shop and renew your favorite topics of conversation: the genius of mankind, the great future of the human race, the latest scientific inventions.

With only one arm, you moved to an island accessible only by boat. But you were a man who could row with one arm. Or rather, you always backed the oars in quick jerks, squeezing both of them in your one shoemaker's hand. You were seldom seen in town, for you caught your own fish, and got your milk and eggs from the opposite shore. Your pension was sent to the bank in the church village.

Rowing must have been your only diversion and pastime. Every evening when the weather was good, your flat-bottomed boat was seen circling the bay hugging the shoreline. As it passed a house, its speed slackened noticeably. You could be seen squinting and craning your neck, not missing a thing, not a new set of curtains, nor a new planting of heartsease, nor a fat lady lying in a hammock at the resort. Because of the rowing and rubbernecking, you were called *Inspector* as well as *King of the Island*.

If you took pleasure in those evenings, we also did, we children of the resort. We would leave our evening tea unfinished and shout: "Look, the old man is rowing again."

When you drew even with the sauna, we were already hanging out the window and would stick both thumbs into our ears and wag the other eight fingers at you.

On such evenings you were often tipsy, which made you sing. Your voice was harsh and tuneless, but on still evenings, it carried a royal distance:

*If I were a bird
and you a head of grain
I'd pluck you in my beak
and fly away with you.*

You did remind me of a bird then, of a vulture. Its picture was in our *Field Guide to Birds*, and it was the ugliest and strangest bird of all.

Once in August, contrary to custom, you came straight to the shore of the resort, but when you got out of the boat, you fell headlong on the sand. I was there too, squatting on a rock and brushing my teeth, brushing and gargling and brushing again. I was all alone when you came staggering up, and wanted to run away. But shabby and dripping wet, you blocked my path to the resort, almost the same size as I, but looking like a goblin or troll. You staggered up to me and blew a stinking breath on my face, reached out your one hand, touched my cheek with the back of it, and said, "Sweet girl."

I brushed away your hand with all the strength of my fear and hissed at you: "You crazy drunken bum!"

Those were my exact words, I can remember them perfectly well. Where I got them from, I don't know.

The words had a remarkable effect. You seemed stricken. You turned on your heel, and went back to the boat, no longer staggering.

When I reached the verandah, the boat was far out on the water. But this time I could see that you were rowing, not backing the oars. I had never seen you do that before. Your clear silhouette receded in the calm of evening, and gold-colored waves rippled in your wake. They seemed not to change, and followed you faithfully till you reached home.

That summer you were no longer seen near the resort, and the following year my parents rented another summer place on another lake.

I was no longer four-and-a-half feet, but four-foot-eight, and five-foot-three, and five-foot-five and finally a little more than that. I became a grown-up without especially wanting to or doing anything in particular to that end. It just happened to me and my sisters, cousins, and schoolmates.

I wound up abroad and lived there for many years. During the day, I never gave a thought to Finland or the lake, not to mention the *King of the Island*. But every night I returned home, sometimes to your lake and the old resort. It was there that O., who abandoned me long ago, and who never even saw the lake, carefully closed his teeth on my breast, pressed his lips to my skin, and passed the tip of his tongue over my nipple.

I was awakened by a sob at the memory of being so far away, and the thought that O. would never touch me, much less kiss me, except in dreams.

Wide awake now, I knew that nothing of the kind could be found there or anywhere, that such love was scarcely worth those bitter tears. It was only the dream of an orphaned heart, and I drove it out the window to lose it in a land where it did not know the language so that it would never return. For dreams are always monolingual.

But it did return, and I knew in advance that it would.

I stood by the window for a while, for the potted palm in the roof garden to console me with its waving fronds – as much as a palm tree can console a person accustomed to being lulled by birches.

I did return to Finland during my waking hours, to my old home and then to your lake, where a family I knew had bought a lot and cabin. It was the dog days of August again, as it had been when you stroked my cheek with the back of your only hand and were to me only a drunken bum, entirely different from those adults I knew as my parents, my friends' parents, my godparents, and my aunts and uncles.

In the cooperative store, the same one where I had once bought cream puffs, the woman told me casually about your death.

“What did he die of?” I asked.

“What else but booze,” she answered. “He couldn't live like a human being after he lost his arm.”

“But is the castle still standing?”

“The castle is, but not for long. And the garden must be gone by now.”

A garden? On that rock? It was the first I'd heard of it. I learned that with your boat, one-armed, you had ferried soil and irrigation water to your kingdom a boatload at a time. You had gotten heartsease from the woman at the co-op, although she had laughed at the idea of flower beds in a place like that. You had even taken tree seedlings there, birch and maple and even oak, which needs a deep and rich topsoil. But, I heard, they had taken root in your kingdom, which was like a crumb of bread, dry and forgotten.

I heard more besides: that there had been a girl named Selma and certain hopes which had died completely when you returned maimed from the Winter War. But enough of that.

As evening fell, I asked for the loan of a small fiberglass boat from my friends. So I came to your country, King of the Island.

It was no flower garden. True, the maple tree still grew there, but there was no sign of the heartsease, not even growing wild. A dried shrub protruded from the grass, perhaps an oak, but it was impossible to be sure. The castle stood askew and rain had washed the red ocher from its walls. The soil beneath its window was supported by boards, for the sake of the heartsease, fuchsia, or bleeding heart. But over their grave, a shaggy thistle flourished, purple and silvery gray. Its burrs stuck to my woolen blouse when I peered over the edge of the flower bed to see inside.

Either the wind or a vandal had broken the small windowpanes, and the maple, as if curious, had thrust its branches inside. But there was nothing to see, absolutely nothing. Oh, the ruins of your castle! Loads of empty bottles, torn newspapers, moldy tin cans. Nothing but dirt, pollution. Its original shape and substance could no longer be defined. Among the glass fragments under the broken window, jumbled rags lay rotting, and I thought I could sense the smell of solitary sperm.

I sat on the porch, feeling as weary as if I had labored long and hard. A gooseberry bush, it too without berries, brushed my sleeve mysteriously.

Only this and the boat that lay rotting in the reeds were left of your life, and there was no one to weep for them except me, to whom you were just a drunken bum while alive.

The maple before me rustled. It was soothing to my eyes. I looked at it as I had looked at many trees, I mean, truly seeing them. I had studied their movements, the slow swaying of the trunk and the rapid stirring of the leafage, and wondered that, unlike people, they continued to grow until death. I have seen withered standing trees and withered standing people. But only the former can be beautiful.

I looked at the maple now, at your maple, and saw a swarm of mosquitoes partying in its shade, sustaining an incredibly high note with their wings. I saw that there were dry branches on the tree as well and that it would never grow to full size in such lean earth.

How much work had your one hand done for the sake of its future? How many sacks of soil and buckets of water had you carried to its roots?

But what use is the gardener's care when the roots rebound from hard rock? When fertile land is far to the south with those who do not love the life of the earth. Those who dress it in asphalt and gleaming glass and sparkling steel, who would not water a maple even if they had three arms.

Your maple would wither and the windows would bow it. Afterwards, there would be no evidence of your strivings but a lusher than usual clump of thistles under the window of the hut.

The maple still continued your life, and the darkness pushing in from the east caused its yellowing fingers to quiver. It was the King of the Island, it was you, it was the bearer of everything for which the shoemaker and soldier and one-armed hermit had lived and worked.

There under the maple, I vowed that before leaving I would bring a boatload of soil to your kingdom in memory of the *King of the Island* and perhaps as a kind of exercise in repentance.

I rowed for a long time before the garden disappeared from sight behind other islands and wooded points. I saw the shape of your maple growing darker and brighter as the sky in back of it was lighted with all the colors of the heavenly fires. But the waters repeated its green form; the lake gave it another maple as a companion.

I left the lake sooner than I had intended for what is called the great world, but which can be smaller than your bread crumb.

I did not manage the load of soil for your maple. So many other more pressing matters came up. But I haven't forgotten it, never fear. I'll do it next summer, or if not then, the summer after, I swear.

LEENA KROHN. Consult biographical entry on page 29. The following story comes from a collection entitled *Kertomuksia*.

RICHARD IMPOLA has also translated Tauno Yliruusi's *Hand in Hand*, the touching story of a childless elderly couple whose dearest wish is that they be allowed to die together, and with dignity.

A Clear Conscience

Leena Krohn

translated by Richard Impola

EVEN TODAY THERE are people that remind us of the true princess who could feel a pea through twenty pads and twenty down mattresses. Joel Jävi was such a person. The slightest thing upset his equilibrium. A harsh word sent his temperature soaring; stepping on someone's toes on a bus cost him a sleepless night.

What is to be done with such people? Some believe they must be toughened, must learn to sleep on a bed of peas only, without pity for their bruises. But that may be the wrong approach. Perhaps there is no proper treatment for them, in which case the poet's words apply:

For the time, let them be what they are
Until they return to the mould.

All kinds of rumors about Joel Jävi's death have gone round the city. But the truth is, his death was caused by a superficial scientific article.

Elina was probably the last to see him alive. Late one evening last winter, he rang her doorbell. When she opened the door, he stood there looking mournful. With hardly a greeting, he walked by her in silence. His coat still on, hands in his pockets, he collapsed onto the sofa.

Elina said nothing; she was used to almost anything from that quarter. She began to make tea and to slice onions and tomatoes onto an open-faced sandwich, for Joel was against eating sausage, sardines, and even eggs by reason of conscience.

Joel grasped the teacup absentmindedly, stirred some honey into it, but put the cup back on the table after one slip. He did not touch the sandwich.

“Why don’t you have something to eat or drink?” asked Elina.

“I can’t.”

The words came out gaspingly.

“Are you ill?”

He shook his head.

“Why can’t you eat then? The bread is fresh and the tea is a special Java blend.”

Joel did not reply, but drew a newspaper clipping out of his pocket.

It told of new scientific research findings according to which even plants have feelings. Electrical instruments were supposed to have demonstrated conclusively that plants feel fear, pity, and pain, that the horror of death seizes them at the approach of someone bent on their destruction.

“Rubbish,” Elina said scornfully, but her heart contracted with fear, not for the plants, but for her poor friend.

Joel Jävi bit his fingernails without looking at the girl. In a rage, she crumpled the clipping into a wad and threw it to the floor.

“It’s ridiculous!” she cried. “Absolutely ridiculous! I know what’s on your mind, but you’re not going through with it. No way! Who do you think you are? Some Bodhisattva or this whole world’s Jesus Christ? Like Tolstoi’s apostle, you won’t eat eggs, supposedly in order not to hurt a hen. Go sit on a flagpole and fast so you’ll get your saint’s title, you shithead.”

She stopped speaking, for tears burned in her throat. Joel Jävi now sat with his hands in his lap and his face turned away. To the girl’s eyes, there was indeed something saint-like in his melancholy profile and his downcast lashes.

She rose and knelt before his chair. Wrapping her arms around his legs, she laid her head on his knees, and begged:

“Forget about it now. Don’t waste your thoughts on such rubbish. Have pity on me, if not on yourself. You can’t let such nonsense affect your life. Those people don’t know a thing; they just jump to arbitrary conclusions. It can’t be possible, and it isn’t. Plants don’t have a brain or a nervous system, or anything. How can they suffer then?”

She looked up. Joel Jävi still sat there, stiff and distant. Elina tried a new tack.

“The world is a place where no one can live purely in spirit. A human being is flesh, a living substance, and to sustain it one must use other forms of life. You can’t set yourself up against the order of nature.”

The girl squeezed Joel Jävi’s cold, limp fingers. Still he did not answer, did not look at her. And when she pressed her lips against the

back of his hand, he drew it away, got up, and walked over to the window.

Even the girl turned cold now and went back to where she had been sitting.

“Good,” she said. “You pity tea leaves more than you do human beings. Just try to stop eating and they’ll force-feed you. I’ll see to it that they put you into some kind of institution and shove a tube into your belly. You’re the one who’s choosing this kind of feeding.”

Banging things around, she began to clear off the table. She poured the now cold tea down the drain and put the untouched sandwich into a cupboard. When she returned from the kitchen, Joel Jävi had left.

That day was the start of the true princess’s long fast.

From that day on, he was dead to the world, living alone, in secret, starving, abandoned by friends and acquaintances, listed at length among missing persons. The only thing he enjoyed in his refuge in the cellar of a deserted house was water, which contains life too, but of such a type that even in the intestines it can continue its microbial existence.

With his masticating jaws, his greedily bobbing Adam’s apple, and his smacking lips for company, Joel Jävi lived all alone, sinking into an ever deeper depression. What is the limit to this suffering? he wondered. Wasn’t it enough that natural creatures were subjected both in life and death to all kinds of atrocities, were driven during their lives along such a bloody road, and that their departure was if anything even more revolting?

Did even all the greenery which covered the Earth-Star with a thick hood and made it the only possible abode for its inhabitants, did it too have to have something reminiscent of a soul, the source of all misery, that is, feelings?

And as he fasted there in his solitude, his ears grew sharper and sharper. He heard the cries of complaint that rose into the air, not only from the throats of the sick and from slaughtered beasts but also from vegetable gardens and greenhouses, from hay fields where the scythe whistled and from fields of grain where combines clattered.

There all was weeping and lamentation, but human beings went on enjoying their breakfasts and lunches and snacks. How could they have heard the cries above the eternal grinding of jaws, the crunching and smacking, the din of teeth, tongue, and lips. How carefully they pulverized the butchered life, softened and moistened it for still more thorough processing.

But spring was drawing near, had arrived. And the true princess left his dwelling place very thin and pale. He could barely stand, but still he longed for the woods and the open sky.

There in the woods, the pious sun, God’s light, was shining, and the forest denizens were awake and busy at their tasks. But things grew

dark before Joel Jävi's eyes. Dizzy with hunger, he fell to his knees on a sun-dappled bed of moss and his head sank to his breast.

Squirrels, two of them, ran along the trunk of a bearded spruce keeping up a merry chatter. Maidenhair seed-pods swayed before his eyes. As a child he had called them tea kettles, for a white hood covered them, which he had taken for a tea cozy. Under the cozy was a small lid, which one could lift off, and only under that was the green pudding of the seed. Joel Jävi badly wanted to raise the hood from one such pod just to see if the lid was in place, but his emaciated hands were too tired to do anything.

A dung beetle moved into the range of his vision. He recalled clearly how pleasantly its hairy legs could tickle one's open palm.

He had now slid to the ground on his side without feeling the earth's springtime coldness, but he could see far into the wood's motley recesses. His ears were sunk into the damp moss and he seemed to hear from beneath it, from deep under the network of fungus and tree roots, a quiet patter, whispering, laughter. He remembered tales read to him long ago of spirits that lived beneath the earth.

But from the earth's surface all around him rose a multi-voiced hum, for the smallest folk of the forest, the bumble bees and other winged creatures, the worms and the ants, were busy at their endless task of purveying food.

An orderly band of red ants dragged a still living earthworm past him, and he commanded them in a weak voice:

"Stop that right now. It won't do."

But they refused to obey and went on with their task, and he hated himself in his weakness.

He was still in the same position when evening arrived, but his eyes kept opening and closing. He looked down a slope where the trees thinned near a pond, and it seemed to him that it was broad daylight, although he lay in thick shadows under the bearded spruce trees.

In an opening through the trees, in a bright daylight glow, he saw two figures sitting near each other. Waterfowl were quacking, and beyond the glow, the sun filtered through fresh growth. From his spot under the spruces, he could not see who they were or hear what they were saying, but he knew, he remembered, that he was one of them, and that the other had to be Elina.

"I have to go," said Elina. "I promised to peel the potatoes."

But she made no gesture toward rising.

"It's not late yet," said Joel Jävi. "It isn't."

He grasped his thin wrist to look at his watch. Its dial had slid out of sight in back of his wrist, and his fingers fumbled over the veins that stood out from his skin as he tried to turn it around. But even after he succeeded, he kept his hand there, and he remembered, no, he clearly sensed, the warmth of his hand. Concentrating fiercely, he turned the

hand resting on his thigh upward, found its pulse, and pressed his fingertips upon it.

The pulse beat drowned out the hum of the woods, and he heard its unceasing hammer blows in both the wrist and the fingers pressing on it. It rang in all his veins, his organs, and his heart, his temples, and his jugular, in his ears and his knee joints. The blows resounded, rapid, strong, and endless as the tramp of marching feet, to the blue sky above (or was it coal black?) and nothing in the world was broad or high enough, heavy or hard enough, to halt their advance.

To the sound of their beat, his ears ringing, the true princes sank into the approaching night. The little folk of the forest, wise, innocent, and tidy, carried him off bit by bit during the course of the summer.

KAARINA BROOKS is a retired teacher, living near Alliston, Ontario. Fifty years ago, at age nine, she left Finland with her family and landed at Pier 21 in Halifax. Her poems have been published in various magazines, newspapers, literary journals and anthologies. She also does translations from Finnish to English.

Four Poems / Kaarina Brooks

The Feast

She plumbs the deep, dark sadness of her soul;
Sifts through her life for every crumb of hurt;
Brings up the miserable morsels of her past;
Chews on the anguish of each grievous wrong;
And sips the bitter juices of her pain.

Her endless sorrow yields a glorious feast
of woeful tribulations to dissect,
of aching agony to masticate,
of melancholy memories to consume,
To swallow pitifully ... and to moan.

She will not see the sun behind the clouds:
The silver lining stings her tearful eyes.
Don't try to spoil her misery with cheer!
"I am not a Pollyanna.
I will *not* be comforted!"

Her life is so delectably ... *sad*.

City Dwellers

Windows -

 row on row,
 row upon row,
 row stacked on row -
mark our homes.

Incandescent beacons

 light the windows;
 glow in fabricated rows:
 (not sky-scattered)
city stars.

We make love.

 Behind blind windows
we make love.
 Burrowed in boxes
we make love.
 Lying in rows
we make love.

We sleep.

 Inside our cells
we sleep.
 Above lurid streets
we sleep.
 Curled clutching close
we sleep.

Red geraniums

 bloom on window sills.

Foreshadowing

My friend

we have climbed crags,
 black with blueberries,
above the distant depths
 of the bay,

dived underneath
 pellucid topaz waters
of the bottomless
 crater,

shared susurrations
 of moonless summer evenings,
embalmed in the perfume
 of night-flowers.

Under beckoning skies
 black with death and destiny,
laughing, we have chased
 fireflies.

That's It!

Finally, I stopped hoping for a miracle.
So when at last I said, "That's it!
Take your vodka bottle and leave!"
I wrapped a heavy lead sheath around my heart
so I wouldn't be burned by the love
radiating from you.

While my hands plucked dead flowers
from African violets
I grew another pair to clamp over my ears
so I wouldn't hear your entreaties.
And I put on blinders so I wouldn't see
your eyes, begging me to reconsider.

Now I am doomed to carry
the dead weight of that decision
as I head unwillingly towards a future
where the only certainty is
that you will *not* be part of it!

EEVA KILPI (b. 1927) lived her childhood in Karelia and, like thousands of other Finns, was forced to flee to Finland when the Soviet Union seized that area. She has published numerous books that have been translated into different languages. “Silly Feeling” comes from *Se Mitä Ei Koskaan Sanota* (WSOY 1979), a collection of nine stories about members of one family.

JILL GRAHAM TIMBERS is a freelance translator from Finnish into English. Her translations appear in numerous anthologies and literary magazines. She began translating Eeva Kilpi’s work as part of a Research Fellowship awarded her by Central Michigan University while she was reference librarian there. She holds degrees in comparative literature, English literature, and library science. She lives in Normal, Illinois.

Silly Feeling

Eeva Kilpi

translated by Jill Graham Timbers

THE GIRL RAN up to Juhani and wrapped her arms around his legs even before he’d leaned his bike against the house.

“You only came now?”

“I came now. What’s only about it?”

He lifted the child and she hugged him around the neck with all her strength.

“You promised you’d come earlier.”

“No, I didn’t. I said I’d come as soon as I could. And I couldn’t get here earlier. I was on a long bike tour. I did send you cards from lots of places. Didn’t you get my cards?”

“I got them. Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

“Well, didn’t you look for the places on the map the way we agreed? Didn’t you see that I was far, far away?”

“Yes, I found them but then it seemed that you were coming this way.”

“In that case you looked at the places in the wrong order. You should have looked at the dates, too.”

“But then it would have felt as if you just kept going further away.”

“You silly. I told you I’d come in August.”

“Throw me in the air a little! Hey, look!” the girl cried to the children playing on the side of the cliff. “Now Uncle Juhani’s throwing me in the air!”

Juhani threw the girl up as many times and as high as he could. The child's small braids flew up with each toss and she gave a shriek each time she fell into Juhani's arms.

"One more time," said the girl.

"Well, okay. I must have gotten in better shape on the bike trip."

And he threw the girl into the air one more time. Then he swung her back and forth by the hands. The girl laughed and shrieked.

"Oh, now I really can't do it anymore. You've grown. Boy, have you gotten heavy! And since when do you have braids?"

"Since this morning. I said to Mummo, let's braid my hair just in case Uncle Juhani comes."

"When did you start calling me 'Uncle'?"

"I started when you were gone for so long."

"To pay me back, eh?"

"No, but an uncle has to come."

"Oh. I see."

"Hey, look!" the girl shouted to the other children. "Uncle Juhani came!"

The children stared, frozen, some squatting, some standing stiff as if it were part of the game they were playing. You could see from their expressions that a great marvel was occurring right before their eyes and that all of them had doubted it would ever happen. The girl radiated triumph at them and she, too, stood still for a moment, head tilted, stomach puffed out, her whole bearing proclaiming, "There, now you saw it! It did happen the way I said. Uncle Juhani came."

"Do you have a lot of time now?"

"Well, listen, let's say relatively speaking quite a lot. I wanted to propose we go to the beach or for ice cream or maybe both. Is your grandmother home?"

"No."

"I can't take you without permission."

"Sure, you can. I told Mummo to just go ahead, I'd keep an eye on myself."

"What did Mummo say to that?"

"She just laughed. We can go."

The girl was jumping impatiently in place.

"Where did your grandmother go? Could I call her there?"

"She went to the Golden Years dances, you can't phone there. But we can go. I'll be good."

"Isn't anyone else at home?" Juhani asked cautiously.

"No."

"Why don't we write a note and drop it through the mail slot?"

"Okay, let's do that, then," the girl said, annoyed. "You're always like that."

"Like what?" Juhani asked, fumbling in his pocket for a pen and some scrap of paper on which to leave a message.

“Oh, that kind of worrywart.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“One time all the people and a helicopter were hunting for a girl my age. And when they found the girl she was dead and her mother cried so hard they had to take her to the hospital.”

“There you heard it. I don’t suppose you want everyone to be scared because they think you’ve disappeared.”

The girl didn’t answer. She just pursed her lips and tugged on the lower lip with her fingers.

Juhani wrote on the note: “Am taking Jaana swimming and then for ice cream. We’ll be back by five at the latest. Greetings, Juhani.”

He read the note to Jaana.

“By five,” the girl quoted. “Of course that means a dreadfully short time.”

“Does not. We have over two hours. That’s enough time for just about anything.”

“Two. Huh. And I’ve been waiting for at least a hundred hours.”

“But this is just a beginning,” Juhani began. Then he remembered what he had thought as he pedaled the Finnish back roads, how he had reflected and reasoned and the decision he had finally reached. The girl would have to grow free of him. He himself would have to get free of the past sometime; as it was, he’d remained dangling in a way that wasn’t natural and which he couldn’t explain. Who was it who had just said, “You still running there?” And he hadn’t answered. All that was needed now was for someone to charge him with child molestation.

They walked over together to drop the note through the mail slot. Jaana hopped beside him like a newly freed bird who doesn’t yet dare fly.

“Do you have enough on?” it occurred to Juhani. “It might start to get cool.”

“Sure I do,” said the girl, dancing along next to him. “Don’t go fussing again.”

“Are you absolutely sure you know how to keep your legs away from the spokes?” Juhani asked as he took his bike. “I don’t have a child seat, as you see.”

“You don’t need one of those for me. Get one later for your own kids,” the girl said. “I know how.”

Juhani had arranged a wool scarf to cushion the bike rack.

“See if it feels okay.”

“It’s fine.”

“But feel it! I can fix it if it’s not right.”

“It’s perfectly fine, now let’s go! Hey, look!” she cried to her playmates who were still gaping, dumbfounded, from the base of the cliff. “Now Uncle Juhani’s taking me for a ride! We’re going to stay five hours and go to the beach and eat ice cream! Try to make do without me!”

She waved her hand as they left the yard, and the children waved back solemnly as if they still didn't believe their eyes.

"Hold tight with both hands, now," said Juhani. "And remember: keep your legs spread wide and don't catch your fingers in the saddle springs."

"Just go, and stop fussing," said the girl.

They had swum and were now sprawled on the beach. The girl was covering Juhani's legs with sand.

"Will you tell me again about the girl who went to live with the animals?"

"Where were we in the story, anyway?"

"I'll tell you when we get there, just start at the beginning."

"I'm not sure I even remember the beginning anymore."

"Well, the girl had to sleep alone a lot and then one night she went into the forest to the animals and the animals took her as one of their own cubs. And she met lots of animals who behaved all different ways and in some of the animal families the fathers took care of the cubs, but in most, the mothers did, and in some families like the wolves, the father and the mother. All the animal children played and almost all of them fought, too, but they stayed together until the moms started to push them away because they were pregnant again."

"Haven't I been instructive," Juhani said. "It was in the days of fairy tales, when there were lots of animals and lots of forests and little girls went wandering in different worlds at night."

"Last time the girl was sleeping next to a big elk."

"Hmmm. What happened to her then?"

"Yes, what happened to her then?"

"No doubt fall came..."

"Don't say 'No doubt.' Tell what happened then."

"Fall came and the elk hunters were on the move. The elk population had multiplied in the land..."

"What's the elk population?"

"The number of elk. That is, there were so many elk that more hunting permits were sold than usual. The elk ate seedlings and caused traffic accidents. So it was decided to decrease their numbers markedly, which meant that in the fall hunting season a whole lot of them would be shot down."

"I know you're going to tell something sad, but go ahead. Just don't mind if I cry."

"Do you want me to give the story a happy ending? Stories can have any kind of ending at all. And even if I should tell a sad story, you have the right to make up your own happy ending or whatever kind you want for it. And besides, a story can have lots of endings. Lots of stories end and so there are lots of endings and all different ones."

“Now you’re spoiling everything. Tell what happened when hunting season began.”

“On day the hunters saw the unusually large and beautiful elk that the girl had slept next to on fall nights, and they started chasing it. It escaped over swampy bogs into dark underbrush where it thought it would be safe, but the dogs tracked it and the hunters encircled it and kept it surrounded for many days, because it had managed to hide itself in a very hard to reach place in the backwoods.”

“And still the girl snuck to it every night without the hunters even noticing and slept against its warm side.”

“Precisely.”

“And one night when the hunters got close to the elk, they saw the child sleeping next to it...”

“Exactly. Go on.”

“No. You go on.”

“When the hunters saw the child next to the elk, they thought, this is certainly unusual. We can’t kill an elk like this one that’s protecting a child. And they decided to let the elk live, and they went away.”

The girl had stopped digging in the sand and was listening, motionless. When she heard Juhani’s last words, she threw herself down on her stomach, buried her face in the ground and started kicking so hard the sand swirled up over both of them.

“No, no!” she screamed, furious. “Now you spoiled everything anyway! You were trying to please me. You thought I’d believe that. That’s not what the hunters did. Just the opposite – they thought, now we’ll get a handsome and unusual catch! First we’ll shoot the elk and then we’ll grab the girl, too, she won’t have any protection and she’ll be easy to catch. And then we’ll whip her for running away from home to live with the animals. She’s a bad girl and we don’t have to feel sorry for her.”

Juhani sat up, his eyes full of sand, and tried to calm the child, but she was crying and screaming so hard that she didn’t hear a word he said. So Juhani let her cry. He cleaned the sand out of his eyes while he waited for her to quiet down.

“I hate you!” the girl announced, not looking at Juhani, when she had calmed down, and she began digging another hole in the sand next to him.

“That’s a shame,” said Juhani. “It’s a shame to hear after being apart so long. But that’s how life is. First you love and then you hate, or maybe just get tired of. Relationships don’t last forever, or very few do, and even those get ended by death.”

The girl stopped digging sand and raised her tear-streaked face. “Do you still like Mommy?” she asked.

Juhani was quiet a long time. Then he said, “That’s hard to say anymore, now. Yes, in some strange way and for some incomprehensible reason, I do still like her. But a very large part of that liking is – how

should I put it – sort of like pain. Lingering pain, if you know what that means.”

“I know. Mummo had an operation and she had lingering pain.”

“Exactly. But if I can speak frankly with you, I hope I will grow totally free of her, so she isn’t in my thoughts anymore.”

“Then there’s no point in my hoping that Mommy will start to like you again.”

“There’s no point hoping that.”

“Or my father.”

“Has your mother seen him?”

“No. Mommy hates him. And she detests you.”

“Where is she now? Though I shouldn’t ask.”

“In Hammerfest with some jerk. I would have told you even if you didn’t ask. I know you’re still interested, anyway. That’s why you come to see me.”

“Jaana. I don’t come to see you because of your mother. I don’t want to meet your mother anymore. What was between us is over, ended. Is that clear?”

“Then why do you come to see me?”

Juhani turned the child’s face toward his, wiped off most of the sand, and squeezed the small chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I don’t know, Jaana. To tell the truth, I don’t know. And now I am being as honest with you as one person can be to another.”

“I know why,” said Jaana. “You come because I like you and you don’t have kids of your own yet. The elk didn’t have children of his own, either, did he, and that’s why he liked the little girl.”

“Mmmm. That could have been it.”

“Let’s say it was.”

“Okay. I’d have a slightly different ending to the story, now. You misunderstood me. I’m not thinking quite so prettily.”

“What kind of ending?”

“It turned out that hunting season ended and the hunters had not found the elk. That happens. Some always make it through alive, in fact, a rather large percentage. This elk of ours made it, that’s not unrealistic. Life is full of happy occurrences, too. But the little girl grew and one day she realized she would have to be able to live with people, too, and, when necessary, to sleep by herself. So she stopped her night wanderings.”

“Then what?”

“She became a wildlife activist. And sometimes even as an adult it happened to her that some elk in the forest would let her come quite close and would show himself to her in all his beauty. She was no longer sure whether it was her elk or not, but she knew that she was known in the forest. The animals told one another about her.”

“Did she tie herself to a backhoe so the wetlands wouldn’t get drained?”

“She did. And she did lots more that was equally inventive and courageous. She turned into the kind of person who is considered a little strange, but she was happy in her own way. But what it was that made her happy is hard to define.”

“Is it sort of a really silly feeling?”

“It is.”

“I hoped that you and Mommy would get married. Then I would have been happy. But now it looks as if Mommy’s going to marry the jerk.”

“Really? Is your mother getting married?”

“That’s how it looks. But that’s how it looked with you back then, too. Maybe we won’t be able to meet anymore then. Unless we start meeting secretly.”

“That would hardly be wise for either of us. And it would be extremely difficult.”

“When I was younger I used to imagine that we could get married, but now I know it won’t work. You need someone older.”

“And you, someone younger.”

“I can’t stand young boys. They’re all brats!”

“Maybe that will take care of itself in time. Could you please dig me out of the sand now so we can go have ice cream?”

“When do you think you can come the next time? Say even approximately. Although children do prefer exact promises.”

Juhani gave a laugh.

“Don’t laugh. It may be that this is the last time we meet.”

“Then I don’t dare promise anything.”

“Go ahead and promise. Say when you’ll come if Mommy doesn’t call you and forbid you to meet me anymore.”

“Has your mother threatened to do that?”

“Yes.”

“Then I really don’t dare promise anything.”

“But say when, if she doesn’t call.”

“Well, maybe a week from now, in that case. But if she really does forbid me to meet you, I’m powerless. She has the right to forbid it if she wants to. Even if I were your father, she would have the right.”

“When I grow up I’m going to look for my own father.”

“Hmmm. I don’t have anything to say to that.”

“You don’t have to. I’m just going to look. And nobody can stop me. I know he’ll be glad. Tell me what time you’re coming, if you come.”

“Well, probably around the same time as now. Okay?”

“Okay. I’ll run away from anywhere on earth...”

Juhani again turned the girl’s face to him. “Jaana, look me in the eyes and promise me that you won’t run away from anywhere at all. People run away in fairy tales and in daydreams. But if you start running away, I guarantee you that we can’t meet at all. Promise me you’ll

wait like a good girl, and I'll do all I can so we can meet as we have up till now."

So there it was promised, now, and all the plans about slowly sliding apart and getting free of the past went the way of the sea wind and vanished over the horizon.

"Do you promise?"

The girl nodded.

"And now let's go find our ice cream and have some hot dogs, too."

"But tell me why you came to see me?"

"It's hard to explain. I like you, but there's more to it, too, a whole lot more..."

"Is it that same sort of a silly feeling, too?"

"Yes. That's it exactly."

"Good," said the girl.

When they came back to the yard, Juhani waited while the girl went inside to see if her grandmother had returned yet. It felt more honest to Juhani to explain their outing face to face and show himself openly. It's true the idea that Kirsi might have come home and he might suddenly find himself eye to eye with her frightened him a little. He still didn't really feel he could bear meeting Kirsi yet, not even now, even though whatever had once been between them was already more than a year ago. This whole time he had been meeting Jaana, who had grown attached to him during the two years he and Kirsi had been together.

The girl returned with Juhani's note in her hand. No one had come home while she'd been away. Juhani crumpled the note and stuck it in his pocket.

The other children had already disappeared. The girl stood with her hands behind her back.

"Go really fast, but turn to wave," she said.

Juhani did.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. The following poems are excerpts from *Straying from Luminosity*.

Two Poems / Ernest Hekkanen

I Did This

Who crushed the infant's head
with a blow so mighty
eyes popped out of sockets?

Who raped the women,
young and old alike,
not once but a thousand times?

Who burned the houses
but left the clothes hanging
on the line?

Who dropped the bombs?
Who unleashed the missiles?
Who murdered the villagers
as they crossed the bridge
to market?

Who looted? Who beheaded his neighbor
and left him there to gawk
bodiless
beside the city gate?

I did.
I and my comrades did this.
I, your good neighbor
who went to mass
who prostrated in the mosque
who donned his skull cap
who genuflected, who prayed.
It was I, I who used the correct word
for bread.

I eviscerated the young woman.
I disemboweled the young man.
I disgorged the heavy bombs

which blackened the sky.
 It was I. I did this.
 I let my bitterness
 be used like a tool.
 I listened to the demagogues
 who promised me more of this
 and more of that
 if I got rid of my neighbors
 over there.

I fed like a dog upon the lies.
 I let my rancor be used.
 I, a civilized man
 who once wrote poetry
 who once played the classical guitar
 who once attended soccer matches
 who once went to theater
 who once shouted bravo at operas
 who once played chess outside the tavern
 who once held a flag high
 at political rallies.

I did this. I stuck my neighbor's head
 atop the stanchion
 for all to see.
 I flung the baby against the wall.
 I held down the village girl
 while my comrades in arms
 took turns
 plowing
 that which wasn't theirs to plow.

It was I. I did this. I let myself
 be used
 by those who said
 I would be better off
 without my neighbors
 down the street.

I cheered on my compatriots,
 who were as vicious as I.
 I let myself be employed
 like a machete
 like an anti-tank gun
 like an Uzi
 and now,

now I can't trust my neighbors
 not to act
 the same way
 as I.

I listen. I wait for people
 to betray themselves
 each time they utter
 the word for bread.
 Bread tells me everything
 I need to know.
 It tells me who can be trusted
 and who can't.
 It tells me who to break a crust with
 and who must be denied a crust.

I did this. I made it impossible
 to endure my neighbor. It was I,
 a civilized man
 a man who didn't have enough
 a man whose fields grow the grain
 that's ground and baked
 into bread
 I now sell at this stall.

I made a battlefield of this earth,
 right here.
 I fenced it off with corpses.
 I did this, I who sang in the choir
 I who attended mosque
 I who went to temple
 I who believed my cause was right.

It was I. I did this.
 I, a civilized man
 well-versed in literature.
 I let others use my hatred.
 It was I. I did this.
 I brought to ruin
 that which was best
 in me.

Journey to Milarepa's Cave

Today in my mind I am climbing
 the mountainside to Milarepa's cave.
 Air is cold, rocks are slippery with ice
 and there's a fresh crust of snow
 covering the ground, making it difficult
 to find my way. Nothing deters me.
 My stride is strong, my footsteps are sure,
 my breath billows in frosty plumes before my face;
 for today I am going to see the Great Cotton-Clad One;
 I am about to ferret out the Great Green-Glowing One
 in his cave.

In my mind, I am ascending the mountainside
 to Milarepa's cave. I am going to ask him
 how a man who practiced sorcery in his youth
 could reach enlightenment,
 apparently in one lifetime.

I am going to put it to him thus:
 Oh Great Green-Glowing One,
 Oh Great Cotton-Clad One,
 exactly how did you cause
 stallions to mount mares
 and mares to kick out,
 until the posts and beams
 of your uncle's house
 sprang like ribs from a sea-battered ship;
 how could you crush
 thirty-five people
 in the rubble beneath your auntie's house
 and yet attain enlightenment,
 apparently in one lifetime?

I am going to ask him straight out:
 Oh Great Nettle-Eating One,
 Oh Great Green-Glowing One,
 exactly how did you cause
 lightning to flash and thunder to rumble;
 how did you cause the Maroon-faced Dza
 to be heard in your magic cell;
 how did you call forth hail
 from your avenging fingertip;
 how did you provoke that hail

to rise to the height
of three courses of brick,
causing harvests to be lost
and mountains to slide
down upon villagers;
and yet apparently,
in one lifetime,
attain enlightenment?

I am going to put it to the Great Cotton-Clad One,
to the Great Green-Glowing One
in his cave:

I, too, have bent the world to my will;
I, too, have caused harvests to fail,
floods to rage down gorges
and machines to fly out of the sky.
I, too, have called forth hail from my fingertip,
have bombed peasants crossing bridges to market,
and have raped women as part of the spoils.
I, too, have put kinks in my karma
that desire undoing.
I, too, would like to shine
with the same luminosity
as you yourself.

Now in my mind I have reached
the entrance to Milarepa's cave.
In my imagination I am crawling
through a narrow opening
between icy rocks;
however, when I do,

the Great Cotton-Clad One,
the Great Nettle-Eating One
pops like an angry bear out of his cave,
hurls me down the slope,
throws rocks at my head,
and then moons me
with his green-glowing butt,
speaking thus:

Do you see these calluses?
Do you know how they got to be there?
That's the path to luminosity, my boy.
That's what it takes to shine.
Now build me a tower
over there,
one that is ten storeys high.

I want it finished to perfection
by the end of the week.

His green-glowing haunches resemble a rhino's,
his green-glowing face peers upside down
between his green-glowing thighs,
and his green-glowing tongue wags thus:

Come on, young fellow,
hop to it.
Either that, or get off
my mountainside.

LEENA KROHN has written about twenty books – novels, short stories, fantasy stories for children, poems, essays and radio plays. A collection of stories and essays, *Matemaattisia olentoja tai jaettuja*, was awarded the Finlandia Prize in 1992. The following two stories are from *Pereat mundus* (1998).

HELENA DARNELL. Born in Finland, 1951. Lived in the U.S. since 1975. Freelance translating and writing with a special interest in literature. Publications: *Dimension*, University of Texas, Austin, 1994; *Kielikannas-Language Link*, Michigan, 1996; *World Literature Today*, University of Oklahoma, 1993-present. She lives in Missoula, Montana.

The Breathers

Leena Krohn

translated by Helena Darnell

HÅKAN, TOO, was one of the Breathers. The doctrine of the Breathers was spreading throughout the nation. The Breathers lived just like the holiest of writings told people to live: they were satisfied with little, unselfish, generous, and patient. They respected previous generations and their accomplishments. They didn't count their working hours; they cared for their children, the elders, and the sick.

The families of the Breathers voluntarily had only one or two children. They objected to the use of all weapons. They had given up their bad habits: private cars, the use of alcohol, sex outside of marriage, shopping, the eating of meat, bad-mouthing, and coffee.

The Breathers recycled everything that could possibly be recycled. They gave their old clothes to charity and their used newspapers to paper recycling.

The Breathers had founded ethical financial institutions and banks which gave out loans with just a nominal interest. They most willingly offered loans to people without any collateral, which is to say, to the very poorest.

The Breathers worked ceaselessly for world peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, and a clean environment.

They believed that before too long everyone would have opportunities for education, that mass unemployment, hunger, and poverty would soon disappear thanks to their efforts. They would live in paradise.

"I don't believe that," said Håkan's father, a former carpenter. "Not in the least. You are really dreaming. Quite the contrary. Don't be so

ungodly selfish. You think you are righteous but your piety is moronic, utter weakness.”

Håkan, like the other Breathers, had excluded from his diet not only meat, milk, fish and eggs, but also nuts and vegetables. Most of the Breathers managed to survive on fruit alone, of which they consumed only surprisingly small quantities.

Many decided to give up even the fruit. They were the Hyper Breathers. They strove to become one with the universe and believed that they could live like plants, with just air and sunshine. This growing elite group gathered at sunrise in different holy places around the city, usually on hills or open fields. They were called Refineries.

Lately more and more new Refineries had been dedicated. In the Refineries the Hyper Breathers meditated as they sipped from their water bottles. Their fast was absolute. They believed that the sun gave to them – like it did to the plants – all the energy they needed. It was simple, quite automatic: they only needed to breathe. The only other thing that was necessary was clean water.

Håkan, too, had decided to join the Hyper Breathers. Håkan’s old father was enraged when his son told him about his decision. Håkan was afraid his father would hit him.

“Do I have to watch my only son die for such lunacy?” he asked.

“I don’t plan to die at all,” Håkan said. “I am in better shape than ever.”

“So, you are? And getting better yet? White like an olm and barely thicker than a rope. When is the last time you ate?”

“I don’t eat,” Håkan said, smiling meekly. “I breathe.”

“Dear God, I am going to get you into treatment,” the father ranted. “Intravenous feeding, that’s what I say. What is the world coming to? It will come to an end at this rate; the human race will disappear from the earth.”

“Would that be so unfortunate?” Håkan asked.

“Don’t be so goddamn sheepish!” his father yelled. “Try to become a man finally! Don’t you understand that the world doesn’t turn because of virtues? A small amount of what is called evil is also needed; money, flesh and sex, fighting and war, blood and sweat, tears and profanity are needed. The world needs them just like it needs mud slides, forest fires, floods, volcanic eruptions, ice ages, earthquakes. Part of the human race will always be their victim, and that is horrible. But without these kinds of upheavals, nothing will ever get renewed. Therein lies the future of the world.”

“Your doctrine is horrible,” Håkan said. “I will choose death over following that kind of teaching.”

After that Håkan never visited with his father again. He moved and didn’t give his father a forwarding address. All contact between them was over.

In the mornings he got up remarkably early, filled his water bottle, and wandered over to a Refinery on the other side of the city. At sunrise the Breathers already had to be on the hill in order to be able to receive all the energy they needed. Håkan prayed with the other Breathers and bowed to the rising star, their only source of life.

Despite the devotions, he felt weaker each day. One morning he could no longer get up before sunrise. Håkan had a dream in which he was still a boy and was walking with his father in an autumn forest. It had just rained and the sunshine danced through the pine bows on the mossy hills. Father picked lingonberries, and Håkan gathered mushrooms. There were lots of them: slippery jacks, penny buns, milk caps, chanterelles.

“We’ll have potatoes with mushroom sauce today,” father said, “and we’ll make some lingonberry sauce.”

Håkan felt an incredible hunger arise within. It was a relentless and primitive craving; it was a passion which couldn’t be harnessed or tamed. The sun caught fire inside Håkan. It was the clean and hot flame of his body, the final truth about his flesh.

LEENA KROHN (see page 56)

HELENA DARNELL (see page 56)

Vita Nuova

Leena Krohn

translated by Helena Darnell

THERE WAS AN August sunflower on the kitchen windowsill. Håkan's wife had cut it out of the garden and put it in the vase. In the middle of his reading, Håkan stopped to stare at the disk of the flower, the spirals of its heart. In his mind he began to count the stamens of the flower. Their design reminded him of horn-shaped mussels and rings of dead trees, dodecagons of snowflakes, stripes of a tiger and spots of a leopard, the symmetry of a starfish and the waves of sand dunes, ellipses of the planets and the repetition of meteor showers. When he looked at the flower, he heard the gallop of a horse and the rhythm of human steps.

Håkan's wife poked her head into the kitchen and said: "Håkan, time to go."

Håkan was only three when he learned his numbers. He could add and subtract three and four-digit figures when he was four. Soon Håkan got interested in timetables; he became absorbed in them like other children do in cartoons.

As a school child, Håkan had noticed that nearly all flowers had a certain number of petals: lilies had three, buttercups five, larkspurs eight, marigolds thirteen, asters twenty-one, and daisies thirty-four. Håkan also knew flowers that had fifty-five or even eighty-nine petals. The pattern was remarkable in that the number was always the sum of the two previous numbers.

"Dad, let's go already," Håkan's son called from the yard.

"Right away," Håkan answered absentmindedly.

In nature Håkan found patterns, designs, and constancies: in the starry sky and the microcosms, in the climate and the shapes of creatures, and in the movements of phenomena, as well as in society, stock markets, and crime statistics. There were numerical or geometric regularities where one could admire the esthetics of absolute purposefulness and the beauty of necessity.

And the more familiar one became with the numbers, the more astonishing they proved to be. Why the numbers were what they were was something that puzzled Håkan endlessly.

He was constantly counting in his mind. But he was a person of very few words. Words were far less necessary than most people thought.

“Dad! Come on, we’re going,” called Håkan’s daughter.

The world was not a language; it was based on numbers, series, codes, and formulas. Language and words were secondary, even marginal. They belonged to human beings only, but had very little to do with nature itself. What concerned human beings was not of any lasting interest to Håkan.

To him the only natural – nature’s own – language was mathematics. Håkan believed that the usual human thought process, the constant inner speech, was an immense waste of energy. It consumed the greatest part of the brain’s memory and ability to count.

It was a joy to observe that what was discovered, in fact, existed. There were no natural numbers in nature; nevertheless, they were there, hidden and invisible, but necessary.

“Håkan!”

Mathematics was also Håkan’s spiritual exercise, but he didn’t mention that to anyone. It professed of the truth of God to him.

There was an August sunflower, a labyrinth of summer on the kitchen windowsill. It was beautiful like all flowers are beautiful. They possessed a dizzying light and thirst. Everything that they had received from the sun, they passed on unselfishly.

Then Håkan got to thinking about Julia’s flowers, which were not real flowers at all. Julia’s flowers were mathematical pictures or fractals which repeated themselves, always according to the same principle. They were principles, but at the same time they were animals, human beings, and metaphors. Their disks and spiral branches repeated themselves infinitely.

In the patterns of the fractals, Håkan saw evolution, growth and infinity as a mathematical metaphor, from which burst forth the wildflower of real life. He detected the outlines of insects, mollusks, and coelenterates in them. Their symmetry repeated the shapes of organic nature, the designs of ice and snow, surging waves, smoke and clouds, down and hairs, feathers and tendrils. In them was a picture of the secret of life for anyone to see, almost always the same, yet renewing each moment, all at peace, yet in fierce motion.

They were maps of the entire truth, misleading mazes which continued from one scale to the next. The world of small things was the same as that of the large ones, and human beings were caught in between the two. Their eternity was not limited by size or time but by the mind itself.

“Håkan! Can’t you hear?”

The sunflower was a landscape of eternity. Its disk gave flight to spiral galaxies; it spread forth the spore dust, communities and families. That was where species were born and became extinct.

As Håkan thought about the life he had lived, he imagined he saw in these events – in his own deeds and negligences – the outlines of the same big picture. How was it drawn and whose will was behind it? What presence and power expressed itself both through coincidences and his own choices? Håkan observed it in both his fortunes and his misfortunes. He saw it in well thought-out deeds and happenstances, in yesterdays and in tomorrows.

It was as if something was calling for him and him alone, and he discerned the echo of his name, which was repeated in whispers, loud calls, and gesticulations.

There was no end. Where there was disintegration, integration began. Where the end loomed, there was a new beginning, a newborn life, *vita nuova*.

“Mom told me to come and get you,” Håkan’s daughter said. She took Håkan by the wrist with her fingers, and Håkan followed her like a sleepwalker, still deep in thought.

There was an August sunflower on the kitchen windowsill.

HENTRY LAHTI is a translator, writer, actor, folkdancer and the inspiration behind Finland Canada Connected.

The Little Red Truck

Henry Lahti

EVERYTHING WAS coming to an end. The day, the job, the relationship. Ossi breathed a contented sigh of relief. Three o'clock. He had survived the heat of another summer's day. Ten feet more of eave-trough to paint and that task, too, would be only something to sometimes recall. Another day passed without words, without tension, destined to end that way. No reason for anyone's feathers to be ruffled anymore.

And as to the future? Surely that would resolve itself.

For the moment Ossi was pleased just to breathe in and out, to dab at the rotted, thin metal with his brush, exerting so little effort that it almost made him feel ashamed, or concerned that he might be endangering the sublime peace that he and Anna had at last established.

Anna stepped into the empty carport.

Ossi's rubber-booted legs and torso were wrapped around the top half of an extension ladder. A gallon of paint hung heavily from the hooked and crooked fingers of his paint-spattered left hand while a round, bespectacled, old-man's face peered sternly into the cracks and crannies that an equally befouled right hand was sealing with a heavy slug-green paint. A small, crooked mouth monitored the work, the lips pursing and tightening in response to effort and success. Tufts of thin, gray hair had escaped from under the reversed baseball cap and now fluttered haphazardly about his ears like a broken and fallen halo.

Anna was not impressed.

"I need a ride to Barb's," she said. "Johnny's got my Landrover," she added, an unnecessary explanation.

“Okay,” Ossi said, pleased by the fact that there had been no inference of his going anywhere, except as chauffeur.

As he stepped down from the ladder he looked at her. She was still beautiful. She took good care of herself. Too bad she was so hard. Even now she was well dressed and groomed, full of life and energy; but it was all locked into herself, cemented into hard and fast attitudes. There was no softness or flexibility in those hands, in those long fingers with their red-enameled nails that even now clicked and snapped together at the corners of her straight-drawn mouth.

“I’ll get the truck,” he said.

Ossi and Anna had always had different opinions as to what constituted a proper way of living. Still, their lives had developed rather well during the sixties and seventies, only to crash as the years of change and upheaval began to mark the end of the century and millennium.

But it was around that insignificant little red truck that their differences had really crystallized.

God knows where he had found it!

“Good, cheap transportation,” he had said.

“A joke,” she had said, laughing her cold, hard laugh. But still laughing, in the beginning. And it really was quite humorous to see Ossi dressed in coveralls and ball cap put-putting up the hill, because that’s exactly the sound that the motor made with its one leaking valve. But soon the humor of it was lost on Anna.

Right from the beginning, the truck had understood the situation. It had read Ossi at a glance. A big, brawny man, well past middle age, ready to step off the treadmill. Family grown up, married, moved off, fortune made, mostly blown away, a little saved; tired and pissed off with this useless struggle; prepared to slow down, relax.

“Just my type,” thought the truck, “no more pedal-to-the-metal jackrabbit starts; lots of rolling down dusty back roads to overgrown little lakes, hauling at best a hundred-and-fifty pounds of gear, then just lolling around in the sun. Probably will stay at home on rainy days. No logging roads, that’s for sure. No chaining up for ski trips into the high country.”

With Anna, it would have been another story.

“I wouldn’t want to butt bumpers with that one. Past fifty, but hard and mean as nails. Let that senseless, tight-assed all-terrain keep her company. I’m too old to be punched out, revved up and second shifted shooting down some ten-percent grade. Funny how some people mature so late. Some never make it. Super-achievers. Moms, pops, gran-nies and granddads, rushing right into the grave.”

The truck realized it would play an important role in Ossi’s life. It knew what the man wanted, and needed, and it empathized with him in those needs. Besides, as old-fashioned and macho as it might sound, in their relationship the man was the master, it said so right there on the transfer papers. The truck accepted that.

However, the truck also respected the primary importance of meaningful relationships between humans in the universal scheme of things. It knew full well how tragic it was for everyone, and everything, when these failed. So every opportunity had to be given for this relationship to succeed, and the truck was fully committed to this task.

Every day it did everything it could to play the part of a trusted, reliable and worthy servant to both man and woman. Every light, accessory, and function that it had been endowed with at birth worked without fail at the slightest urging. Even Ossi was surprised at the strange beeps, buzzings, flashings and reactions that happened, particularly whenever Anna acquiesced to ride with him, usually to protect her four-wheeled queen from rough road or weather.

The coolant indicator and the oil pressure gauge, both old-fashioned and read in increments on a dial, offered the most reassuring declarations of perfect function and order. The gas gauge hardly moved at all, even after hours of driving. The brakes never squealed, but applied themselves uniformly. The gears never argued with each other, but cooperated in the most synchronistic way.

The old truck truly did its very best to conduct itself with decorum and elegance in order to maintain its position. It was, however, fully aware that in a head-to-head contest with the likes of Anna's all-terrain, it would at best come out second best. And it was because of this awareness that it resorted to a more subtle tactic. It humored the lady with certain displays of recklessness, nonchalance and informality, thereby diverting her overly severe fixations, much as the medieval jester might have soothed his lord's and lady's impatience with each other.

And often, it did seem that Anna's mind might soften, that she might release her grip, let go of the lifestyle that she clung to so tenuously. Then the truck would take pride in believing that it too had contributed to these moments of enlightenment. But, alas, even though there were some small victories, or at least stalemates, the campaign was not being won. Anna would always retreat into the cocoon of her house and emerge again just as cool and distant as ever.

Ossi brought the truck around from its special backyard stall to the head of the driveway. Now it perched on the brow of the deep descent that led down the winding access road. The handbrake was set tight. The truck purred, its body vibrating slightly. The red and rusted paint job was perhaps dull, but it was spotlessly clean in the long rays of the afternoon sun.

Suddenly the truck was filled with great pride. At this moment it could not help but imagine itself to be no less than the perfect mechanical being.

Anna sat on the passenger's side of the bench seat and studied the sparseness of the weathered, imitation-leather interior. She frowned.

Ossi noted the frown, but ignored it. The truck was too intent on its own strategies to notice.

Ossi released the handbrake carelessly. The truck compensated by beginning its descent so carefully, and with such delicacy, that not a single pebble on the graveled driveway was disturbed; not a squeak of steel against steel; not the springing of a spring. It was sheer magic! Mechanical perfection!

And then, the soft lispings puffs of energy from that one faulty valve, the stuttered joke of the jester, a playfully whispered admonishment meant for Anna's ear: puff, puff, puff.

"Listen, Anna, listen! Nothing is perfect. Everything has its flaws! But how insignificant they are, when compared to the whole."

And Anna laughed! The truck heard Anna laughing! She was laughing at the jester's joke!

Anna's face softened, her whole body laughing as she listened to that silly, soft sound. Her eyes smiling and tearful, she quietly nodded her assent, moved by the wealth of natural vitality softly brushing against her cheek through the half-open and scratched-up window and by this strange, gray-haired fellow, dressed in coveralls and baseball cap, who firmly cranked the stiff steering wheel and seemingly guided this fine little vehicle.

MICHAEL MÄKELÄ, a veterinarian in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, writes plays for the local theater and short stories about a veterinarian named Arvo Airola. What follows is Scene One of a full-length play entitled *All You Need to Know About Sisu*.

All You Need To Know About Sisu

Michael Mäkelä

Characters

Pekka

Father of the Sisunen family. Middle fifties. Gruff. Something of a buffoon. Runs a construction business.

Toivo

The first son. Blond. Muscular. Macho. Not terribly bright. Works for his father and has absorbed many of the old man's values.

Heikki

The second son. A college boy who is often referred to as Aristotle-puss. Dark. Twenty years old. Slighter than Toivo. He takes exception to the values of his father and older brother.

Sanna

Mother of the Sisunen household. Favors her son, Heikki. Tries to encourage his artistic temperament without incurring the wrath of her husband.

Cheryl

Wife of Toivo. Vastly pregnant. Her favorite activity is bowling. She and Toivo would make great tag-team wrestling partners.

Scene One

[The stage lies in darkness. We hear laughter, incidental conversation, the clanking of dinner plates. After the first few lines of dialogue have been uttered, the lights start to come up. We will see a sideboard and a long table, suggesting a kitchen.]

Toivo

I could use some more potatoes down this way. Another one of those pork chops, too.

Cheryl

Can you say please – with that.

Toivo

Okay, please with that.

Cheryl

You know what I mean, Toivo.

Toivo

[exasperated]

PLEASE send the potatoes and pork chops down this way. I'm hungry. The old man worked me almost to death today.

Pekka

Work. You guys don't know the meaning of the word 'work'.

[By now, the lights have risen to half-brightness. A spot picks out Heikki just as he is about to utter his first line. Sanna is standing off to one side, staring out an imaginary window, trying to ignore the conversation.]

Heikki

[as though in an aside]

I'm sure you're going to tell us, though – huh, Dad?

Pekka

[gruffly, with a challenge in his voice]

What's that, Aristotle-puss? What did you just say?

Heikki

I said ... I'm sure you're going to tell us – what the meaning of work is – according to you, anyway.

Pekka

You've come back from college with a really smart tongue, I see...

Heikki

Isn't that why you sent me there ... to get educated?

Pekka

Being educated is one thing. Being a smart aleck is another. You were being a smart aleck just now.

Heikki

Well, pardon me. Pardon me for living.

Pekka

We weren't talking about living, Heikki. We were talking about work. Work defines your character. Work makes you worth something in this world.

Heikki

Work is the force necessary to overcome resistance. That's the real definition of the word 'work' ... the scientific definition, I mean ... the one you sent me to university to learn.

Pekka

Leave it up to my smart-aleck son to know what the definition of the word 'work' is.

Toivo

For him, I think it's more a matter of how much resistance he can get out of applying himself to. That's what I think.

Heikki

I put in as much effort as you did today.

Toivo

Like hell you did. You were still toying around with that dinky little wall by the alcove ... long after I finished nailing together the long one at the front.

Heikki

I'm out of stride, that's all.

Toivo

You've always been out of stride, Heikki, my boy. Always.

Pekka

[contemplating Heikki for a long moment]

Tomorrow, I think I'm gonna change your work description, Sunny Jim. I think I'm gonna get you to do something you've got a real talent for.

Toivo

Like what – sitting around on his butt?

Heikki

I didn't sit around on my butt. Not once.

Toivo

You might as well have ... for all the good you did.

Heikki

It was my first day back on the job. I'll get into the rhythm of it. Don't worry.

Toivo

That's not what worries me, little brother. What worries me is how much damage you're gonna do in the meantime.

[a pause]

Pekka

So, what do you think we should get him to do – huh, Toivo?

Toivo

Something must need some digging ... somewhere.

Pekka

Yeah, Heikki's pretty good with a shovel, now, isn't he?

Toivo

He's excellent when you give him a shovel and tell him where to dig. Excellent.

Pekka

Better than any gopher, in fact.

Toivo

Much better than any gopher.

Pekka

Give him a shovel and he's happier than a pig in shit, in fact.

Toivo

A shovel and a pile of shit really go together, when it comes to Heikki.

Pekka

I'll say they do. I'll say they do.

Sanna

[turning toward the table]

Is everybody ready for dessert?

Pekka

Excuse me? What was that?

Sanna

I said, is everybody ready for dessert?

Toivo

What's on the menu? Anything good?

Sanna

Rhubarb pie. If you want, you can have it with ice cream.

Toivo

Sure, I'll bite.

Pekka

Me, too.

Cheryl

[rising from the table]

I'll clear the table for you, Sanna.

Sanna

Thanks, Cheryl. That would be very kind of you...

[looking at Heikki]

How about you, Heikki? Would you care for some dessert?

Heikki

No thanks. I'm stuffed.

Toivo

Me, I'm stuffed, but I'm still gobbling.

Cheryl

That's because you're such a turkey, my dear.

Toivo

I don't hear you complaining about how I use my waddles, honey, so I must be doing something right.

Sanna

Toivo! Do you always have to be so crude?

Toivo

Sorry, Ma. It was too good to pass up.

Cheryl

Rude, crude and ugly. That's my husband.

Toivo

Rude and crude, I'll admit to. No woman has ever called me ugly, though.

Cheryl

You're such an egotist, my dear.

Heikki

A megalomaniac, is more like it.

Toivo

[glowering at Heikki]

It's just like my little brother to trot out a big word like megalomaniac – to impress everybody! When it comes to other things, though, you're a bit of a limp fish, if you ask me.

Heikki

What exactly are you referring to, pray tell?

Toivo

Ooo-ooo-ooo! Did you hear that? Heikki wants me to elaborate, PRAY TELL. I wonder where Little Lord Fauntleroy picked up that expression, huh? Certainly not from around here, PRAY TELL, because we're just too damn stupid for words ... especially big words like megalomaniac.

Cheryl

Pretty soon, he'll start wearing breeches and won't want to get his knees dirty.

Toivo

Yeah, and then he'll start carrying a hanky around in his sleeve ... one that's got frills all around it.

Heikki

I think the boors in this family are trying to make fun of me. It's hard to tell, though, because they're being so damn subtle about it.

Toivo

Obviously, too subtle for the likes of a smart boy like you, anyway.

Heikki

Do I detect some envy in your voice, big brother? Is that your problem?

Toivo

My problem is ... I like to work around a guy I can depend on. Not somebody who's gonna screw up in some major sort of way.

Heikki

Are you referring to that wall that nearly got away from me?

Toivo

I sure am, little brother.

Heikki

I didn't expect the wind to grab it. That's all.

Toivo

You're lucky I was there to save the day, otherwise it would've tumbled over the side ... right onto the old man here ... We would've had one squashed Pekka on our hands. No two ways about it.

Sanna

[turning from the counter where she has been cutting pie]

What did you just say, Toivo?

Toivo

I said your youngest son – Little Lord Fauntleroy over there – the one you can't stop pampering – nearly got the old man killed today. That's what I just said.

Sanna

[to Pekka]

Is that right?

Pekka

Toivo's exaggerating ... the way he always does.

Toivo

Hell if I am. If I hadn't of been there to haul back on that wall, it would've flattened you dead, old guy.

Sanna

[looking at her husband]

Is that right, Pekka?

Pekka

[fluttering his right hand]

Yes and no.

Sanna

What's that supposed to mean?

Pekka

It means I wouldn't of been squashed. That's what it means. I had plenty of time to get out of the way.

Toivo

Yeah, sure ... if you were as fast as lightning ... which you aren't.

Sanna

Heikki! How could you have been so careless?

Heikki

I wasn't trying to be careless. The wind came up at the wrong time. That's all.

Toivo

You gotta think about such things, little brother ... especially on a windy site like that one ... otherwise you could get somebody hurt, and hurt bad.

Heikki

I was pushing too hard. *You* were pushing me too hard.

Toivo

Sure, blame it on me. I've got the broad shoulders, right?

Pekka

Okay, drop it, you two. No one got hurt. No one's the worse for wear.

Toivo

Thanks to me, no one's the worse for wear.

Pekka

I said – drop it, Toivo.

Toivo

Okay, next time I'll let it drop ... right on your head, Pa. We'll see how much you like it. We'll see if you survive, even.

Heikki

You know, if you hadn't played the big boss all day long – if you hadn't kept yelling at me to get my ass in gear – none of it wouldn't have happened, Toivo.

Toivo

We have a pace to observe, Aristotle-puss. It's not like at a college where you can waltz along all day long, taking your goddamn time.

Heikki

I'm attending a university ... not a college.

Toivo

Whatever! We've got a pace to observe. We can't just meander along, sniffing the bloody daisies.

Pekka

Okay, that's enough. Break it up, you two. I don't want to hear anymore about today.

Toivo

Yeah, break it up, break it up! That's all I ever hear. Break it up – usually because Heikki over there is on the losing end of things. For crimminy sake, when is it ever gonna change, huh? When do I get to stop compensating ... for him?

Pekka

I told you not to bring the job home with you. I told you to leave it at work.

Toivo

Why, so Mom doesn't have to hear what an ineffectual, little boy Heikki is? Huh, is that why?

Pekka

No, because it doesn't do any good to keep reliving things. Plus, you've exaggerated it all to hell. It wasn't half as bad as you made it out to be.

Toivo

That's because *I* got there in time to save the day. Not because *he* was using *his* head – which is supposed to be so goddamn smart!

Heikki

I'm not cut out to be a construction worker, anyway. I'm cut out for other things.

Toivo

Yeah, like crocheting or something like that – right?

Heikki

I'm not going to dignify that remark by replying to it, big brother.

[*a pause*]

Pekka

[*to Heikki*]

So, what do you mean, you're not cut out to be a construction worker?

Heikki

Just that – I'm not cut out for it. That's what I mean.

Pekka

[*sarcastically*]

What are you cut out for, then? Tell us. PRAY, tell us.

Heikki

Well, if I had my druthers ... if I were to follow my inclinations ... I think I'd become a writer.

Pekka

[*with heavy sarcasm*]

A writer...

Heikki

Yeah, a fiction writer, to be exact.

Pekka

[with even heavier sarcasm]

A fiction writer...

Heikki

Yeah, I took a couple of courses this past year, and I think I've got what it takes.

Pekka

I thought I was sending you to college to become an engineer?

Heikki

I took some writing courses on the side.

Pekka

[coldly]

On the side?

Heikki

Yeah, because the other stuff – the engineering stuff – was boring me to death.

Pekka

[even more coldly]

Boring you to death?

Heikki

Yeah, I don't want to go back to university to become an engineer. It isn't for me.

[There is a long silence.]

Pekka

Somebody tell me I didn't hear what I just heard. Somebody tell me Heikki didn't open his mouth and say what he just said.

Toivo

I wish I could tell you that, Pa, but I'd be lying to you if I did.

Pekka

Maybe I had wax in my ears. Maybe I misconstrued what you were saying, son. What did you just tell me?

Heikki

You heard me, Dad. I said, I'm not going back to university to become an engineer.

Pekka

This time I heard you, alright. This time there was no mistake – none whatsoever.

[slamming his fist on the table, rearing up from his chair and beginning to pace]

Let me see if I've got this right. Let me see if this makes sense. *I* send *you* to university – for two years running – to get an education – because *you're* the smart one in the family – because *you're* so much more intelligent than the *rest* of us here. *I* pay for *your* tuition – two years in a row! *I* foot the bill for *your* rent, *your* food, *your* books, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and *you* pay *me* back by saying *you* don't want to become an engineer. Have I got that right or am I missing something?

Heikki

You've got it right, Dad. I don't want to become an engineer. I don't want to build up the family business – so Sisunen & Son's Construction can become The Sisunen Development Corporation, or whatever you want it to be. That sort of thing doesn't interest me – not one little bit.

Pekka

But writing does?

Heikki

Yes, writing does.

Pekka

For crying out loud, what's wrong with you? Has your cock gone soft or something?

Heikki

[incredulously]

What's my cock got to do with this?

Pekka

Plenty. I raised you to do a man's work. I raised you to have some iron in your soul. Now you tell me you want to become a faggoty little writer. Is that what two years of university does to a person? Huh?

Heikki

You're mixing up your apples with your oranges, Dad.

Pekka

Don't tell me I'm mixing up my apples with my oranges. I'm not the one who wants to become a goddamn writer.

Toivo

I think what the old man is trying to say is this: if you had a little more puck in your net you wouldn't get faggoty ideas about wanting to be a writer.

Heikki

Faggoty ideas!

Toivo

Yeah, that's all literature and stuff like that is, little brother. When you're not getting enough of what makes the world go around – show him what makes the world go around, Cheryl ...

[she obliges by showing off her pregnant belly]

... your head gets soft and you start liking crap that has to do with art and writing and stuff like that.

Heikki

You two are hopeless ... utterly hopeless.

Pekka

But at least we've got plenty of iron in our souls ... plenty of *sisu*.

Heikki

Don't worry. I've got plenty of both in my soul. Plenty.

Pekka

I don't think so, Aristotle-puss. I think you've turned soft through and through. I think maybe you better start walking around in a frilly little tutu.

Heikki

[standing up]

I think I'm going to leave you to your own delusions, thank you.

Pekka

[pointing at the chair vacated by Heikki]

No, you stay! You sit right there and face the music.

Heikki

No, I'm not going to sit right there and face the music. I'm going upstairs to my room.

Pekka

You're trying to provoke me, Heikki! To provoke me!

Heikki

No, I'm not, Dad! I'm trying to tell you that I see life a lot differently than you. I have other places to go, other things to do, and that doesn't include being an engineer.

Pekka

Come back here! Right now.

Heikki

No, I'm going up to my room.

Pekka

The room that's under *my* roof! Under *my* roof, Heikki! Come back here! This instant!

Heikki

No thanks. I can't talk to you when you're like this. It's no use even trying.

[The lights go out.]

ERNEST HEKKANEN is a poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist, playwright, publisher, printmaker, painter and carver. In *The Finnish American Reporter*, Karen Douglas said of *The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn* (New Orphic Publishers, 2001), “Let’s hope we hear more of the foibles of funny Finn-hood from this masterful storyteller.”

The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn

Ernest Hekkanen

Chapter 1

TO UNDERSTAND what I am about to tell you, you must first know that it was spring in these parts of the North Country, with blossoms bursting forth from every branch of every fruit tree around and that, in the spring, blackflies bite like you are a walking delicatessen item meant for them to dine on. The second thing you must know is that Toivo Toivonen was the offspring of Finns born on this side of the Atlantic Ocean and, like for so many of his kind, spring was a pretty harrowing time of year. He felt as if it were trying to burst forth from every square inch of his body and soul; it veritably screeched, in fact.

Only by knowing all of the above would you understand why it was so imprudent of Mel Biggs, the new man down at Svend Sigurdson’s Hardware Store, to sell him that length of rope – about five feet of it, all told – just enough for a man of miserly disposition to hang himself with.

“How much is that gonna cost me?” Toivo had asked Mel, rather gruffly, too, nodding at the thick, yellow cord lying coiled up on the counter. He was squinting at Mel with a bloodshot eye, the swollen lids of which were deepening to purple, due to a drunken brawl he had gotten into with his brother, Tauno, the previous afternoon. Tauno, by all accounts, wasn’t drunk at the time, but was simply trying to beat a little

sense into Toivo's thick head. Tauno, I should tell you, was the younger of the two brothers; he was attending Milwaukee Trinity College with the intention of taking a doctorate in Theology and was righteously indignant over the way Toivo had let the family farm get so run-down over the past couple of years.

"For you, it's six forty-nine," Mel Biggs had told Toivo. "That includes the tax."

"Six forty-nine! – for that?"

"Six forty-nine is what it will cost you, alright. Take it or leave it."

"Put it on my account," Toivo told him.

"Under what name?"

"Toivo Toivonen."

Mel Biggs checked in the drawer where the accounts were kept; he was new not only to the hardware store, but to the town as well, having moved there on account of his wife, Marjorie, who had landed a job at Thunderstruck High School. "Sorry, I can't do that for you," Mel informed Toivo. "It says here, your account's no longer any good – not until you pay what's outstanding on it."

"Listen here, are you trying to give me a hard time, or something?"

"No, I'm just following Mr. Sigurdson's orders, and his orders are not to extend you any more credit – not until you pay up what you owe."

"Guess I'll have to come up with the money somehow."

"Guess you will, alright."

"Be back in a little while. Hold onto that rope for me."

Ω

Toivo had spent one heck of a miserable winter in Thunderstruck. All those dreary, snow-laden, sub-zero months, one thing after another had kept breaking down. First, his chainsaw had seized up – seized up so good the piston had fused to the cylinder wall – then his old Ford pickup truck had blown its transmission, after which the water pump to the Toivonen homestead had frozen solid in the pump house, cracking the block right down the center.

If that had been all that had gone wrong, if that had been all that had screwed up on the farm, well, Toivo could have handled that just fine, but, no, there was more yet to come. His cow keeled over dead in the field during an ice rain that coated her in a thick layer of transparent armor, coyotes plundered his hen house, and his three-hundred and seventy pound hog, affectionately known as Gertrude, having rutted her way into the outhouse, proceeded to fall through the rotten floor boards into the smelly environs below, where she had unceremoniously suffocated upon plunging head first into the muck.

Then, when it felt like it was just about ready to thaw here in the North Country, when it felt like the worst of winter was finally over,

Toivo's girlfriend up and left him – dumped him like he was a sack of moldy, damp flour, which, in fact, he was beginning to feel like, too, because his hot water tank had sprung a leak by this time and he was too darned depressed to melt enough snow to fill the bathtub with water and so clean himself up good and proper-like.

And then, just that morning, about three hours ago now, he was working out near the two-lane highway that went into town, chopping down an old snag, when he spotted Impi-May go by in Daryl Borson's totally refurbished, metallic-blue '69 Camaro SS – sitting really close to the guy, too, she was – and, well, that just kind of topped things off for poor Toivo. Somehow, for some reason he couldn't quite understand, he was reminded of his bitch-dog Irish who had just had a batch of unwanted pups he had had to drown in the middle of the night. Indeed, he could still hear Irish yelping – yelping most fretfully, too, in the barn where he had locked her up. The yelping was like fingernails scratching on the inside of Toivo's skull and it made him feel even more miserable than he already was.

"What's there to live for?" he asked the old snag he was whacking at with a double-bladed ax. The tree was a big fellow, about two and a half feet across and a hundred and some feet tall. He figured the work-out would sober him up. Since waking in a cold sweat just before dawn, he had had the meanest, vilest green-cider headache anyone could possibly imagine. It was the sort of headache that could be cured only with a lot of hard work, followed by a stint in the sauna, which Toivo hadn't fired up in over five months.

He stopped chopping about a quarter of the way through the trunk of that old snag, when he spotted his former girlfriend go by in Borson's metallic-blue Camaro SS. Indeed, upon seeing her, Toivo missed the tree with the blade of the ax and hit it with the ax-handle instead. The resulting vibration made his wrists go numb for a few moments.

"Add insult to injury, why don't you?" he yelled at no one in particular, his hands tingling with pain. "What! – I haven't suffered enough already?"

Nearby neighbors assumed that Toivo was having a conversation with God – the Lutheran God of his parents and his brother.

The ax-handle had broken upon striking the tree. The blade had ricocheted off a boulder and come back to hit him on the shin. His pantleg was cut through by the sharp edge which had also sliced into skin and bone. He was bleeding through the torn fabric – quite profusely, in fact – and suddenly the sight of his own blood was too much for him. No, it didn't make him faint; he had endured many more cuts and bruises than that in his short lifetime. No, it was the fact that the blood, now running down over his boot, was beginning to seep into the soil – soil that had soaked up first his father's and then his mother's life-blood and was now apparently intent upon soaking up his as well, or so

it seemed to him right then. Even Toivo, in his hung-over condition, knew a metaphor when he saw one, and this one was just too much for him to endure.

When he turned and limped off across the field, he had no idea where he was going – not at first, anyway. He walked back to the house, all slump-shouldered and defeated. There, in the mud-room where he usually kicked off his boots and hung up his coat prior to taking a tin cup off its hook and dipping it into a vat of fermenting apple cider in the corner, he discovered, with horrible dismay, that he had drunk the apple cider right down to the bottom of the vat. The only option he could think of right then was to relieve his coffee-can piggy bank of the last few coins it contained and head into town to the Owl Tavern.

He trudged along the two-lane highway in his workboots, trailing the leather laces in the dirt behind him, looking for all the world like he was some tramp who had tramped halfway across the country. He had walked about a mile and a quarter, when he tripped on one of his boot-laces. He lurched forward, grasping for an invisible handle to hang onto, but of course found none. Upon hitting some rocks in the bottom of the ditch, he not only got the wind knocked out of him, but accidentally let go the coins that were clutched in his hand.

Several minutes later, who should come by but his one and only friend, Haygood Tuft – a man who resembled his name, by the way. Haygood pulled his old Chevy pickup truck off onto the gravel shoulder of the highway and got out to ask Toivo what he was doing on all fours in the ditch.

Toivo gazed at him with his puffy left eye. “Looking for what I lost. Got any problems with that, Haygood?”

“Looked to me like you was rutting around for something to eat.”

“I could eat with this, if I was able to find it.”

“Oh yeah, what is it you lost?”

“Some money.”

“How much money?”

“Just some coins, is all.”

“Down on your luck again, are you?” Haygood asked him.

“Just saw my old lady drive off in Daryl Borson’s Camaro, so what do you think?”

“Sounds to me like you’re down on your luck, alright.”

“I’m dead right out of luck, if you ask me.” Toivo turned his head just enough to look at Haygood with his good right eye. “Hey, you ain’t got ten bucks I can borrow off you, do you?”

“Ten bucks?”

“Yeah, ten bucks.”

“How long you want to borrow it for?”

“Not very long. Just until the bank opens up on Monday. I’ll give it back to you then.”

Haygood reached tentatively for the wallet in the left rear pocket of his jeans. It was said in these parts that you could lend a Finn the shirt off your back and would get it back in better shape than when you had lent it, and that went for a money-loan as well. You'd always get your money back, and then some. But Toivo was a bird of another feather. He fancied himself a kind of artist, and maybe he was, too, if you're a fan of the sort of welded-together junk that looks like upright, mangled scrap iron. All of Toivo's so-called sculptures had big For Sale signs hanging from this or that part of them, but none of them ever sold – not one piece, in fact – because, after all, who wants a hunk of rusting scrap iron sitting in the yard? Consequently, Toivo was perpetually short of cash – perniciously short, in fact. He had been known to borrow money from one person in order to pay back someone else.

“Oh, come on, Haygood. I'm a man who's in desperate need.”

“How about five bucks?”

“How about eight bucks?”

“Six?”

“Seven?”

“Okay, seven,” Haygood said. “I'm good for seven bucks, but don't come asking me for any more, not until you give me back what you've borrowed.”

“What are you trying to do – insult me?”

“Seven bucks, and a lift into town. That's all I can afford right now.”

“Okay, I'll take the seven bucks. *And* I'll pay you back. On Monday. You'll see.” Of course, that was before Toivo had decided to hang himself. Later, he would picture his body dangling like an obscene, discolored fruit from the old snag he had been trying to fell, so Impi-May would be sure to see it on driving back the other way in Daryl Borson's metallic-blue Camaro SS.

Shooing blackflies away from his face and neck, Haygood Tuft counted out seven one-dollar bills into Toivo's trembling hand and then drove him into Thunderstruck. I should tell you that on Front Street – that is, the main street that runs through town – there are so many stores owned by Finns you can hardly get yourself served without speaking their language, which is so full of singsong and K-sounds you'd think they were sneezing or else coughing in a Broadway musical of their own making.

Finns came to these parts of the North Country on account of the timber. The way they cleared the land around here gives credence to the old saying that if you give a Finn an ax and a stand of trees, he's happier than a woodchuck chucking wood. Neither sex nor hunger will stop him from swinging his ax. At one time, timber was so plentiful in this region, it would take a person several days to wind his way through the forest before coming into a clearing. The Finns changed all of that. Now there are rolling, green pastures all around these parts, with little

patches of forest in between. As the trees vanished, the Finns became more numerous. Then, it was said, you could throw a rock in any direction and know for certain it would conk a Finn on the head. It isn't so much like that any more, but there are still enough Finns hereabouts for such a stone to hit its mark about a third of the time.

Ω

Upon letting himself out of Haygood Tuft's old Chevy pickup truck, Toivo went straight into the Owl Tavern on the corner of Front Street and Superiorlahti Avenue, the latter of which takes a long, plunging curve down to the shore of Lake Superior. The day was so bright and sunny outside, it took a moment for Toivo's eyesight to adjust to the dim surroundings inside the tavern. Two men looked up from a table where they had just thrown back some rye whiskey and were now settling down to work on a couple of glasses of beer each.

"Well, look who's here. If it isn't old Bumbleberry Finn himself," Gerry MacTavish snarled to his drinking buddy, Doy Larson. Gerry and Toivo had been in high school together. Back when they were on the same wrestling team, MacTavish had had to move down a weight class to avoid wrestling Toivo for the right to represent the team in the one-hundred and forty-five pound division. Since that time, though, both men had put on an extra forty to fifty pounds and probably couldn't have wrestled their way out of burlap bags, even if they'd had wanted to.

Toivo ordered a pitcher of beer from Olga Nyström, who worked the swing shift from three in the afternoon until twelve midnight; then he went to sit in the corner by the window and stared glumly out at the street. Not one thought was twirling around in his head. If one had been twirling around in there, it probably would've made him seasick, judging from the condition he was in, which was one of near-delirium tremens.

Olga set a pitcher of golden-colored beer down on his table and waited to be paid for it. For nearly twelve years she had harbored a flame for Toivo, without knowing precisely why, except that he was sitting on a pretty nice piece of farmland and she figured, with the right woman – a woman like herself, for instance – he could be whipped into pretty good husband stock.

"Dwelling on something?" she asked him.

Had he been dwelling on anything? He couldn't rightfully say. All he knew was that his stomach felt rather sickish and he thought by having a few glasses of beer he could bring himself back into balance, kind of.

He smiled at her rather lamely. "Had to drown my dog's pups last night," he told her, more for something to say than anything else.

"That's why you're so down, huh?"

“That, and some other things. A whole winter’s worth of them, in fact.”

“Are you intending to go to the mid-summer festival up in Iron Spur next month?”

Here, you should know that the Finns are really big into what they call summer solstice festivities; it’s got something to do with their pagan past or some such nonsense.

“Don’t know if I will or not. Don’t know if I’ll even be alive, then.”

“Why do you say that?”

“‘Cause I’m feeling so low a snake could crawl across me, if it wanted to.”

“Well, if you’d like to go with me, I sure could use a partner in the wife-carrying race.”

“You ain’t my wife, Olga.”

“You could pretend for the afternoon that I was. Doesn’t have to be for real, you know.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said, tossing down all his money on the table. “Keep the change.”

Chapter 2

AS TOIVO was pouring himself a glass of beer from the pitcher, he raised his eyes and glanced across the tavern at Olga Nyström who was standing beside the bar, trying to look busy adding up receipts or some such thing. Although she was only five foot three, she had a plentiful bosom and pretty wide hips. Her family hailed from the islands off the Southwest Coast of Finland – Finns of Swedish stock, in other words – and so she had this really bright flaxen hair. She wasn’t bad looking, either; that is, if you were into chunky women with practically no waist to speak of. Toivo didn’t think of himself as the sort of guy who fancied chunky gals, and maybe that was his problem. The sleek-looking ones, the ones who looked like they were a breed of furless ferret – the way Impi-May did, by the way – well, those ones got fed up with Toivo at the first sign of anything going bust, like his pocket book, for instance.

Toivo was so caught up in his thoughts about womankind, he didn’t notice that the beer he was pouring from the pitcher had reached the top of his glass and was now spilling over the side and down onto the table, where it formed a small pool before rolling across the fake wood-grain

Formica tabletop and cascading onto the crotch of his trousers. When the beer finally soaked through his pants and began to run down his leg, he jumped up from the chair with a yelp and sloshed more beer on the table.

Toivo's antics caused Gerry MacTavish and Doy Larson to laugh quite boisterously and uncontrollably at their table across the room. "What's the matter, Bumbleberry? Have you forgot how to stop filling your glass?"

Usually, when someone called him Bumbleberry to his face, Toivo took offense in a major sort of way, sometimes even getting into a fist-cuffs with the individual; but that day he was feeling so glum, so depressed, he found it difficult to rise to the bait. And anyway, given the litany of bad luck that had plagued him not only that winter but for the past several years to boot, he was beginning to think maybe he deserved the title of Bumbleberry Finn. All he could manage to do right then was to look with daggers at MacTavish and Larson and tell them to go frig themselves.

"You go frig your own frigging self, you leftover piece of frigging trash," MacTavish rejoined, hoping he might be able to even up an old wrestling score from the time when they had gone to the same high school. "And frig the horse you frigging rode in on, too."

"Frig whatever you're pouring down your frigging gullets," Toivo shouted back, "and may you choke on the frigging stuff, too."

"Yeah, and frig the pig that gave birth to you in that frigging barn of yours that is frigging falling down, you frigging moron."

At that point, Olga jumped into the mud-slinging fray before it got out of hand. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, would you please watch your tongues. There's a lady present in this establishment."

"Yeah, you heard her, too," said Big Bob, the bartender; he weighed in close to two-hundred and sixty pounds, not a bit of which was fat. "Pipe down in here, otherwise I'll have to throw your stinking hides out that door over there. I mean it, too."

Toivo sat back down on his chair, only to realize he was now sitting in a puddle of beer. He would have gotten to his feet and cursed, but just then he glanced through the window and saw Daryl Borson's metallic-blue Camaro pull up to the curb across the street. Daryl leaned across the front seat of the car to give Impi-May a little peck on the cheek and then both of them got out of the Camaro, Daryl hurrying around the rear end of it to catch up with Impi-May, who was already on her way to Marja-Leena Pakkala's Fine Lingerie Boutique and, by golly, as sure as Toivo was sitting there in the Owl Tavern drinking beer and watching events unfold, the two of them went inside the boutique – hand in hand, no less – looking for all the world like they were fiancée and financier.

The sight of Impi-May and Daryl Borson going into the lingerie shop together was the proverbial straw that broke Toivo's back. He was

thrown into such a state of agonizing despair and loneliness, he finished his beer in record time even for a man like him and proceeded to head up the street to Svend Sigurdson's Hardware Store, where he tried to buy that five foot length of yellow rope, only to discover that his credit with Svend had run out.

Upon leaving the hardware store, he walked with a determined gait up the street to his bank, thinking he might be able to siphon off a little cash by using the automatic teller machine. He fed his card into the slot, punched in his access number and tried to withdraw the smallest amount he possibly could – namely, ten dollars – because he knew there wasn't a lot of money in his account. However, the message came back that he had been denied even that small request.

"Damn!" he yelled, trying to figure out what to do next. "Things are going from bad to worse for me, that's for sure."

He stood on the sidewalk outside the bank for upwards of thirty seconds, shooing blackflies away from his face, pedestrians hurrying past him, their gazes taking in the wet crotch of his trousers. There was no doubt in his mind that they were thinking he had woken up drunk in a nearby alleyway, only to find he had wet himself in his sleep. "What a shame, what a shame," women tsked as they went by, averting their eyes and pretending to glimpse something of interest across the street.

By now the beer which Toivo had so recently dumped down his gullet had begun to lubricate the gears in his head well enough to figure out what to do next. He would hurry back to the Owl Tavern and ask Olga for a loan. If he swore an oath upon his heart that he would be her partner in the wife-carrying contest up in Iron Spur next month, he was sure he could get the money he needed to buy the rope to hang himself with from the old snag he had been trying to cut down earlier that morning – in just enough time for Impi-May to go by in Daryl Borson's metallic-blue Camaro SS and see his lifeless body swinging back and forth like a large, overripe mango or some such fruit.

Toivo hastened down the street to the Owl Tavern. Like a dog who's been hit one too many times with a rolled-up newspaper, he sidled up to the flaxen-haired Olga at the bar and put on his best grin.

"Excuse me, Olga, but I've got a request."

"What request might that be?"

Anyone who knew Toivo the least bit well would have discerned right away that he was in his asking-for-money mode, for he was wiping his lips on the back of his hand and staring nervously around, as if he expected a large bird of prey to swoop down and carry him off as a lunch item.

"You said a little while ago that you needed a partner in the wife-carrying race – up in Iron Spur next month. I gave it some thought and I think it would be a great idea if the two of us joined forces, you know."

Sliding two beers onto her tray, Olga assayed him with a look of suspicion. "I'll be right back, after I deliver these."

The Owl Tavern was beginning to fill up with farmers, pool players and sit-about. Toivo waited anxiously by the bar, trying not to look too nervous. Gerry MacTavish and Doy Larson eyed him in a snide, condescending manner from their table across the room. MacTavish even gave him the finger. It didn't bother Toivo, though. He now thought of himself as a dead man, and dead men didn't have to react to such things.

Olga came back with a half-dozen empty glasses and deposited them on the conveyor belt that took them straight into the kitchen to be washed.

"What made you change your mind?" she asked Toivo, who was dancing around her like a boxer.

Toivo turned on the old charm. "I'm thinking it might change my luck," he said, "partnering up with you in that race, I mean. Of course, we might have to put in some practice sessions between now and then. I'll have to get in shape for it, starting tomorrow."

"How much money do you need, Toivo?"

"Ten bucks. I've got to pick up an ax-handle."

"You should've thought of that before you came in here to tank up on beer."

"I thought my bank account had some money left in it. Turned out, it didn't."

"Okay, I'll loan you the ten bucks," she told him. "You better not welsh out of that race, though, otherwise I'll skin you alive, starting with your scalp and working down to your family jewels."

"A Finn always keeps his word, Olga. You know that."

"Do I, now?" She pulled a ten-dollar bill out of her skirt pocket and handed it to him. "You better spend this on what you need – an ax-handle, to be precise – otherwise, I'll see to it you're tied up and horse-whipped. I mean it, too."

"You're already beginning to sound like we're married and in that wife-carrying contest."

"I'm serious about that contest, Toivo. You better show up and you better be in shape for it."

Toivo crumpled the ten-dollar bill and shoved it into his trouser pocket.

"Thanks for the loan, Olga."

"You're welcome," she said. Then, as a parting stab: "Get yourself cleaned up, for God's sake. You look and smell like a real mess."

"Yeah, I'll do that," he told her as he headed out the tavern door and up the street to Svend Sigurdson's Hardware Store. Olga's parting words kept echoing in his head, making him feel even more worthless.

Hanging would come as a vast relief, he thought. Yes, siree. There'd be no more insults to bear, no more blackflies to nag him in the spring and no one to call him a Bumbleberry Finn to his face.

Ω

The thick yellow rope was lying coiled up on the countertop beside the cash register. Toivo waited for Mel Biggs to finish serving an old man who was buying a couple of sheets of sandpaper, then he plunked down the ten-dollar bill.

"That's for that rope there," he told Mel.

"It sure took you long enough. Where did you have to go – Timbuktu?"

"Nearly," Toivo said, without any humor in his voice.

"Do you want to apply the difference to the bill you've got outstanding?"

"I'll settle my bill on Monday."

"Monday, it is, then." Mel Biggs slammed down Toivo's change on the counter, not even bothering to scoot it across the Formica top to him.

Grabbing both his change and the coiled-up yellow rope, Toivo hurried out of the hardware store and across the street to the liquor store where he purchased two finger-sized sample bottles of vodka, thinking it would be a good idea to fortify himself on the way home to his final end. He shoved the bottles into his trouser pocket and hurried down the street to the road that would take him out of town, not realizing that Olga Nyström had spotted him passing by the Owl Tavern.

Just by chance, Olga had set down a pitcher of beer on the table by the window – the very table Toivo had been sitting at, and which was now occupied by a couple of hardened, middle-aged Legionnaires, fellows who had fought in the Vietnam War, back in the 1960s. She happened to look up and see Toivo go by on the street – with that coiled-up, yellow rope in his hand. First she became furious that he had deceived her, then she felt her face drain of blood as she realized what Toivo was about to do.

My God, she thought, her hand going to her throat. Who in his right mind would sell a Finn a length of rope at this time of year?

"What's the matter, Olga? You look like you've just seen a ghost," Mark Anttila told her.

"There's something I've got to attend to," she said, "and attend to quick."

She scooped up the bills that Anttila had tossed on the table and quickly made change.

"Must be something awfully important – to make you go all white like that."

"I just saw Toivo Toivonen go by with a coil of rope in his hand."

“Oh-oh, that doesn’t sound very good.” Mark Anttila turned to look out the window. “Where’s he gone to, anyway?”

“Round the corner.”

“Hold my beer for me and I’ll go get him.” Anttila pushed himself up from the seat. “Don’t let this horse-piss get warm on me, okay?”

“I won’t.”

Anttila was a big man with a lumbering gait that was whonky on one side due to having lost the lower part of his right leg to a landmine and having had it replaced by a prosthesis. By the time he had pushed back the door of the tavern and had hobbled down the street to the corner, he was too late to stop Toivo from getting into Henry Puttonen’s old mint-green Oldsmobile. Puttonen had obviously just gotten out of church. He was wearing his black Sunday-go-to-meeting duds and had on the wide-brimmed black hat that made him look like the Quaker on the Quaker Oats box.

“Shucks,” Anttila wheezed.

He dog-trotted back to the Owl Tavern, working up a sweat. “Missed him ... by seconds,” he reported to Olga.

“How could you have missed him? I just saw him go by.”

“Hitched himself a ride in Henry Puttonen’s old Oldsmobile. Church must’ve just let out.”

“Do you think Henry will have the mental wherewithal to know what’s about to happen?”

Anttila shrugged. “Depends, I guess.”

“On what?”

“On whether he’s so full of the Christian spirit he’s blinded by it.”

“I better not take any chances.” Olga removed her apron and threw it on the bar. “I’ve got an emergency on my hands,” she told Bob, the bartender. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Who’s gonna take your place?”

“Ask Mark, here. I’m sure he looks good in an apron. How about it, Mark?”

“Well, seeing what it’s for, I guess I can spell you for a while. Don’t be gone all day, though. I’ve got some serious pool-playing to do later on this afternoon.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it.”

Chapter 3

TAUNO TOIVONEN woke up the way he did every Sunday morning, looking forward to taking a shower and putting on his best suit and tie

in preparation of going to church. However, upon glimpsing his face in the bathroom mirror of the Thunderstruck Hotel and seeing his puffy, discolored right eye and split lower lip, the experience was slightly marred. He suddenly recalled the foolish fight he had gotten into with his older brother and that was enough to practically throw a pall over his soul. But, being a good Lutheran, he had a duty to go on with life, no matter how drab, gray or miserable things might appear to be on the surface.

Tauno was the more handsome of the brothers. Unlike Toivo, who had a swarthy complexion and dark hair like Urho, their father, Tauno had the fair, good looks of their mother, Helmi. “My angelic son,” was how his mother had referred to him. Indeed, Tauno’s face, particularly when he was in his pre-teens, looked like it might very well have been sculpted out of Ivory hand soap.

Every Sunday morning Helmi had driven her two sons into town to attend the Lutheran Church on the hill – not a hill exactly, but a knoll that was nonetheless higher than the surrounding townsite. Tauno would sit quietly in the pew beside his mother and let himself be mesmerized, totally and utterly mesmerized, by Reverend Juha Moisala’s sermons. The pastor could have been a great Shakespearean actor, given his deep, rich baritone and handsome good looks. What impressed young Tauno even more than Juha’s ability to deliver rousing sermons was the fact that he was married to one of the most beautiful women in the district. Juha’s wife, Cheryl, not only sang like an angel in the choir, but taught Sunday school in the basement of the church. When she played the guitar and sang Christian tunes to the little boys and girls – in an alto that made him tingle where he probably shouldn’t have been tingling – Tauno could barely remove his gaze from her face. The pastor’s wife was that strikingly beautiful.

After the collection plate had been passed and the last hymn sung to its inevitable conclusion, Juha and his wife would stand beside the massive oak door of the Lutheran Church and press the flesh of each parishioner who went by them, out into the world of sin and temptation. The sight of them standing there together made such a lasting, fulsome impression on young Tauno, he decided, at the tender age of nine, to make the Word of God his chosen profession.

“Mother,” he said, riding home in the car one Sunday after church, “what do you think it would take to become a pastor like Juha?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure, but I think I’d like to become a pastor just like him.”

On the way home, Tauno always sat in the front seat while Toivo sat in the back. “Yuck!” Toivo piped up in a sardonic voice. “What would you want to do something stupid like that for?”

“Toivo!” Mother had said rather sharply, knifing a glance over her shoulder as she steered the Dodge toward home. “I will not have you

criticize your brother's desire to become a Man of God. I won't tolerate it – not for one second!"

Toivo, at that time, had wanted to be a welder-blacksmith just like their father, Urho, who prided himself on not having darkened the doorway of a church since the day he had gotten married to Helmi. The last thing Tauno wanted to do was to be like his father. Urho's skin was eternally grimy, eternally sooty-looking; his hands were forever scarred by sparks or else by cuts. When Urho was working at the forge, banging on a hunk of metal with a four-pound sledge, sparks flying every which way, it was easy to imagine the old man living in a hell of his own making. Tauno figured his brother's desire to become a welder-blacksmith was, in fact, no more than an unconscious desire for hell and damnation.

Such thoughts were spinning around in Tauno's head as he shaved, showered and dressed in preparation of going to church the day after having gotten into the fight with his brother. It was spring break at Milwaukee Trinity College and he had come home to find out why his brother hadn't been sending him any funds. The reason, he soon discovered, had to do with Toivo not having put any crops in the ground the previous spring or summer. Indeed, rather than attending to business the way he should have been doing, Toivo had spent his time constructing those asinine sculptures of his and that, in turn, had used up every cent of the farm's income. That had been the original reason for the argument and the subsequent fight. Tauno had gotten fed up with his brother's self-serving behavior.

"I can't live on scholarships alone," Tauno had yelled at Toivo, who was already well into the hard apple cider. "I need your support, too – support from this farm – *our* farm, I should remind you."

"Maybe you and God should learn how to use a tractor – because I'm tired of being a bloody sharecropper. Get your own flipping hands dirty, for a change."

Directly after the fight, Tauno had packed his bags and moved into the Thunderstruck Hotel, thinking he would stay over until Monday morning, when he would catch the bus back to Milwaukee Trinity College in the southern part of the adjacent state. Meanwhile, he had an entire day to kill.

It was difficult for Tauno to enter the House of the Lord sporting a black eye and a split lower lip, so he left the Thunderstruck Hotel as late as possible, barely giving himself enough time to be seated in the rearmost pew of the church. His plan was to flee immediately after Reverend Moisala's sermon and so avoid having to explain his swollen right eye; however, he found the sermon on forgiveness and redemption such a balm to his angry, seething soul, he allowed himself to linger there until the end. By the time the final hymn had been sung – with such fervor, it seemed to rattle the very rafters of the church – Tauno was feeling so peaceful, if not downright complacent, he had barely

enough gumption to get to his feet and flow with the other parishioners toward the narthex, where everyone once again lined up to shake hands with the pastor and his wife.

Tauno, wanting to be a good Christian, let the other parishioners go first. Fifteen years had gone by since the day Tauno had made his decision to become a Man of God. Between that time and now, Juha and his wife had aged like two bottles of excellent wine. Juha, now beginning to turn gray, due to the many responsibilities that weighed upon his shoulders, seemed nonetheless more distinguished than ever. His wife, Cheryl, who each morning anointed herself with Oil of Olay, seemed even more beautiful than Tauno had remembered. He wished he could be married to a woman just like her, a woman who would teach Sunday school to children in the basement of a church that he would be the sole pastor of.

“Good morning.” Juha firmly gripped Tauno’s hand. “My goodness, what happened to you? Why the black eye and cut lip?”

“A fight I got into with my brother.”

“That cut on your lip looks rather fresh,” the pastor’s wife observed. “When did it happen?”

“Yesterday. It was foolish, really.”

“Would you like to stay behind and talk to me about it?” Juha offered.

“There’s nothing to talk about, really. My brother was drunk; I simply tried to defend myself.”

“It disturbs me when I hear two brothers have been pummeling each other. Cain and Abel come instantly to mind. I shake my head and think to myself, *When will it ever end? When will brothers stop fighting one another?*”

“Yes, I won’t be going back to the house ever again. It’s too painful to watch my brother going downhill the way he is – almost with a vengeance, too!”

“Perhaps, I should go over to the farm and have a word with him?”

“Please – that is, if he’ll let you set foot on the farm, which I’m not inclined to think he’ll do.”

“It’s too bad your mother and father are no longer alive. They might have been able to prevent him from taking this plunge into perdition.”

“I certainly can’t seem to talk any sense into him, that’s for sure.”

“Or beat any sense into him – from the looks of it.”

“Believe me, Reverend Moisala, I didn’t set out to get into a fight with him. It just happened that way.”

Ω

Which was and wasn’t exactly a lie, Tauno told himself as he walked down the hill and along Front Street to the Thunderstruck Hotel.

He was heading rather briskly past the Owl Tavern, when Olga Nyström bolted out of the door and almost knocked him down on the sidewalk. The force of the collision sent them careening like two pool balls.

"I'm so sorry," Olga apologized. "Oh, it's you," she said in the next breath. "I'm so glad I ran into you, Tauno."

Tauno was far less glad, for Olga's knee had struck him below the belt – right where it hurt the most! His eyes widened in painful alarm; he gasped for breath while pressing his knees together, his face creasing in an expression not unlike that of a saint who has been struck by a sudden illumination.

"Oh my, I didn't mean to knee you right there." Olga pressed her fingertips to her mouth.

"Olga," he stammered, after regaining his breath and his composure. "What a surprise!"

"I have an even bigger surprise," she told him.

"What could possibly rank up there with this last one," he rejoined.

"It's your brother," she said. "I think he's going to hang himself."

Tauno barely prevented himself from saying, *Good riddance to bad rubbish*. Had he not been to church that morning, he might very well have spoken his mind. The civilizing effects of Reverend Moisala's sermon allowed him to maintain a modicum of civility, though.

"Well, my dear, if that is what he chooses to do, I don't know why I should come between him and his decision."

"Toivo is your brother, Tauno! How can you say such a thing?"

"Believe me, it's a lot easier to say than you might think it is." He pointed to his lower lip and then to his eye. "We're not exactly on the best of terms, as you can see."

"My God!" she railed. "What is it with the two of you? Why are you like this?"

"Different belief structures, I would think."

"My God!" she said in an exasperated tone. "I can't believe you. Really, I can't."

"Belief, my dear, is a delicate matter. What one person chooses to believe might strain the credulity of someone else."

By the time Tauno finished uttering this last bit of sophistry, Olga had turned on her heels and disappeared around the corner of the Owl Tavern. Her Toyota Tercel station wagon was parked about halfway down the block. She slipped the key into the ignition and started the car. Jockeying back and forth in the parallel parking spot, bumping up against cars in front and in back of her, she finally managed to roar off down the street and around the corner – none too carefully, by the way – with the result that she nearly sent Tauno flying off his feet for a second time that day.

Tauno couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Olga's car careening around the corner and coming straight at him. He jumped back in just

enough time to avoid being hit by the left front fender. Olga couldn't believe what was happening, either. Slamming on the brakes of the car and swerving to the right, the hood of the Toyota Tercel wedged itself beneath the tailgate of Ben Appleyard's two-ton, flatbed Chrysler truck, loaded down with lumber, sand and bags of cement. The hood of the Tercel crumpled upon impact and the radiator began to leak green fluid onto the pavement.

Appleyard had just come out of Dixie Kivinen's Bake Shop and Café, carrying a styrofoam cup full of hot coffee. He stood on the sidewalk and shook his head as he observed what was unfolding, feeling vaguely sorry for Olga and the Tercel, for he had quite a formidable tailgate on the rear end of his truck and he knew the Tercel was made of metal little better than tin.

Upon hearing the crunch, he hiked his shoulders up around his neck and grimaced.

"My word, when will people ever learn to buy American," he muttered to himself.

Setting the styrofoam cup of hot coffee on the flatbed of his truck, he circled the rear end of the Tercel and went to inquire if Olga was all right.

"I'm fine. I'm just fine," she stammered, although her knees felt a little weak upon getting out of the car. "I'm more concerned about stopping a hanging than I am about this."

Appleyard's response was one of complete bafflement. "What do you mean, stop a hanging?"

"Why don't you ask Tauno over there?" She snarled in his direction. "*His* brother is the one who's going to hang himself."

Tauno looked as if his whole life were passing before him. He was standing smack-dab on the yellow center line, his mouth agape, in too much of a shock to say anything.

Ben Appleyard quickly assessed the situation. He walked over to Tauno and waved his hand in front of the young man's face. "Come on, Tauno, you can't stand here in the middle of the street all afternoon."

"Did you see that? Olga just tried to kill me."

"I don't think she was trying to kill you, Tauno. I think she failed to see you jaywalking across the street. I think that's what it was."

By the time Appleyard had managed to unravel what had occurred, and why, nearly ten minutes had gone by. Olga and Tauno had to first be calmed down so he could get a straight story out of them.

"What I suggest is that we push your car out of the way, Olga. Let me back my truck out of the parking spot it's in, then the three of us will get into my truck and go rescue Toivo. What do you say to that?"

"I couldn't care less if Toivo were to hang himself," Tauno said.

"Now, now, now. That's no way to talk about your brother," Appleyard told him. "Put your shoulder to Olga's car. We've got to dislodge it, somehow."

In the end, in order to free Olga's car from the grip of the flatbed's massive tailgate, Appleyard had to back up his truck and then jerk forward with a sudden letting out of the clutch. By the time Olga, Tauno and Ben were packed like three sardines in the cab of the flatbed and were heading out of town, nearly forty minutes had gone by and Olga was worried down to the marrow of her bones that Toivo might already have succeeded in hanging himself.

Chapter 4

TOIVO FIGURED he would probably have to walk all the way home from Thunderstruck. Just on the off-chance that he might be able to hitch a ride, though, he stuck out his thumb at the first car that came by and, lo and behold, the driver stopped to pick him up. Toivo opened the passenger door and scooted his butt onto the front seat of the old, mint-green Oldsmobile, without any thought as to which day of the week it might be. Only when he turned to say thank you to Henry Puttonen, and saw that the elderly man was dressed in his black Sunday best, did he realize that it was the Sabbath.

"So, why are you out on the road this Sunday?" The elderly man's fluffy, salt-and-pepper beard and naked upper lip made him look like a man of a far different religion than the Lutheran one. The upper part of his face would have looked good on Mount Rushmore; it was that rugged, that imposing. "I didn't see you at church, that's for sure."

"Yes, that's for sure," Toivo echoed him.

Back when Toivo had been a kid of no more than thirteen, he and some school chums had tried to knock Puttonen's black, wide-brimmed hat off his head by throwing snowballs at it. Toivo remembered his snowball arcing high up into the air and coming down on the brim, causing the hat to fly off and Puttonen to lurch forward in order to catch it before it fell on the ground, only to have his feet slip out from under him. Puttonen had landed with an awkward swan dive in the slush and Toivo had been grounded for over two months on his parents' farm.

Toivo huddled close to the passenger door of Puttonen's car. He wasn't in the mood for talking. His mind traveled down the road to home and started pondering the technical aspects of hanging himself from the old snag. The first real substantial limbs were pretty high off the ground. That, of course, had its pluses and its minuses. It would take some doing to get up to those branches, but when his body was

dead and hanging there, it would be impossible not to see it from the highway. Impi-May wouldn't be able to ignore him swinging there, not for the life of her.

Puttonen cleared his throat. "Reverend Moisala was sure in fine form this morning. Yes, siree. Delivered one of his best sermons ever. You should've been there. Probably would've done you some good."

"You don't say."

"I *do* say." Puttonen swung the car slowly around a curve, nearly coasting. "All about forgiveness and redemption, it was. According to him – to Juha, that is – we've all got somebody to forgive, be it ourselves or somebody else."

"That's really great to know." Toivo hugged the coiled-up, yellow rope to his stomach and stared at the landscape going by ever so slowly. At least, he thought, it's faster than walking, but just barely. They were traveling at such a slow pace, a car pulled into the oncoming lane to pass them. At first, Toivo thought, it was Daryl Borson's supercharged, metallic-blue Camaro SS, but on second glance, it wasn't. It was a blue Pontiac.

"Not too smart of that fellow to pass on a curve like that," Puttonen rambled on. "Could've put somebody's life in danger. Might've driven somebody off the road or maybe even maimed them. Would've been on his conscience for the rest of his life. No amount of forgiveness would've done any good, then – that's for sure."

"People just don't think, I guess."

"Sure as shooting, they don't." Puttonen removed the black, wide-brimmed hat from his head and put it on the seat between them. "Getting mighty hot and it's not even officially summer, yet."

"Every year is different."

"Now that's a true fact. Truer than true, I'd say." Again, Puttonen cleared his throat, this time launching a glob of mucus out of the open driver's window. "So, what are you aiming to do with such a short rope, Toivo?"

"I aim on tying up my dog, Irish."

"Should give a dog a little more running room than you're gonna be giving it with a short rope like that one."

"Could be, I don't want her to run all that far."

"Could be, I guess."

Puttonen swatted a fly that was buzzing against the windshield, flattening it dead so it stuck to the back of his middle knuckle and had to be shaken loose. The dead fly landed on Toivo's shirt sleeve. Looking at it in disgust, Toivo brushed it off onto the seat.

"Smells like you've had a beer or two this morning," Puttonen observed.

"With my cornflakes. Nothing like a beer and cornflakes first thing on getting up and starting the day, I say."

“You know, a man who loses himself to the bottle ends up losing his soul. At least, that’s what they tell me.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“What’s that?”

“I said who is ‘they’ – the people who told you that about losing your soul.”

“‘Twas some people I’ve known over the years. Alkies, most of them. Former alkies, I guess would be more like it. You know, men who’ve gotten themselves off the demon sauce. Men who went to those AA meetings at the church. Cleaned up their lives so they now look brand spanking new again. Not a bad organization, the AA – that is, if you drink too much.”

“Thanks for telling me.”

Puttonen drove on. He swatted at another fly, but missed.

“You know, rope isn’t the best thing for tying up a dog with. Likely as not, that dog of yours will chew its way right through it. Seen it happen more than once in my life.”

“Have you, now?”

“Sure have. Once I had an old mongrel by the name of Jake. Jake would up and follow me everywhere I went. I was courting a woman down in the Woodbine area, back then. That’s a pretty long ways from these parts. Something like twenty-five miles or so. But that darned old dog of mine would follow me all the way – no matter what. The result was, I bought myself a nice, thick rope – just like the one you have there in your hands – thinking I’d tie up old Jake to the tree in the front yard. Figured that would fix his wagon, for sure. Didn’t, though. He chewed right through that darned old rope and followed me, anyway.”

“Good, old Jake.”

“Yeah, good, old Jake. He was some dog, alright.”

They drove in silence for a while. The engine of the mint-green Oldsmobile purred under the hood; air whooshed through the open windows.

“Saw your brother, Tauno, at church today – from a distance, you know. He was sporting a shiner just like yours, only it was on the other eye.”

“He’s right handed and I’m left, that’s why.”

“A lefty, huh?”

“Yeah, a lefty.”

“So, do you think it’s true what they say about lefties?”

“What do they say about lefties?”

“They say lefties don’t live as long as us right-handers do. Do you think there’s any truth to that claim?”

“First time I’ve ever heard of such a thing,” Toivo remarked. “Where did you hear it, anyway?”

“Program on the N.P.R. Said part of the reason lefties don’t live as long as us right-handers is ’cause lefties are so accident prone. The world isn’t made right for them, or some such thing.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s what I heard on this program, alright. Don’t know if it’s true, though. Don’t have any way of verifying the veracity of it.” Again, Puttonen spat out of the open window on the driver’s side. “Maybe you could tell me. Do you think you’re any more accident prone than a right-hander like myself, say?”

“How the heck would I know? I haven’t done a survey on it. I just live my life.”

Puttonen viewed him with a sidelong glance. “I guess what I’m trying to find out is whether or not you’re intending to be accident prone with that rope you’ve got in your hands, there. I guess that’s what I’m really trying to find out.”

“Well, stop trying to find out, because anything I do with this rope is *my* business. Not yours.”

“Okay, okay. No reason to get defensive.”

“I wasn’t getting defensive.”

“Wasn’t what I heard in your voice. What I heard was defensiveness.”

“Why don’t you just let me out right here,” Toivo said. “I’ll walk the rest of the way home.”

“Up to you.” Henry Puttonen pulled the car slowly onto the gravel shoulder. “You’re almost home, anyway.”

Toivo slammed the car door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Don’t mention it,” Puttonen told him through the open passenger window. “Just remember what I told you about that rope being too short.”

“Sure thing, deacon.”

Ω

Toivo headed through a wooded glen and across several fields to get home. Halfway there, he remembered the finger-sized sample bottles of Vodka in his trouser pocket and stopped briefly to twist off the caps and down the contents. His mind, although in a beer-sodden state, was already working on the technical aspects of hanging himself from the old snag. He would need to get the aluminum extension ladder off the side of the barn and haul it down to where the deed was going to take place. That was the first thing to do.

Toivo, I should tell you, wasn’t altogether in his right mind, otherwise he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of buying that five-foot length of rope in the first place. There was plenty of rope lying around the farm, a fact he would soon be reacquainted with upon fetching the ladder off the side of the barn – the barn annex, actually. It was an ex-

tension his father had built onto the barn's south side in order to shelter his welding-blacksmith equipment. There, a huge pile of tangled-up rope was lying on the left rear wheel of a broken-down John Deer tractor, just waiting to be used for a hanging or any such purpose.

When Toivo saw the rope piled on the tractor's wheel, he flushed right down to his gills because of the mistake he had made. Rather than using the money he had borrowed from Olga for the five-foot piece of rope, he could have used it to buy a bottle of whiskey. He could've sat at the bottom of the old snag and drunk that bottle right down to the bottom and so have departed from this world in a rip-roaring sort of fashion. He was so upset with himself for buying the rope, he smacked himself on the forehead with his open palm.

"How could I have been so dumb? What was I thinking, anyway?"

Toivo's dog, Irish, was quiet until she heard him banging around in the barn annex trying to get the aluminum extension ladder down off the brackets on the wall. As soon as she heard him making a racket in there, she started yelping again – in that mournful, depraved manner that was like fingernails scratching on the inside of Toivo's skull.

Toivo hauled the ladder out into the workyard. By now Irish was pawing at the inside of the barn door. Toivo felt sorry for her. First she had lost her pups and now she was about to lose her master as well. She had been in the barn ever since about midnight and Toivo had yet to feed her, he had been so consumed by his own misery and torment. Not wanting Irish to starve before anyone discovered her in the barn, Toivo went to the house to haul a leg of deer out of the freezer (he had shot a good-sized six-pointer the previous hunting season) and threw it inside the barn for Irish to gnaw on.

"Sooner or later someone will come by and let you out of there," he told her. "Just sit tight until then."

Toivo lifted the aluminum extension ladder onto his left shoulder and headed down across the field to the old snag he had tried to chop down earlier that day, only to remember that back in December of the previous year he had actually managed to bung a couple of jugs of his homemade apple cider. To avoid drinking them post-haste, he had stuck them in the cellar under an old wringer-washer machine. Instantly, upon remembering his stash, he dropped the ladder on the ground and went back to the house to fetch one of the jugs.

Had Toivo not experienced such a horrible need to quench his thirst, he might very well have managed to hang himself. By the time he hauled the jug of hard apple cider out of its hiding place and carried it together with the ladder down to the site where he was going to launch himself into the hereafter, he was operating at about a third of his normal capacities – which, by the way, didn't leave much left over for doing things the correct way, when you consider his propensity for stumbling things up.

When, at last, Toivo managed to get the aluminum ladder up and leaning against the old snag and had extended the darned thing so he would be able to reach the first substantial branches, it was time for another little go at his jug of hard apple cider. When he had quenched his thirst and was ready to ascend the ladder to his death, he couldn't figure out what had become of his hanging rope and so had to go back to the barn and cut off a piece from the heap of tangled-up rope lying on the rear left wheel of the tractor.

Upon hiking back down to the old snag, he figured he might as well have another couple of pulls on his jug of hard apple cider. Having fortified himself thusly, he climbed the ladder and tied the rope firmly to the limb he had chosen as his final dangling place. He tied a loop at the other end, tested it several times to make sure it would cinch up properly and then put it around his neck.

Just then, Ben Appleyard's two-ton Chrysler truck came roaring around the bend. Olga Nyström had been fretting all the way out to the farm. She had kept yelling at Ben to press the gas pedal to the floor, before it was too late to rescue her beloved Toivo. When the truck swung around the last bend and Olga saw Toivo up on the ladder putting the noose around his neck, she screamed at Ben to veer the truck across the road, through the ditch and over the field. The ride was so bumpy, the occupants of the cab banged their heads against the roof.

"Honk the horn," Olga bellowed. "Let him know we're coming."

Ben clamped his hand down on the horn; it bellowed like a bull about to be relieved of its bullhood.

Did Toivo see them coming? Did he hear the horn? Did he glance in their direction and then defiantly proceed with his plans? It's difficult to say. Even though the truck's horn was trumpeting like Gabriel's very own, and despite the fact that they were traveling at a fairly hazardous clip across the field, they didn't manage to reach the old snag in enough time to stop Toivo from pitching himself off the ladder and into what he hoped would be the hereafter.

All in all, it wasn't a terribly successful self-lynching job. Rather than jumping, which would most definitely have broken his neck, Toivo barrel-rolled off the ladder, thinking if he did things that way he would avoid snapping the limb of the old snag. Even then, the limb bent and cracked so the rope slid down to the point where it snagged on a couple of stout lateral branches – with the result that Toivo was left dangling about three feet off the ground.

By the time Ben Appleyard jumped out of the cab of his two-ton Chrysler flatbed, Toivo was kicking up a pretty good fuss at the end of the rope, like someone who had been connected up to a 220 volt cable; however, he didn't kick up a fuss for a long enough spell to actually do himself in.

Rushing over to the tree, Ben gripped Toivo by the legs and held him up so there would be some slack in the rope.

“There’s a jackknife in the sheath on my belt,” he instructed Olga. “Go up and cut him down.”

Meanwhile, Tauno stood off to one side, his hands in his trouser pockets, shaking his head as he thought to himself: We got here just in time. Damn it, anyway. What a travesty.