

Harvest

(Synninkantajat)

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PROLOGUE

His breathing is laboured; he stirs, making the sheets rustle. It is his birthday, his ninety-sixth. I set a bouquet of carnations in a vase on his bedside table; though I know that no-one except the nurse will see it.

Mother mentioned it in passing on the phone, his special day, maybe his last, how many times may it have been the last. We are talking again, once a week, about pleasant and easy topics; about more difficult matters we remain silent. It is better for us that way. I guess someone has to go, I promised mother, even though my classes continued late into the afternoon and the children were waiting for me, as always. Father no longer had the energy, not for his own father, who had not recognised his son for a decade. Thought he was his comrade from the war, on the rare occasions when he was alert enough to think anything. Every time he anxiously shouted for him to duck before the shooting started and did not stop until father bent over or left.

Grandpa is so restless that it is hard to look at him, let alone touch him. I am choking; I don't know what to do. I regret coming. I shouldn't have. Why is it that the son of man has to take his leave slowly and with so much agony?

In my helplessness I start to sing. I sing the first song that comes to my mind as I look at the bird skeleton as it rustles the sheets. *There is a place of sweet repose/ prepared for you and me/ in Jesus' wounds on Golgotha; there is our victory.* To my amazement he immediately stops playing with the sheets as if he can hear, which has not happened for a long time. I go on singing and suddenly he opens his unseeing eyes, turns his fragile head and his clouded gaze towards me and speaks fitfully. 'Is it Aaron? Have you come back? Am I in heaven?'

I try to reply but once again he floats far away, sleeping more peacefully now. I look at a man who has been stripped of all his strength and who for too long has had to wait for his turn to set down his staff. But God is so great and mysterious are His ways and He has the power and might to forget queues and order. He can let some in ahead of others and forcibly keep alive a man who almost 40 years ago thought he was reaping his last harvest from his tiny plot of land. He can dangle on the edge of living a man under whose tree lies an axe with a red-brown rusted blade and a rotten shaft rendering it unusable, as if to show, to teach a lesson.

Granpa gasps again. It is difficult to make sense of his words. 'Forgive me. I did wrong. Dear God, why can't I ask for forgiveness?'

'Those times are in the past,' I reassure him, although I'm not clear what he is talking about. 'You are forgiven, of course you are, you were already,' I promise, although I don't know where my certainty comes from. I stroke his hand, thin skin and veins like blue rivers, but he does not hear me, just fidgets with the sheets and whimpers. 'Forgive me, forgive me!' Behind his eyelids his constantly moving eyes focus on a time decades ago. When the earthly tabernacle has crumbled, when health, memory and closest relatives have all passed away, he returns to the place that has been hidden in deep silence. 'Aaron, the stream is dangerous! Aliisa, I was too stern! Auroora, don't go away!'

The nurse with the gentle eyes comes into the room and puts more fluid into the drip. 'Not much left,' she says, and at first I think she means the medicine. 'Taisto has not been conscious for several weeks,' she adds as she is leaving. 'And there are other signs. Fever and fitful breathing. He doesn't eat or drink anymore. Restlessness, that often comes at the end, drifting off, muttering and scrabbling with the hands.'

I moisten his thin, dry lips with damp cotton wool. The medicine takes effect and Grandpa calms down. I am left wondering what it means to be conscious or delusional. Grandpa does not see me; he does not know me, just as he has not seen or known anyone for a long time. Yet there is something he goes back to and where he lives even though everything else in him is already closing down and disappearing. There are things that even death does not prevent him from remembering. Things that make him weep until his last breath. Things that I should bypass as mere delusions.

Grief means the splitting of time. There is loss and before and after. I am soon to lose my Grandpa whom I don't know very well and whose passing I cannot grieve, only bless.

Suddenly he is beside himself with his losses as he moans on the brink of the well of death. I am deep in my own thoughts, the cracks that I have thought were the only important ones, and I have to make an effort to comprehend what I hear. It is impossible for me to connect this moment with the ancient past, to understand how they are linked to each other or to me, yet a certainty overcomes me like a hammer blow: here are the severed ends of the string that I have to tie together, the broken roads and stories that have to be collected piece by piece and put back together again.

By Grandpa's bedside, I dig out of my rucksack the red notebook that I bought on a whim from the shop together with the bouquet of carnations. On the first page I write all the words that I managed to hear, for they may be the last and say more than any earlier ones. At the end of the sentences I draw question marks and exclamation marks.

When Grandpa is asleep I write as fast as I can on the next page my own scrambled sentences: "Remembering has its limits, mutually agreed. You do not have permission to remember too much, incorrectly or improperly. History is looking from someone's point of view. There is the victors' story, the fatherland's story, the White Brigade's story, the story of the rescued, the story of the orthodox, the story of the righteous that has no space for cracks and where an unsuitable other only represents threat, failure, defeat or guilt. The story carries the truth, not the other way round. Truth by itself does not exist. Truth and power are interlinked. Truth means the best way of recalling the matter from one's or the group's point of view. The mind protects itself by rejecting what it cannot comprehend."

On the third page I write just two sentences. "1. The kingdom of God was in the 1970s a special domain for mercy and forgiveness. 2. The largest wave of religious violence in peacetime Finland took place in the Laestadian Lutheran Revival Movement in the 1970s."

After these sentences I have to close the notebook and shove it back in the rucksack as it is already burning my fingers. The sentences glare at each other in anger; they shrug their shoulders, clench their fists and threaten to attack each other. One of them gossips about Lot's wife who looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Another whispers about the truth that shall make you free.

I was not abandoned in a meeting but at the door of my home. It shook the fragile family when it was at its weakest. I have not recovered from it. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the third generation. I will have to study these matters further.

Grandpa starts moaning again and I take hold of his hand and go on singing. *Here the poor wayfaring man/can rest his weary head/and revive himself/with heavenly bread.* He calms down and falls asleep. I spend a long time watching his purple eyelids and hollow cheeks and think about love. First of the kind that suffers long and is gentle, then the kind that does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in truth. The fear of that which covers the multitude or then that which is not afraid, for the

fear includes punishment. I cannot stop wondering how many meanings there are of love.

Sitting by his bedside I understand that when grannies and grandpas die there will be matters where forgetting wins over remembering. The good of the group versus the suffering of the individual. The glory of the greatest versus the wounds of the weakest.

Before I leave I press my cheek against Grandpa's hollow cheek. For the first time ever, for in our family we are not in the habit of touching, only shaking hands. His cheek is like grey crepe paper with sharp bones shining through.

The smell of death is thick and sweet; I recognise it and will never forget it.

The warmth of my living skin passes on to him. The coolness of his dying skin envelopes me. My eyes secrete water that moistens the dry creases of his face.

Grandpa whimpers like a little child.

TRAVELOGUE

Once upon a time. This is how I start to describe a senseless journey that may be just a fairytale. On embarking on it I did not know its meaning and could not in any way prepare for it. Were I to steal the idea from someone – I always steal my best ones – I would begin like this: when I was 36 years old I saw a magnificent sculpture in an art exhibition.

In my notebook I draw pictures of donkeys, like sculptures, sad ones that have very skinny legs and a load twice their size. In between the pictures I scratch storyboards and mind-maps, one on top of another and next to another. Human beings always have to use their days doing something even when 1) their role as a history teacher has been exchanged for a research sabbatical, when 2) the doctoral thesis begun with such grand ideas has run aground, when 3) the story has robbed the time from the research and when 4) even the story has got stuck.

I have started to write Grandpa Taisto's story. With my fragmented sentences I am lost, not in the Sahara desert but on a small island somewhere in the Bay of Bothnia. The engine is broken and the boat on its side on the shore, the one that was supposed to go far. I imagine I am surrounded by volcanoes that can come to life and trees that grow dangerous roots that have to be dug out on time. I dare not send my last email to the professor at the university or to reply to the first response I received

from the leader of the writing group whose words intrude into my dreams and make my nights restless.

“This is still pretty marginal. The scope of the topic has to be broadened. The characters are flimsy; they are only seen through the story. The child is speaking adult thoughts and is not present in the moment. The language is complicated and formal. You preach, when you should show and not teach.”

I set off to do background research. To look for an explanation, a solution or a comparison with my family’s story. Although I already know that neither the human mind nor the novel settles itself in a format or a map, and after all the effort, after the waves rolling with confidence and the miserable insignificance, a solitary poem echoes in my ears. *Even though I could call out after you / I sing with my mouth shut, and the house is trembling / in the water, the echo, the great body of absence.*

I try to calm down from this melancholy that has struck me as I approach middle age and that grows two severe wrinkles between my eyebrows and a worried shadow on Her beautiful face. Yes, I still have a rose too, although you should not call your wife by such a name in this time of raised consciousness and easily hurt feelings. She blossoms faithfully in the shelter of the wall in the courtyard, after many lean years strongly rooted and tolerant of winter, tolerant of shade, similar to millions of others but special to me and this – if anything – I say with deadly seriousness and never, so help me God, with irony.

She defends herself with four measly thorns, but others she protects with the strength of a lioness and she says immediately that getting lost is not meaningless and the story isn’t trivial, that people’s feelings have to be described using their language, that you have to seek perspective from further afield. Her faith is so strong and sincere that I feel ashamed. She looks at me kindly even when I remain with my fantasies within the walls that I have built and totally forget that there are matters that you should still talk about. She knocks on the door of my room every day but gives me space when I shut the door in her face and fasten the catch. I do not intend to forget or lose her even though I have become doubting and doubtful, one who spells earthly love with a capital letter and the heavenly one with a lower case letter, rubs out and crosses off letters when he can no longer work out which comes first, eros or agape.

A fox comes to me when I am at my most desperate. He is not a small white desert fox but a large red fox who wanders about the human neighbourhood now and again and talks nicely. There are many nests in his territory. The cubs are raised in

one and the others are used for different purposes. The nests and the corridors linking them form a complex maze.

The fox manages to open the door even though he is a complete stranger; he just presses down the handle and walks in as if there were no lock. With alarming ease he opens the curtain, seats himself down in my armchair and lifts his legs nonchalantly onto the armrests. I am taken aback by the red-brown light but his friendly smile calms me down and I decide to make some coffee. In the cupboard I find three biscuits and a carrot which we share, and whilst gnawing on them we talk about the beauty and sorrow of renunciation, renunciation for the sake of faith and of renouncing faith.

Between languages we speak into each other's hearts words that do not exist, hybrid words with rough edges, for the old world has disappeared and the new one is yet to appear, for images do not take form properly and concepts do not become clear, and the minute hand starts to hurtle around with increasing speed. On departing he hugs me. He smells of damp woods and pine sap. I let out a silent cry. When he has gone I drive at speed to the ironmonger's. I buy the strongest safety lock and install it on the door that very evening. In the night I am in a state of agitation as I write several additional pages of Auroora's story.

The little boy comes, too, the inner child, speaking in a demanding voice. He comes back to me when I least expect him, curious and neglected. He has an incessant hunger for truth and love, he longs to be far away and wants to travel to the ends of the Earth, though I tell him every time that all is well here now, he just has to settle down. He takes me with him, and then I travel to a time and place in history, to meet whomsoever, even though I don't even feel comfortable amongst strangers and cannot speak naturally; though I am close to exploding after awkward social situations and have to run along narrow paths deep into the forest or ski on the sea-ice into white nothingness.

The boy has a bad habit of coming to ask for me just when I am needed the most at home. That's when I become an absent half-human for those who most need my undivided presence. I start to write tender descriptions of families and partners and am impatient with my own. I become mute in the presence of my loved ones and go off to have lively conversations with strangers. And though I see what it does to us and apologise as I go off, I leave them to manage on their own. While I am away I don't find what I am looking for; I return tired and frustrated and easily angered.

I take off and every time ask those who remain to wait. I know it is too much to ask. And I know that in their place I would not have the strength, but would give up.

AARON

Just a drop of paint, several brush strokes. I have completed a big job. On the side of the box, in big red block letters, the name. The paint is still wet; it drips like drops of blood. I wipe them off with my hands and the cuff of my sleeve before turning over the largest craft ever known and reveal the secret.

‘The Ark,’ Granny smiles, surprised.

‘Well, well, so that’s the name you came up with, I wonder wherever does it come from,’ she asks as once again she did not attend the Service where she would have learnt it. I don’t say anything and she does not force the issue. She throws a bottle of lingonberry juice at the side of the craft and because the plastic bottle does not break I can drink it all and eat some chocolate cake, too. All there is in the sky is some thin, high cloud.

Then we play.

I am Granny’s little child and we are by ourselves by the Sea. As always I can choose the game and Granny does as I say. It is easier to play with her than with others as not everybody always obeys me.

I am little Moses, chosen by God, and Granny is Jochebed, Moses’ mother. I lie on my craft as if in a bulrush basket and the waves rock me. The sun shines on Granny’s hair making it shiny white and her folding chair is in the water so that her toes and ankles get wet when she sits down and her legs are visible under her rolled up skirt, her thighs are like a turkey’s.

I am newborn. ‘Oh, what a wonderful child,’ Jochebed says and looks at me. ‘More wonderful than any other, I will never give you up!’ I smile at Jochebed and at the sun. I look at my legs, knees and shins, toes and toenails; they are my own and special, even Jochebed looks at them lovingly; have they grown, have they become stronger, mine and nobody else’s, even the bones are beautiful and the muscles have fine fibres.

I am Moses and of a strong family, part of the nation of Israel. The pharaoh was afraid of the Israelites spreading over Egypt. He decided to torture them with

hard labour so that they would tire and their numbers would decrease. But the more he tortured them the more they multiplied. Multiplying means offspring. They are both difficult and formal words, full of secrets, they are linked to fathers, mothers and babies and they are not about willies and fannies but instead about God's blessing. Conception, fertile and numerous. Forefather, tribe and generations. These are talked about in the Bible; it is a great thing, when you are more, much more than others, favoured by God. *But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.* That's what Grandpa preached, I checked the words and wrote them down and an invisible crown has from then on been pressing on my head. I have to keep my neck straight so that it does not fall off, the gold crown encrusted with jewels and pearls. The long arches come together at the top and where they join up there is a cross on a ball, like on the crown of the king of Holland, whose picture I found in the Kaleva newspaper and stuck in my Exercise Book, next to the sentences from the Bible.

I sit up in my bulrush basket and shade my eyes with my hand from the sun as I have to ask a question. 'Granny, do you ever wear a crown?' But Granny does not know that game even though she knows almost all the others. Her laughter is more sad than happy; it sounds more like the barking of an old spaniel, of Murre who lies under our stairs. Granny says that she does not know if it's made more of thorns than of gold, that crown. 'Why so?' I ask, but she shakes her head so that the sun swirls in her hair; with her hand she waves the question far away and says that children don't have to worry about grown up matters, especially when it is summer and you have your own Ark.

When the number of Israelites grew the pharaoh told the midwives to kill all the boy children. That's what Grandpa preached during the barbeque evening held in our garden, the Finnish flag swaying in the flagpole, and I sat listening on the bench made of a plank of wood that had been lifted on some logs, I kicked pebbles and stuffed myself full of sausage, with just the right kind of blackened skin, and lots of mustard, all in a paper bag. Followed by Orangeade, a whole glass bottle of it, swishing in my throat, but I tried to behave as if nothing was happening, although I had to blink to clear the water from my eyes and swallow the burp.

The midwives feared God and did not obey the command but let the boy children live. They told the pharaoh that the Israelite women were so strong that they

delivered their babies before the midwife got there. I have to get off the craft and ask: 'Does that mean, Granny, that you don't always have to obey? That sometimes you can lie, if it is absolutely necessary?' Granny looks at me for a long time and nods: 'It may well be so.'

The new information envelopes me like a festive garment and a heavy cloak, the fur-edged cape of the Dutch king; there is a picture of it too in the Exercise Book. We are united by a secret that cannot be shared with everyone, for they may not necessarily understand it.

'Oh, Moses, what bad news,' Granny sighs on the shore, I mean Jochebed, and splashes her toes in the water far too happily.

'What now?' I call out.

'The pharaoh has given a terrible order to throw all the boy children into the Nile.'

'Am I going to end up in the jaws of a crocodile, is it dark and slimy in a crocodile's tummy, is it going to swallow me whole or chew me into pieces, can it chew the bones and crack the skull, won't the splinters of the bones scar its throat and intestines, will I be able to escape like Jonah did from the belly of the whale, does it vomit sometimes, or do a poo?'

'No problem, I will smear the basket with bitumen and pitch so that it floats like a boat and you will come to no ill,' Jochebed comforts me.

Moses' parents and the midwives who helped the Israelites were religious people, Grandpa explained. Their faith was the reason they protected the child for they saw that he was wonderful. They obeyed God's command rather than that of the king. Luckily by that time I had already eaten the sausage for then came the bit. A gooey glob trapped in my throat. 'Times have not improved,' Grandpa said. 'There are still parents who throw their children into the Nile for the crocodiles to eat. There are kings and law-makers who give permission to do so, they even give out bursaries. The standard of living is today's Moloch, for whom children have to be sacrificed so that people can enjoy themselves and are free to have fun. The blood of innocent children calls to the avenging God.'

Fortunately my mummy Raakel is a devout Israelite and favoured by God. When I press my ear against mummy's soft tummy, I can hear the happy shuffling of tiny toes though mummy has not told me. But I have sharp ears and I can hear music best of all. In mummy's tummy there's an echo of the most beautiful rhythm, soft like

the flapping of butterfly wings, there's no rampant rock or riotous strumming, but the joy of life. The notes jump onto the paper, the quarter- and eighth-notes, when the little being sloshes about like a tadpole or a tiny fish, the waves splash and drops of water spray about so that the skin on mummy's tummy quivers. It makes me laugh. Mummy wonders why but I don't tell her. I wonder if she even knows herself yet. The prelude is playing, Handel's Water Music, but it is not a frog or a salmon that is growing in the water, but a true child of God.

'Have a safe journey, Moses,' says Granny, wading deeper into the water and pushing the Ark so far into the waves that her turkey thighs get wet. I survey the passage of the basket further away. 'I'll miss him, but such a lovely boy is sure to be found soon. God's eye guards and His hand directs the basket. *Even in stormy seas our Heavenly Father watches over us.*'

Anticipation is the best part, I would like to stop it there and rewind it. A warm weather front has stopped over Finland. The south wind is weak. I am Moses, God's chosen one, and Aaron, Granny's little child, two brave boys in one. The waves carry the basket, the smell of the sand and salt in the air. The black-headed, red-legged gulls cackle in the blue sky, the reeds rustle in the wind. The whole Sea is ours. The whole world is ours. They belong to the child in the bulrush basket and to Granny who has turned into Moses' mother. The rocks, the reeds and the sky full of happiness.

Although I close my eyes and wait I can hear every splash of a wave. Granny's gaze already tickles my cheek and I know that soon the water will take the basket towards the soft legs of the pharaoh's daughter and I will be rescued. I have been seen.

AUROORA

I have just come out of the shower. My hair is uncombed and undried, I'm wearing a bathrobe.

An old man rings the doorbell, steps in without asking for permission, walks with his boots on straight onto the light-coloured wool rug in the living room. He does not even have time to sit down.

I see it straight away, the neck hunched down with embarrassment, the gaze with a shield that shimmers like bronze, the tight gap in the mouth from which the

words squeeze out one by one, they don't fit properly but grate against each other and stop occasionally.

'There has been, someone, somewhere, who has seen, something, that.'

'Rumours, nasty ones, are, circulating.'

'It's not, right, in that way, a woman, to be, like
some,
stray dogs
toads spawning in a pond.'

Water drips from my tangled hair onto my cheeks, I don't wipe it away. I am no longer yours and you are not mine, instead we belong to everyone. The protective circle is gone and we no longer play at mirroring each other, we glance over our shoulders: is someone moving about, are they coming near. The house, garden, road, streams, field, barn, woods and the pond, they are all full of gleaming eyes.

'About that, that kind of thing, the Bible warns. *Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.*'

There is no time to think, not even to get dressed. I have to weigh the odds too quickly. I have to lift the scales from the cupboard and set them down in the middle of the living room table. I have to use the calibrated weights to check their accuracy. I have to turn the dial to zero.

The old man looks on with deadly seriousness to make sure that I don't cheat.

I tear my skin open between my ribs. With my bare hands I pull out my intestines. It hurts, but that is how it should be.

On the one side of the scales I place the agony of leaving.

On the other I put the pain of staying.

The bloodied blobs thrash about in the bright light, under his measuring gaze.

The old man's breathing rasps and he raises his eyebrows. I am astonished by the change.

The scales are no longer far from balancing. Yet one of the bowls still clearly remains lower than the other.

I apologise for I cannot do anything else.

I promise that I won't anymore.

Then I give up speaking.

TAISTO

Keeyaar! Keer-reet! Kip-kip-kip-tee-ar!

I have to walk to the shore to calm myself down so that my violently whining breathing and my heart that beats like a hammering fist will have time to settle down before I go back home.

An angry Arctic tern circles above me. Her nest is somewhere near, just a hole in the ground; I am disturbing her peace and order, making her ready to attack me.

I don't take offence; I don't mind that the anxious tern is prepared to attack, quite the opposite, unbeknown to her she comforts me in my distress, God's creation, I can see the instincts of birds and the rules of nature; you have to protect your young from predators and intruders. Go ahead, black-cap! Don't give up, red-beak! This world is not at all kind and without danger, here you have to fight for your own with the power of your shoulders or the blows of your wings, even if you are already tired, even if you have had enough, even if you could fly away, seek easier waters to fish and leave everything else be.

I did see it, Auroora's crumbling gaze; the light going out from her face and the dark shadow climbing; the tears that made her body tremble. It is not pleasant to be the one who has to expose a lie and an injustice. That's when you have to be strong, know the difference between sympathy and obedience, you have to separate comfort from duty.

It is hard to understand the strange force that has become internalised, which even at the moment of exposure almost wins over the truth. I did see that although I would like to forget: the possibility of escape hovering on her temples and in the corners of her eyes. Where does it come from, is it from the devil; is the human being really so lacking that at the sight of the first temptation she is willing to sacrifice everything else?

Keeyaar! Beautiful, that's what she is, even when she is furious, fighting to the last for the rightful cause. Her wings white and translucent. If you were to still the image, you would see that they are shaped like an angel's, in the contrasting light as if from beyond, above the slight body just before landing, open like fans, the elbow feathers pure white, I have checked it many times in my book of birds, page 169, right bottom corner.

Keer-reet! I mutter to myself Chapter 27 of the Proverbs: *A stone is heavy and sand is weighty, but a fool's wrath is heavier than both of them. Wrath is cruel and anger a torrent, but who is able to stand before jealousy? A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb, but to a hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.*

Kip-kip-kip-tee-ar! I repeat old sayings out loud: Behave yourself so that you dare go again. Everyone is wise on dry land when an accident takes place at sea. The eye shines like a branch covered in resin on the wall of the sauna. Tastes of man said the spinster when she kissed a cockerel. There's pull in it but no hold.

All being said, it is a sin and a shame! I stomp on the path so that the ground echoes, accidentally kicking a loose pebble, which flies into the grass.

The tern is alarmed.

I have not time to escape.

She lunges down, takes aim and pecks me.

On my head I have a bleeding wound.

The pain now has a visible cause.

The wind changes course.

I don't curse her but bless her.

Home smells of warm bread. I sit for a long time on the stool in the hallway breathing in the smell of loaves, faithfulness and of everything remaining as it is. Changes take place; it is a shame, but luckily not within these walls. My heart no longer pounds; once again it collects images of birds and files them, beating gently.

The air is warm when the wind is from the south. When I step into the kitchen my wife looks at me a long time, a largish stout sparrow, with brown irises and a conical nose. She asks what has happened, a caring, grey-headed bunting, her jingling voice is no longer intrusive but fresh. I don't respond, I just sigh and cross the floor to pat her gently.

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