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From THE VISIT

The lights in the train turned on; their high-pitched whine joined the monotonous humming of the train. The landscape melted into a compact black mass with occasional clusters of lights speeding by. Night number one on the train. Or was it number two? Still very few people around. Luna was apprehensive of anyone who entered the compartment. An eighteen-year old girl, alone on the night train.

The conductor passed from time to time. He'd checked her ticket about seven hours ago; now he just nodded when he saw her.

More hours and more darkness. Change of train at a station, lonely at midnight. Finishing up the last sandwich she'd brought along. She had four apples left.

Dawn. Vast expanses of thick pine forests, brown-green lakes, quiet, empty villages and houses with white gravely yards, all passing by like in some slightly blurry fairy tale. She was too tired to care.

When the train stopped at a small station with a sign 'Tuppenlina' by the tracks, she was taken by surprise; she collected her belongings in a rush and hopped off the train between the closing doors.

#

The platform was empty. A long, rectangular flower pot with blue and white hortensias stood by the Tuppenlina sign. The train eased away.

Luna turned, scanning the surroundings for a person waiting for her, or a car parked nearby. But there was no one. The train station and the little town that spread to the left, with its houses, pretty but without a sign of life, seemed submerged into a deep, self-sufficient, immobile sleep.

Luna looked at her watch. Noon.

She wanted to sit down, but there was nowhere she could - no bench, not even a curb. She finally sat on the edge of the flower pot, her backpack by her feet, waiting to be picked up, or for something to happen, in the hot, midday silence of a deserted northern town.

6.

I open my eyes. Dawn has departed, long ago. I'm late.

I walk to the veranda. I watch the black-and-white painting of geese. I water the flower beds. I sit on the bench.

As I sit, listening to the water plip-popping into the barrel, a thought occurs to me.

If I walked past the rain barrel, to the other side of the house, would that be okay?

I might try tomorrow.

#

I grind the idea in my mind the whole night, splitting it to bits and pieces then putting the pieces together, over and over, in every possible way. I don't even close my eyes.

As the night turns from grayish-black to grayish-white, I go to the veranda. I sit on the bench. I take the bench outside and sit on it. I pick up the watering can and water the flower beds.

Then I walk across the yard and turn the corner.

#

A small wooden shed. The door is shut but there is no lock.

I open the door. Darkness gapes at me.

I step inside. I stoop so I don't hit my head.

Inside, it's dark, but some light spills in through the open door, so I'm able to see.

In the corner stands a desk. On the desk lies a trowel, next to a saw and some other tools. Against the wall lean rakes, a shovel, a ladder.

I make a step toward the desk.

I notice a brown paper bag next to the trowel.

I take the paper bag into my hands. The paper rustles, and startles me.

I drop the bag onto the desk.

But I should look inside. Maybe it's important.

I pick up the bag again.

I open it, slowly, almost noiselessly.

Inside the bag, I find little, round balls.

I know them.

These are flower bulbs.

Someone taught me about them.

She was tall, and her gray hair was tied into a bun the size of a bulb.

I drop the bag and walk out of the toolshed.

I don't want to think about the bulbs.

I don't want to think about that person.

I walk back to the yard. I don't look left or right. I stare straight ahead.

I enter the veranda, pass through the hallway into the kitchen and sit on the chair.

When it gets dark, I move onto the couch.

7.

A humming noise rose in the distance. In a cloud of dust, a pickup truck appeared; it approached, stopping in front of Luna. A girl in her twenties, dressed in khaki sport pants and an orange t-shirt, jumped out.

"Luna?"

"That's me."

Luna was relieved. She was at the right place.

"I'm Hannele. The camp leader!"

Luna slid off the flower pot. "I thought nobody would come," she said.

"Well, you're not the only one to be picked up. I've been up and down non-stop since yesterday. Most people came in groups of two or three. But you – by yourself." Hannele stood before her, her hands at her hips.

"Sorry," Luna began, "I -"

"Actually, you were supposed to be two. You were supposed to come with Djamila. Where is she? Don't tell me she's on a different train."

"Yes, I mean, no, she couldn't make it, and I'm sorry. She had a family problem. She's not coming. She's sorry."

"Oh." Hannele tilted her head to the side, watching Luna carefully. "I hope nothing serious. Hop in!" Hannele motioned with her head toward the truck.

Luna reached for her backpack, but Hannele grabbed it before her and threw it into the flatbed. "You're one of the last ones," she said as they rode past sparse houses, toward the woods. "Only one more to arrive. Luckily, he won't need a ride. So how was your trip?"

"It was okay. Just really, really long. And alone, it wasn't much fun. I was..."

But maybe Hannele didn't need to know all the details. She was focused on the road, and didn't even seem to notice, or care, that Luna stopped mid-sentence.

They drove into the woods; an endless forest of silver birch, aglow in high-noon light; an occasional splash of deep green of a spruce; a shadow of a tender, solitary larch. And up, high above, the lacy curtain of leaves, softly veiling the bright blue sky.

"Are you from Tuppenlina?" Luna asked, to make conversation.

"Me? God, no. Do I look like a small-town girl?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"There's no problem in being from Tuppenlina," Hannele said firmly. "But I am not from Tuppenlina. I'm from Helsinki."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize. I can't stand it when people keep apologizing."

"I didn't mean to apol..."

Luna kept quiet. There was no need to annoy the camp leader before the camp had even begun. Anyhow, it looked like Hannele's mind was already somewhere else. She rolled down her window, letting fresh, sweet air fill the car, and shook her head wildly. "Ah, the almighty woods," she sighed.

Luna looked at Hannele - her profile, sharp and focused; her hair, brown with a tinge of red, flowing in a rich ponytail over her back; her arms, relaxed on the wheel; an almost imperceptible smile on her lips - and in that moment, in spite of hunger and exhaustion and all the discomforts of her body caused by those endless train rides, she felt it, too: the wind, out there, and the woods; the summer, wide open and waiting for her.

#

"We're here!" Luna jerked in her seat, her eyes flying open. Hannele laughed. "End of the journey."

They'd parked near a large wooden house pushed in among closely knit spruce and pine trees. Through the trees, a shaft of sunlight shone on the front of the house - brown, with traces of red paint, like a faint blush - and the front door that was ajar. From the house, a path led to a white-gravel yard - the kind they had in the village, only larger. To the left of the yard, under the pines, two long tables were set with white table runners, pots of coffee and tea and baskets with pastries. A dozen young people and a few older ones sat around, chatting. Down to their right, a tennis court baked in the sun.

Hannele hopped out, leaving her door open. "Meet the crowd!" she said.

Luna's head throbbed and worms wriggled in her stomach. *Breathe*, she told herself. That's what Djamila always said. *Breathe*. That old trick. Did anyone use it anymore? Luna didn't try to *breathe*; she pretended to be searching for something inside the car, when Hannele's face appeared at the window. "Come on, don't make me wait."

"I'm not making you wait," Luna said. "I'm looking for my book."

"Your book? I didn't see any book." Hannele opened Luna's door.

"Oh. Then it must be in my backpack. Sorry. Let me check my backpack."

Luna got out, planning to head around to the back of the car, but Hannele barred her way.

"They don't bite, you know."

"What?"

"The campers. They don't bite."

Luna met Hannele's eyes. They were brown and friendly, but also urging; there was stuff to do, they had to move on. Hannele couldn't waste time on a silly girl terrified of a group of campers she was going to spend the next three weeks with.

Luna dared a peek at the people at the table. They'd all turned to look at them. There was no way around it. Sooner or later, she'd have to walk over there, introduce herself, say a few words. Better sooner than later.

"You're right. The book must be somewhere in my backpack. I'll look for it later," Luna said.

They walked together across the yard. For the second time in a day, Luna was grateful Hannele was there, grateful she didn't have to do the grueling twenty-meter walk in the spotlight on her own, and that Hannele, perfect in her orange shirt, drew all the attention to herself.

"Everybody!" Hannele called as they approached. "Meet Luna, from - "

"Slovenia," Luna said. "Former Yugoslavia," she added timidly. Not because she thought they didn't know where Slovenia was - she was pretty sure they did. It just still felt odd to say, "I'm from Slovenia," and not "I'm from Yugoslavia," as would have been the case just over a year ago.

"We know where Slovenia is," a guy said. Luna shuddered as he sent her a look through a cloud of curly brown hair. "It was all over the news. Still is, as a matter of fact."

Hannele, paying no notice to the guy's attitude, introduced the company: three girls from Portugal, Claudia from Italy, Petra from Germany, Daan - the guy who made the comment about Slovenia - from the Netherlands, Santiago from Spain, Sofi from Finland, Eric from Denmark and Alan from Argentina. The older folks were the locals, the villagers. They waved and smiled. "They're the owners of this place," Hannele explained. "They'll be around occasionally. Very importantly, they're taking care of the food." Hannele laughed.

Luna tried to memorize the campers' names and where they were from when a shadow passed, down where the road disappeared into the woods. She thought, at first, it was an animal; but slowly, the shape became clear: it separated from the trees, moving steadily through the silence of the pines and birches, forming into a man in a blue t-shirt and army-green pants, with a backpack and a cap.

The man stopped, a good distance from the yard, as if he wanted to assess the company before joining it. Hannele walked across the yard to meet him. "Hello hello! Kurt, is it?"

Kurt removed his cap, revealing a brush of dense, shortly trimmed brown hair above his tanned face. He looked a little older than the other campers; about Hannele's age.

"Kurt walked all the way from Germany," Hannele said as they came closer to the table, right where Luna stood.

"Really, from Germany," Daan mumbled. "From the north of Germany, I bet."

"From Germany to Finland?!" one of the Portuguese girls exclaimed.

Kurt lifted his hand, as a way of greeting the group. As he did, his arm brushed against Luna's.

"Sorry," Kurt said, taking a step back.

Kurt looked at Luna. He was slightly shorter than her; about half a head. He actually turned to Luna, taking his time to face her completely; within seconds, he took in, shamelessly, the full measure of her tall, skinny body. Seeing heat rise into her cheeks, Kurt smiled and stretched out his hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Kurt."

"Luna," she muttered.

"Luna," Kurt repeated, holding her hand a little longer than necessary, his blue eyes boring into her as if he were trying to decipher some kind of a secret. "I like your name."

"I like it, too," Hannele cut in. "Very poetic. I'm a poet, by the way."

Kurt shook hands with everyone at the table, then sat down and served himself a cup of coffee. He started a conversation with the German girl. One of the Portuguese girls lit up a cigarette. "Come, I'll show you the house," Hannele said.

Luna and Hannele walked toward the house.

8.

I wake up shivering.

It's still dark outside.

Too early to get up.

Too early to do my work.

I need to wait.

I sit up, facing the man in the photograph.

I can't see him, but I can feel his dark eyes, watching me.

I lie down again.

I watch the ceiling.

I wait for dawn.

#

I return to the toolshed as soon as I'm done with my chores.

I don't know why I do it.

I probably shouldn't.

Because I don't want to know about the bulbs. Or about the person with the bun.

The door is half open, the way I left it.

I enter.

The tools and the brown paper bag are on the desk.

I take one of the bulbs from the bag.

I take the trowel.

I walk out of the toolshed, to the flower beds.

I crouch.

I make a hole with the trowel.

I put the bulb inside.

I cover the hole with soil.

I walk to the toolshed and put the trowel on the desk where I'd found it.

I return to the front of the house.

I take the watering can and water the bulb.

I water the rest of the flower beds.

I return the bench to the veranda, and wait for the night.

#

When I lie in the darkness on the couch in the kitchen, I feel a certain satisfaction with myself.

After all, I did everything properly, the way it has to be done.

I even have a new task.

9.

Sleeping bags were spread out on the unpainted wooden floors in the large common-room that smelled of pine.

"This is a community house," Hannele explained. "A gathering place. The village is scattered all over the woods, so sometimes the closest neighbor is kilometers away." She gestured to point out the spaciousness of the place. "It can hold up to fifty people."

Kurt scanned the room. "Where are all the chairs?" he asked, in a somewhat stiff, formal English.

"They have been stored up in the attic," Hannele said. "To make space for you."

Kurt put his sleeping bag on the floor, near the door. "I like to be close to the exit," he said.

"As you wish." Hannele shrugged.

Luna felt Kurt's eyes on her and didn't dare look his way.

"Over there is the kitchen," Hannele pointed to an open door. In the kitchen, a tall, skinny man was in the middle of sweeping the floors. "And this is Elias, my number two. He liaises with the community, I do the overall organisation." Elias waved at them. "As you can see, he's quiet, but efficient." Hannele cackled.

Hannele stood between the doors. Her orange shirt glowed in the afternoon light, the contours of her perfect figure clearly cut out in the door frame. "So, put your stuff wherever you like," she said to Luna. "We're having snacks outside. Join us when you're ready." Hannele spun on her heels and walked out.

Luna was alone. Kurt had gone somewhere, too, leaving his backpack by his sleeping bag. She was considering where to put her sleeping bag when Petra, the German girl, came in. "Hey. Luna, right? You tired?"

"Don't even ask."

Petra nodded knowingly. "I got here yesterday. Most of us did. It's good to have a day of rest. That train ride was a killer!"

"Totally," Luna agreed.

"You can put your sleeping bag next to mine," Petra offered. "I'm over there, by the window."

Luna followed her to the other end of the room. Petra sat on her sleeping bag, waiting for Luna as she unpacked, freshened up in the bathroom and changed into clean clothes.

When they were back outside, most of the campers were gone. A couple of them played tennis, some had left on a walk. From what was still available on the table, Luna prepared herself a sandwich, although she suddenly wasn't that hungry any more.

Petra went down to the tennis court, and Luna joined a group that was playing cards, the Portuguese girls whose names she couldn't remember, and Niilo, one of the villagers. She didn't stay for long; cards were not something she was interested in. She got her book then sat under a tree, trying to make up for the thirty pages she'd failed to read the day before. But she couldn't focus on her reading. She took a piece of paper, wrote down a few sentences, but couldn't focus on that either. The wind brought cigarette smoke from somewhere.

#

I know cigarette smoke.

Cigarette smoke unsettles me.

It unsettles me so much I start shaking, on the inside.

I look around the kitchen.

I can't see anything because it's dark.

But I can guess the black eyes of the man in the photograph, staring at me.

I don't know what to do.

It's too early to do my work.

I need to wait for dawn.

I need to stay away from what unsettles me.

I close my eyes.