

The bear statue was six feet tall, made of a single trunk of roughly cut birch, and startlingly lifelike.

As the bus rumbled back to life and went on on its way away, Mallory Miles looked at the bear and muttered, "Vicious-looking bastard, isn't it?"

Her companion squinted up at the sculpture and snorted. "Artistic licence I suppose. Bears aren't that fierce."

"They're not?"

"Nah. Bears are koalas, right? Cuddly things. Eat, uh, grass and stuff."

Mallory looked at the statue; it persisted in its frozen, wooden snarl, standing on the birch log's unshaped end.

"I don't think", Mallory Miles said, "that you know a lot about bears."

"Fair enough", the companion said. "City boy and all that. Speaking of which, where's the rest of this village hidden in?"

Mallory shrugged. "I guess this is it."

The village was three roads meeting, one of them paved — the bus had come that way, and departed that way too — and at the meeting-place, a dozen buildings that seemed your usual small-town amenities and maybe two dozen that seemed places with actual inhabitants. Beyond the houses, in every direction, the land rose, and became a wall of mixed firs and pines, dark green and dour in the unenergetic midday light of an overcast day.

The bus had left the two by the bear, next to a building with a sign reading "MATKAHUOLTO";

that was, as far as either of the two knew, "DEPOSIT FOREIGNERS HERE" or "FODDER FOR CANNIBALS".

The building formed one side of a public square of some sort; it was bare asphalt and empty save for an open-sided tent towards which the two made their way. Inside, a bored-seeming old man nodded over a smoking grill.

"Yum", the companion — he had a name; unfortunately, it was Evelyn — said; "fish."

"What the bears would call 'stuff'", Mallory added.

"Bears eat fish? I'm pretty sure vegetarian animals don't eat fish. Or are you saying bears are pescaterians?"

"I'm saying you don't know anything about bears." Mallory smiled at the stand-keeper, who blinked in surprise. "One." She held up a finger. "One fish."

"Two fish", Evelyn muttered, hands in the pockets of his black coat, eyes averted.

The stand-keeper scooped a chunk the size and general appearance of a charred finger off the grill into a piece of white oilpaper, and handed it over, muttering some unintelligible words. Mallory handed over a small euro bill, and got a few coins in return.

"You eat this", she said, handing the fish to Evelyn and starting back towards the MATKAHUOLTO building.

"What, me?"

"Yes, you. You're smaller and slower; with fish too you're a great bear bait."

"Ha ha. Come to Finland because you don't know about the bears; stay because bears?"

Mallory laughed. "Wasn't my idea that this would be a place to visit. Finland I can understand, but why a nether hole of all creation like this? Three hours in a bus, for this?"

The village utterly failed to react to this comment; no stream of interesting or indignant people erupted from any doorway or stand of trees.

"It's ethnic", Evelyn said past a mouthful of hot fish. "You didn't react well to city Finland, did you?"

Mallory frowned. "Isn't my problem. You would think the people who invented the *sauna* wouldn't be hung up on nudity."

The MATKAHUOLTO was apparently a purgatory of some sort: a dusty cafeteria with an elderly woman sleeping behind the counter like a dragon guarding scones and sandwiches older and more wrinkly than she was. A rack displayed much fresher magazines, their covers full of alien words and extra dots above the letters.

"Hey", Evelyn said, "the president." He looked at the headline. "Do you suppose that means 'hero of the free world' or 'Kenyan baby-eater'?"

Mallory rolled her eyes, then woke up the elderly saleslady and tried to ask about accommodations, lodgings, hotels and the like.

This was not easy, given that she spoke only English, and the saleslady only either Finnish, or some made-up argle-gargle backwards-Latin language of her own. After a few minutes Evelyn felt a stitch in his side and went out, because while he knew laughter was the one truly universal language, it was not one that was useful for asking about places to sleep.

The air outside was fresh and cold; the day was much darker than it should (by his instincts) have been, and he wasn't quite sure if the clouds above held rain or snow. Again, rain would have been the obvious answer, but with foreign climes, who knew?

The next building over was a convenience store, all white metal racks and familiar products with unfamiliar brand names. Beyond that was a single-story apartment building, drapes closed behind every window; and beyond that, a side street showing more houses, brick and painted wood, not scenic or quaint or piquant in the least, but well-tended and uninspired; then the street just ended in a wall of fir like the forest had reached down and eaten its continuation.

"Nothing here", Evelyn muttered and turned back.

The village was much smaller than he had thought; come to think of it, he wasn't even sure if any of the local authorities spoke a word of English.

There were no authorities in sight, and no other people either.

He felt an urge to step to the closest curtain-obscured window and peek in; who knew what kind of people he might startle or see?

He walked past the cafeteria's edge to the other direction, the town square or whatever it was; the fish-seller was nodding off again.

Beyond the square, the road split into two unpaved ones which curled uphill and out of sight. Just before that, two streets split off the main road, one to the left and one to the right; both ended after half a dozen houses at parking lot-

fronted drab double-story buildings that seemed some kind of people-holding places: schools, clinics, sanatoriums? The one on the left was dark, and had no cars at the lot. The one on the right had lights and life and cars, and a little red cross next to the main doorway, now that he squinted and looked. A hospital, then.

No sign of anything like a hostel or a hotel or a clue anywhere.

An old, bent woman skittered across the leftmost street; she was over the street and in a doorway and the doorway shut before he had time to react.

"*Elävä paikka vai mitä?*" a voice said behind him, and Evelyn jumped with surprise and blushed with embarrassment.

The speaker was a girl, maybe twenty or so, dressed in a way that clashed badly with the village's drabness: pink jeans, a white hoodie and a pink sailor bag with a sailor-suited cartoon girl on it.

"Um ah", Evelyn muttered, "do, do you speak English?"

The girl blinked. "Do you speak Finnish?"

"No?" Evelyn said, slightly confused.

"You're not Finnish?" the girl asked.

Evelyn shook his head.

"Good enough excuse then." The girl smiled. "I'm from around here. Can I help you?" She smiled mischievously. "The bus just left, though: you're trapped here until tomorrow."

Despondent sounds of ending negotiation echoed from inside the MATKAHUOLTO cafeteria; Evelyn and the local girl sat on a bench outside, chatting lazily.

"So, there are no hotels?" he asked.

The girl tossed her dark hair from one shoulder to the other, and shook her head. "No hotels, no inns. Nothing much, and less every year."

"Are you a local? You speak English so well and—" Evelyn said with a blush. "Uh, I mean—"

"You wouldn't expect so of the locals?"

"Ah, yeah."

The girl looked up at the forests, her expression strange. "I don't think I am, any more. The high school closed the year before I was to go there. . . now I've been away those three years, and three more of university. I came by the northern bus today; I'm just waiting for my mom to pick me up."

"You don't live in the village?"

The girl waved a lazy hand towards the forests. "No. Seven more kilometers into the darkness. The borderland of the middle of nowhere. How about you?"

"We're lost", Mallory said from a side, walking out and sitting with a sigh between the two. "Hi. Mallory Miles. Nice to meet you."

"Laura Taurinen." The two shook hands; Evelyn leaned forward to see past Mal and squawked, extending a hand: "Evelyn. Nice to meet you."

His and Laura's fingertips touched; the Finnish girl smiled. "I study translation over at the university. Don't get your hopes up for all Finns having perfect generic-Anglophone enuns— enunshia— ah, pronunciation."

"Tell me", Mallory said. "Does that woman" — she gestured behind them — "does she even speak Finnish?"

Laura peeked inside, then shook her head.

"Was that", Mallory asked, "an oh-woe shake of head, or a no-she-doesn't shake? Because if it was the latter, I'm getting out of here."

"No bus leaves before tomorrow morning", Laura said.

Mallory raised an eyebrow at Evelyn. "I thought you had checked the bus—"

"Look", Evelyn said, placatingly. "I'm sure there's plenty of interest here."

Laura laughed at that.

3

An hour later, they had seen all the sights of the village, and most of the non-sights as well. The high school was closed; the hospital was open but did not have generic visitation hours or any interesting diseases; the cafeteria they had already seen and its keeper had taken to glaring at them every time they walked past; the library was no doubt useful but hardly a tourist attraction; and the convenience store was too small, generic and expensive to result in anything except three soft drinks.

So, at the end of the hour, the three were sitting back at the same bench, Laura clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, and her phone closed on itself. "It looks like my mother is not answering the phone. Probably she forgot I'm coming this weekend, and has hung the phone on a cow's neck."

"Is that a thing?" Evelyn asked. Laura gave him an odd look and said, "Sure. Cowbells yesterday, phones today."

"Suppose we need a taxi", Mallory sighed. "Please tell me this place has at least that."

"Sure. Plenty of old people to ferry to the city for check-ups. I'll, uh, give you the number... " Laura hesitated. "On the other hand, I have a suggestion. I need the taxi because mother isn't answering or showing up, and I'm too lazy to walk and don't know anyone well enough anymore to ask for a favor. How about you come with me? I'm pretty sure I can promise a mattress and a bit of food."

Evelyn smiled. "That would be great."

Mallory snorted, then said yes.

4

The taxi was your regular car, maybe fancier than most; it was dark blue and the driver was bald and quiet.

The road was hard-packed dirt, swaying as a rollercoaster through a dark forest of fir and pine.

Seven kilometers, Evelyn thought to himself; something like four and a half miles. Seemed longer, though: probably because after a few hundred trees the rest looked kind of same. He wanted to ask how one navigated in a forest, were there signposts or something; but that felt like one of those questions that non-city folk thought funny.

There was a lot of those questions.

The taxi slowed to a halt at a point where an even narrower track separated from the road to the right, to the woods: wilted grass grew between

the tire tracks. The driver turned his car around, then sat in place, fingers drumming the wheel, as the three climbed out with their backpacks.

"Thanks for the help", Mallory grumbled in his general direction; if the man heard or understood he gave no sign of it. She turned around, fiddling with one strap of her backpack, and jumped with a yell as the taxi roared to life and barreled back down the road, missing her by inches.

Evelyn was staring after the car, equally dumbfounded; Laura the Finn was standing with her hand held out, mouth open, more dumbfounded than either of them.

"Must be a real busy man", Mallory said.

Laura lowered her hand, picked her backpack off the ground, and shook her head. "I... I wish I knew what his problem was. I was asking for him to come back here tomorrow, though come to think of it I am sure I can loan dad's car for dropping you back to the village—"

She bumbled on, shepherding Evelyn to the tire-track road, she on the left one, he on the right. Mallory looked after then, then took two steps to stand where the taxi had been.

Forest to the left and right, a twisty dark-brown band of road ahead of her...

She took four steps forwards and bent down to inspect the road.

It was smooth, pebbles pushed into the dirt by passing wheels, featureless and as good as asphalt probably, but there was a gouge in it, like a sunburst: nine teardrop-shaped grooves spreading from an untouched center the size of her palm. Each teardrop was as long as two of her fingers.

"What the... ", she whispered. Not a tire mark. Some sort of a stand, maybe?

Was this something to drive quickly away from?

Maybe the driver had just been in a hurry?

"Are you coming?" Evelyn shouted from behind the first bend; Mallory fished her phone out, took a quick picture, and followed the others.

5

The house was ten rooms maybe, horizontal clapboard painted dull dark red with vertical corner and window frame planks painted white: it sat at the end of the road, on a small clearing surrounded by firs, with an equally large cowshed and a few open pastures behind it. The road ended in a gravel loop like a yard, with an unimpressive, tiny and white Japanese car in the middle of it.

"You own the forest?" Evelyn exclaimed in surprise.

"A part of the forest", Laura said.

"You could get your own Christmas tree!" he yelled.

Laura gave him an odd look. "Yes?"

"Unbelievable!"

"He's a city person", Mallory stage-whispered, and touched Laura's back for reassurance.

The words worked; the touch less so. The Finnish girl gave Mallory a look usually reserved for much more severe cases of inappropriate touching; and raised her voice to a yell.

Mallory half-expected it to be "Help! Foreigners are invading my personal space" — but it was

a phrase in Finnish that sounded like something much happier.

There was no answer; the house was dark, the front door closed and, once Laura tried it, locked too.

"Maybe the tigers got them", Evelyn suggested.

"That much of a city person?" Laura asked, pulling a key out of a pocket of her pink jeans.

"That much", Mallory said.

As soon as she got the door open, Laura kicked her shoes off; Evelyn gave Mallory a conspiratorial wink and did likewise, tiptoeing in after the Finnish girl.

Mallory frowned. The first room had a rack off to one side, full of shoes of all kinds; she couldn't say outright if any pairs were missing.

No matter; wasn't her job to try to jump-scare the girl's parents. She brushed her boots against the doormat and stepped in.

6

"Probably they are taking a walk", Laura said over a cup of coffee. "Or visiting the neighbors."

"I didn't see any neighbors", Evelyn said, sipping from his own cup. They were in the kitchen, on heavy wooden benches around a heavy wooden table shiny with transparent lacquer and holding a few picture frames, each full of Laura and her parents: she in a plain white gown, she in a black-brimmed white cap, she holding a piece of paper and smiling in a green gown and gloves.

"Would be pretty intrusive if you could", Laura said. "Them looking in your windows, *ick*. The

closest is four kilometers back towards where we met."

"City person", Mallory whispered.

"This 'city person' thing is getting old", Evelyn whispered back. "Anyhow anyway, are you sure they're okay with us coming here—"

"Don't worry. Dad's not a xenophobic axe killer type."

Evelyn put his cup down and glanced around nervously. "Uh, if you thought that was reassuring—"

Laura laughed. "Don't worry. This is a dozen times nicer place than the village."

"I prefer concrete", Evelyn said.

"The village's decaying concrete. And decaying people. Every time I come here it's a little bit older, colder, weirder, more... senile. Everyone who's young moves out, and nobody moves back in because there's nothing here."

"It didn't seem all that, uh, decrepit to me", Mallory said.

"And a good host I am", Laura sighed, standing up. "Let me get you something to eat, a few cookies or something. You don't have crazy allergies or anything?"

7

"Let's go to see the cows. You don't have crazy allergies or anything?"

"Can you be allergic to cows?" Evelyn asked.

It was hours later; they had had coffee, cookies and the remains off a macaroni casserole off the freezer. Laura's parents hadn't shown up, and several calls to the closest (though not strictly

speaking close) neighbors hadn't revealing anything regarding their location.

Mallory could see the Finnish girl was a bit anxious as they tromped round the house and to the cowshed — well, "cowshed" was her guess at what it was, there probably was a better word for something you could lose trucks in. A cowhouse, maybe? Or was that like a cathouse, only even worse?

Laura stepped in, and stopped.

Mallory peeked over her shoulder into the darkness inside.

"What", Evelyn said, standing on tiptoes and failing to see past, "are the cows restless?"

Laura flicked the lights on, and said something uncomplimentary in Finnish.

There were no cows in the shed: plenty of railings and chains and concrete, and an enduring stench of big animals and big manure, but no cows at all.

"Do—" Evelyn said, nervous, "do people take the cows for a walk too?"

"Don't be—" Mallory started, and then stopped. "You don't, do you?"

Laura gave them a quick look and shook her head. "They're probably, uh, out at the pasture or... "

The pastures behind the cowshed were grass and brown piles of surprise; and also contained not a single cow.

"This is silly", Laura muttered, and dodged under a wire and into the pasture.

"Er", Mallory said, "are we supposed to follow... "

"Sure", Laura said without looking back, "sure, it's okay, I'll just peek to see. . . "

Evelyn reached out to raise the wire, and pulled his hand back, yelping.

"The fence's electric", Laura called back, walking briskly towards the pasture's other end, where no wire separated it from the slowly thickening firs.

"The fence's electric", Evelyn muttered, and dropped to hands and knees to crawl under it. "Is this some kind of ritual abuse, Mal? The fence's electric!"

Mallory decided to not try a limbo move, and bowed, crouched, swept out a foot and was under the wire and back up in one smooth move, one hand tugging her red ponytail to keep it from touching the grass.

"Don't touch those", she called to Evelyn and jogged after the Finn.

"But who left chocolate cakes for the cow—wait, is this cow poop?"

Mallory rolled her eyes and jogged on.

8

The pasture extended to the woods three times its open length; the firs had seen their share of rubbing and nibbling by cows, but there were no cows in the pasture. Not even a fallen wire at the back.

Evelyn was casting fearful glances at the overcast gray skies by the time they returned to the house.

"Afraid of rain?" Mallory asked.

"Afraid of saucers", he muttered.

"You're not a cow."

"Do you think an alien would see the difference?"

"Moo."

"Oh, probe you."

"You wish."

They ducked under the wire, and caught up with Laura fiddling with the phone. "Typical", she said. "Mother's still not answering, and now it says out of range, cannot be reached."

"You mean", Evelyn said, casting an incredulous look around him, "we're still in range?" He pulled out his phone, and exclaimed: "I can check my e-mail!"

"It's probably something really simple", Mallory said to the Finn, in a voice as calm and soothing as she could. She had no idea what kind of simplicity would account for the disappearance of two people and a herd of cows — border-hopping Russian gangsters? — but mysteries like this were usually less arcane than they appeared to be.

Laura snapped her phone shut and shook her head. "Yes. Er, uh, sorry about bothering you like this. I'm just... just always a little out of phase whenever I come here."

"Don't worry. We needed some exercise anyway."

"Why... if you don't mind me asking, why are you here... uh, do you have like relatives, ancestors here or something?"

Mallory gave the other a crooked smile. "No way. All corners of Europe except this one. We came here on a dumb bet."

Laura rolled her eyes. "I bet you did, this place" — she giggled — "God, I'm really out of

sorts if 'I bet' is a funny joke now. What kind of a bet?"

"Ev made a program to select random places on Google Maps."

"Whatever for?"

"He's a teacher. Elementary school. Needed something to generate homework."

"Oh no, not 'two pages about Ulan Bator'?"

"More or less. Knowing him, probably more. He was testing it and said we should make a holiday of it, take the first place it gave and" — Mallory spread her hands — "here we are."

Laura gave her a puzzled look. "You're not trailing a TV crew or something?"

"Sorry. Left with Snooki in Helsinki."

"That... "

"That was a joke. Okay? We're normal people. Little money, less to spend it on; and we've known each other forever."

(A few paces away, Evelyn was typing to Twitter, "Snooki has been mentioned. We expect deportation in five mins or less.")

Laura blushed. "So you're not—"

Mallory blushed. "We? Oh God no we're not—"

Evelyn put his phone away and blinked. "Are we done?"

As they came back in, Laura glanced behind herself and said: "You're doing worse now."

"Huh?" Mallory saw nothing she was doing differently.

"Oh!" Evelyn exclaimed, looking down.

Mallory saw nothing different there. Just two pairs of shoes and— "Oh, wait."

Evelyn kicked off his shoes as if they were iron and hot. "Stupid me. This is one of those shoes-off houses!"

"Are there any other kinds?" Laura asked.

"Huh?" Mallory said.

The other two went towards the kitchen, shoeless. Mallory looked down at her own feet in puzzlement. "What, no shoes?"

There was a shoe rack by this cowshedwards back door too; black rubber boots of the agrarian, non-fetishy kind mostly. Was this a religious thing or—

She slapped her forehead and groaned.

Right.

Cows, cow manure, not a local habit to walk in with the boots on.

She stepped into the kitchen on soft black-socked feet, and paused at the doorway.

There was someone new in, sitting at the kitchen table with his back at her. Laura and Evelyn were seated on the other side, clearly uncomfortable. Whoever the new man was, he was much shorter, balder and dark-haired-er than the father figure the kitchen table photographs showed. A white dress shirt peeked from under a dark green windbreaker; a pair of hands rested on the table, clutching each other.

He was speaking in the kind of a dry, patient voice that the very worst teachers used to address their very youngest pupils; and naturally he was speaking in Finnish.

He finished a sentence; Laura glanced at Evelyn and said a few words. The balding stranger went on.

As Mallory had no desire to join this unintelligible conversation, she walked backwards in the blessed silence of socks on a good wooden floor, and peeked out a front window. A yellow Opel, a seeming legacy of the Seventies, was parked next to the family's white Japanese vehicle.

Mallory tapped "what's up?" to her phone and clicked Evelyn's number.

A few seconds later, a text came back: "do you think i speak finnish?"

Mallory pocketed her phone and tip-toed to take a leak.

10

"So, who was that guy?"

The yellow Opel growled back towards the road, and Mallory slumped to the spot across the table the stranger had occupied.

"He was..." Laura hesitated. "Uh, I don't know the correct term... the prov... no, the municipality's, uh, *puuhamies* and *kunnanvaltuuston*— uh, the secretary of the municipality... council?"

"Sounds good to me", Evelyn said. "What did he have to say? Surrender the foreigners, the bonfire is ready?"

After a moment of silence, he added, "Don't tell me he said that."

"No. He was... uh, he was saying Dad and Mom are out walking the cows."

Mallory blinked. "I thought you didn't do that."

Laura shrugged. "I thought we didn't do that. He said it is some kind of public health thing and wouldn't say anything more, and they would be back by Sunday morning."

"Long walk", Evelyn said. "So tonight, tomorrow and then they're back? Sounds a little fishy to me."

Laura stood up. "Which probably is the reason he said we should just sit here and do nothing, this is not our business and it's official and public healthy and no-more-details-to-be-released—"

"You don't seem to be sitting", Evelyn said.

Laura looked at them, eyes blazing. "That officious little leering prick is not the boss of me. And if you knew Finnish I would give you the version with the curse words in. Since he won't tell me anything, I'm going to find out on my own. You are free to crash here while—"

"No no", Evelyn said, "we are in."

11

"Is it supposed to be getting this dark?" Evelyn asked.

The three were walking around the cowshed — well, Laura was walking and the rest were following her, trying to see any recent cow-tracks in the grass. The sky was getting darker, and it wasn't even five in the evening.

"Maybe it's the clouds", Mallory said, looking up. "An storm coming on, maybe?"

"Maybe it always gets dark this early, outside cities?" Evelyn said.

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't work that way."

In the end, the only tracks lead out to the pasture, and across it, and to a gate at the back of it.

Well, it wasn't a gate exactly: the electric wire just had a handle and a hook on it, allowing it to be opened between two fence-posts.

"I'm pretty sure", Laura said, hand on the handle, "that this wasn't here when I last visited."

Beyond the gate, a narrow path went into the firs. What remained of grass at this point was torn by the passage of hooves (did cows have hooves, Mallory asked herself, or were they called something else? Ungulates, or something?), and as the ground turned to dry brown fir needles, darkened where overturned by cows passing by. Tree roots slithered in the murk like rough brown snakes, some with little white cuts on them where the cows had gone.

The path into the forest seemed very dark and ominous, almost as dark and ominous as the darkening sky overhead.

Evelyn shifted nervously. "I'm pretty sure my shoes aren't up for this kind of stuff."

Laura gazed into the darkness, and muttered: "I am sure some of Dad's would fit you. . . "

"It's getting kind of dark", Mallory said.

Laura looked up, past the treetops. "Oh. Right. I. . . I didn't notice."

"We'll look for them tomorrow", Mallory said.

They had eaten a few sandwiches in silence, and showered before that; it was fully dark outside, and Evelyn was periodically glancing out a window, muttering of blackouts.

"Yes", Laura muttered, emptying a glass of milk with a troubled expression on her face. "I'm sure this is just something. . . something."

"Not that I know", Mallory began, "but do you think we should call the police?"

Laura's expression was one of surprise. "Police? No, this isn't. . . this isn't the sort of big sad thing you call a police for. Is this?"

"You tell me. Is this normal?"

"What, in Finland? No! People don't just disappear along with their cows."

Evelyn joined in. "No, uh, rebel militias or secret policemen?"

Laura rolled her eyes. "Please. This is Finland."

Evelyn blinked. "Is that a good thing?"

"If you're afraid of militias or the secret police, yes. If you're afraid of getting lost in the forest and. . . and. . . it's not a good thing. But not both of them! They're not *city people*. And what about the cows?"

"Something spooked the cows", Evelyn offered.

"And they flew over the fence?" Mallory asked.

"I—"

Mallory raised a hand. "If the sentence you were about to say had the word 'tractor beam' in it, don't say it."

"No", Laura said, "the tractor was in the shed."

"Huh?" Evelyn said. "What's a tractor?"

"Look", Mallory said, standing up, waving her empty glass like a weapon. "Quiet, both of you. Think logically about this. If they're just lost, that council-secretary-person would not have come here. He came here, so it's something else. And he came here because— well, you tell me."

"Oh", Laura said in a small voice. "I did call all the neighbors, asking where Mom and Dad—"

"So that creep feels it's his place to come here and tell us to stay put. Why does he do that?"

"Because he's mad?"

"Shut up, Ev. Why doesn't he want you" — Mallory pointed the glass at Laura — "knowing where your parents are?"

A thought bounced around in Mallory's head — because they're dead — but she pushed it down and didn't say it.

Laura frowned. "He did say they'd be back on Sunday—"

"Assuming he's telling the truth", Evelyn whispered.

"—so it's not something that he would mind them telling me about on Sunday."

Evelyn shrugged. "Is it your birthday on Sunday?"

Laura shook her head.

"Wait", Evelyn said, "is that 'no' in Finland?"

"Yes."

"It's yes?"

"No... it's no."

"Oh. Well, where do you take cows, anyway?"

Laura shrugged. "What do you mean, 'take cows'? Your milk and feed them here, you don't take them anywhere, even the vet comes here... "

She set her glass down on the table and breathed in. "Oh."

"Cow plague?" Mallory asked.

"*Cow plague?*" Evelyn fairly shrieked, rising off the bench and backing into a corner.

"There... " Laura shook her head. "There's no such thing as a cow plague, okay? You're safe. But maybe it's that there was something with the cows and... "

Mallory leaned back, hands on thighs to avoid falling off the bench. "So you're saying your parents are at the backwoods now, with a nail gun, a shovel, and a pack of cows?"

Evelyn laughed nervously. "Better that than the village militia, a nail gun—"

"Don't go there", Mallory said.

Evelyn snapped his mouth shut and swallowed nervously. "Sorry. Didn't mean to—"

"Look", Laura said, rising up. "It doesn't help any if we just jump up and down around the table, talking. I'll call the secretary tomorrow and twist his arm. I can ask about the foreigner too."

"What foreigner?" Mallory asked; and all of a sudden it was very quiet.

"Eh... " Evelyn breathed.

Laura looked at them, first one and then the other. Then comprehension blossomed all over her face. She pointed at Mallory. "Ohhh. You don't know. You really thought this was a randomly chosen place!"

"What?" Mallory didn't quite know whether to be alarmed or pissed.

Evelyn moved back to the bench and sat down, leaning towards the window to stay out of Mallory's punching distance.

"I don't know anything", Laura said, one side of her mouth twitching up into a smile, "I just know he" — she pointed at Evelyn — "wanted to know about some foreigner who had been here a few years ago. . . "

"Okay", Evelyn said, nervously rubbing his hands together. "Er, Mallory, I was not entirely honest when I, uh, 'randomly' chose this specific village for our vacation spot. . . "

Mallory narrowed her eyes. "This better be good."

13

So, Evelyn began, I have a brother. A year younger than me. Some people say we're alike; I don't see it. I went to study to be a teacher because I like giving the gift of knowl— I like the way people's eyes shine when they understand something.

My brother on the other hand travelled around the world, postponing his studies, sending slow postcards and quick e-mails. He was. . . he always said he was looking, but never could say what for. Eventually he came to Finland, and stayed here for a week. I don't know where, as there doesn't seem to be a hotel, right?

Right, no hotel. Maybe he had met someone local on a bus, on a train, and stayed at their place. Maybe he had a tent. I don't know. What I know is that one e-mail told he liked it here, liked the quiet and the trees; the second e-mail told the people here were nice, though wrinkly and for the most part not English-speakers; but he had found a few kindred souls, people he could learn from. Get his eyes shining with understanding.

No, he wasn't a druggie, thank you very much Mallory, I think you met him a couple of times years ago so thank you for asking that. He was a dreamer type, but not the sort that joins a hippie commune and sits around all day smoking every plant in sight. Our parents thought that, but he's my brother and I know he's not like that.

There was a third e-mail, seven days after he'd come here: told that he had found— a girlfriend I suppose, he was writing in a hurry, as impatient as he usually was.

And then?

Then nothing.

After a few days I wrote him, all jokes, asking—

Well, more or less asking whether he was too exhausted by exotic Finnish sex—

I'd appreciate if you didn't laugh at this, I don't understand why this is funny.

I wrote him a couple of times more, and he didn't answer. There were no postcards. He just vanished.

No, he didn't have a phone. It's either terribly bothersome or terribly expensive to own a phone when you hop from one country to another and still another.

Of course we wrote the authorities. And yes, I know Finland is an orderly place. We got nice, friendly answers. And they all said that they had contacted the local authorities and inquired and they had looked into things, and nobody knew where Thomas was. He had probably moved on, but nobody knew where, and nobody had any idea of who he had hung around with. As far as anyone knew, he had showed up here, been

here for a couple of days, seeing the sights, such as there were, and then. . . poof!

Disappeared off the face of Finland.

"Okay", Mallory said. "I would be a lot more angry for not telling me that, but one, you should have because that's horrible, and two. . . uh, is it too melodramatic of me to say that it has happened again?"