

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(11.11.2013)

(three days later)

I'm writing this from the mountainside — both my thumbs and calves hurt. Walking around here is pretty easy, if you have the shoes — and you know I'm a walking shoe person anyway. I took a snack to go — a bottle of water and a plastic sandwich in a plastic wrap — and started following this road past my sweet home. It keeps curving along the mountainside, but there're no other houses. Google Maps tells me it should go on for maybe a kilometer more and then just stop.

That's silly; roads don't just stop!

I just hope I'd taken an umbrella. There're bad clouds rolling in from the... starts a compass app... the north.

I guess I'll unburden my heavy heart until I can make my mind up about the imminence of deadly rainstorms.

So: I've tried to talk to the locals.

I've tried.

The problem is, even if I find someone who will talk English, and will talk to me, then since I'm a foreigner, they seem to all want to talk about that. There are two and only variants.

First: Oh hey, you Nordic shavepate person. Power fist bump! I am sure you too agree there are too many darkies! We shouldn't let any more in, kick those in out, and maybe hunt them for sport! Though some of their women are as hot as their weather, right, hur hur hur, thrusting hip motion! We Swiss are the good sort of people.

Second: Oh hey, you Nordic person! I profusely proclaim to you that the persons of the first sort are

a sad minority that do not represent the true nature of the Swiss, and in many communities immigrants are doing just right. We Swiss are good people.

Both get really old really quickly.

Now onwards with the walk!

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(11.11.2013)

(the same day)

Oh hey wow. See the picture.

(Attached to this e-mail is a low-quality phone camera picture of a outdoors scene: gray stone and grayer buildings, bleached to their original concrete flavor by time and hard weather. Most are one or two stories, but a circular one in the middle of the others is three stories, the upmost one an unfinished or dismantled or destroyed mass of steel girders black with age. Doorframes gape open, doorless; windows likewise. The interiors appear empty. A line of leaning steel frame towers, maybe four meters high, each leaning, one fallen, march off the front of the circular building to the left and out of the picture.)

Recovery log

(11.11.2013)

(the same day)

The log lists an audio capture, started by remote five minutes after the previous e-mail. The capture is ten minutes in length, and mostly silent.

At intervals, a male voice mutters in Finnish either amazed obscenities or expressions of delight or confusion.

“What *is* this place?”

“Well, the management’s really let this place run down. . . heh, better note that down.”

“Sure hope this thing doesn’t fall on me. . . ”

“Wait. Those towers march uphill, and there’s a winch, so. . . ”

“Yep! Tickets, parking, equipment rental, coffee shop— well, this explains why my fucking hut exists. This went to ruin, but they kept a few of the houses. . . ”

Other than the voice, there are sounds of rustling clothes, loud at close proximity, footsteps crunching on gravel or scuffling against smooth stone or concrete, and what seems to be wind whistling.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(11.11.2013)

(the same day, an hour later)

So the rain got me; I’m trapped inside, snacks eating, waiting for the rain to stop.

Waiting? Why, you ask — well, because I found what was at the end of the road.

A ruin.

Not a scenic castle ruin either, but something from the dark years of industrial design, concrete-on-concrete and ugly-on-ugly. An old, abandoned resort! By the signs of it, a skiing resort — there’s ruined ski lift going towards the top of the mountain, and parts of it on this side seem to be smoothed a bit. There’re like — well, look at the picture I sent you — a dozen buildings here, all stripped down to walls and roofs and not much else. The local repo men must be super efficient!

That, or the management’s really let this place run down.

There's nobody and nothing here, just this ruin in the middle of nowhere. Or a kilometer from my place and two from the village. I guess this place going south explains why they're so sullen — “Sure, *now* the foreigner comes!”

Aw crap, it's getting dark outside. Damn these sudden southern sunsets! I gotta get going, rain or not; mountainside in darkness not fun.

Aki.

Recovery log

(12.11.2013)

(the next day)

The log lists all items as “unavailable”, starting around sunset the previous day.

An e-mail from Laura to Aki

(12.11.2013)

(that same next day)

You okay?

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(12.11.2013)

(the same day)

Yeah, I'm okay, considering how shitty yesterday was, in the end.

It gets dark, real dark, real quick. I obviously have never walked this way before, and never in the back direction, so I stumble over every fucking rock; and the only lamp I have is the phone, and I'm not about to go around holding it up when it's raining.

And it's raining.

Then it's pouring.

Twice I walk off the asphalt; once I twist my ankle and sit there for a happy half-minute thinking of crawling home.

No such harm or happy tragedy; I get back to the house soaked and limping, but with unbroken limbs. I stagger to the door, and—

I have a porch, right? Three doors: inside, firewood room and toilet?

When I get my key out, I notice the latch to the wood room is undone. The door is maybe a finger's breadth open. I'm on the hinge side, face close to the wall, so I can see the door trembling back and forth.

Not the rain; it's on the porch.

Not the wind; the wind's let up.

No, the wood room door's trembling because there's some murder hobo on the other side of it, and I've interrupted him stealing all my firewood—

I think, does he know I'm here? He must, why else would he be waiting there, fingers on the door?

As I'm thinking this, the door starts to swing open.

I panic and throw myself against it.

The door slams shut the measly five centimeters or so that it's opened. Yay! I reach for the latch.

Then the door slams open with tremendous force, open all the hundred-and-eighty degrees that are available for it, and after being barely slowed by contact with my forehead and left knee, it knocks the wall. I knock the floor, and when I get up, the intruder is gone. No sight, no sound, not even wet footprints on the wet asphalt.

So yeah, yesterday was not a great day. (Plus my phone had gone gaga in the rain, and I had to dry it and shake the battery in magic circles until it started

working again. If you don't hear of me again, it's either the creeper or the phone—)

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(12.11.2013)

(the same day)

Silly me. Only just now thought to see if there was anything changed in the woodshed.

Well, one thing: someone had, with some relish, peed all over the closest wood.

They're now re-drying outside.

Was it a man or a bear?

Are there bears in Switzerland? And do they pee in the woodshed?

Aki.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(13.11.2013)

(the next day)

So this manuscript is partly done in a typewriter, partly written by hand. The handwriting sucks ass. Thus, more from the typewritten portions—

Reasoning that the woman hadn't just dropped out of thin air, the police went round to every hotel, chalet, lodge, youth hostel, motel, hof-thingie, apartment-rental, wohnung-whatsit, and the like — there's a list, and it's like ten pages long. Each was asked about a tall, pretty, white woman with long hair — not necessarily brown, as it might have been dyed, earlier — and for each there's either a no-such-guest or such-a-guest, amended with “still alive” or “doesn't fit”.

In the end, no sign of the woman having stayed anywhere.

Then they started going door-to-door: friend? relative? overnighter, hitch-hiker, asker-for-the-way?

No luck.

Sure, there were some leads — all either too vague to be of any use, the words of self-promoters or idiots, obvious lies given what the police had withheld, honest mistakes — in one case a local lady that stepped into a police office and said, yes, that's me; I'm the mystery lady.

That's a kind of copycat I haven't heard before.

One more detail from the autopsy. The teeth. She had long, strong, perfect white teeth, usual in every way except one. On the inner surface of her right front tooth, there was a mark. Three red dots in an equilateral triangle. Little pits on the tooth, half-spheres with a radius of 2 millimeters, drilled, coated with a metallic red paint.

If that's body modification, it's the most pointless kind possible. Who ever sees the inner surfaces of your teeth?

Aki.

PS. That's a signature, not a suggested answer!

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(14.11.2013)

(the next day)

Hey! Had a good day at work — fiddled with light-bulbs. Insert a screwing joke here. Then walked home, and went on and visited the ski resort again. No rain this time.

Maybe I should take up writing a diary. Or writing memoirs. I already have an audience of one!

Have a look at what I found — a flyer from the days the place was in operation. I found a whole sad rack of these, in different languages. This is in English (duh), the others were in French and Italian, and then there was an empty spot and a pile of ashes on the floor. Happens when you write in the language of the hot, right?

(Attached to this e-mail is a phone camera picture of a flyer, printed on faded pink paper. The upper left corner has crossed ski poles, the upper right crossed skis. Between them reads, in ornate letters, “SKIRESORT UNTERGALEN”. Below, words in halting English spell out the schedule of a “cheerful Winter festival”. It appears to have been mostly skiing, including a skiing Santa Claus, a skiing Krampus, drinking mulled wine and dancing towards the end of the day. Also, “gold warped gifts for all entering the dancing competition”).

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(15.11.2013)

(the next day)

So I get to work today, put my overalls on, hunt for the hammer — no euphemism — and one of the computer guys comes and tells me to go home.

I say what; he says go home.

I think, woah, xenophobia!

He then explains, no, not to Finland. Go to the place where you live and sit out today, there are complications or something, go home and come back tomorrow.

So I drop the hammer, swim out of the work suit, and saunter back here.

I wish these guys were talkative enough to talk with, or knew enough English, or any German.

So I spent today outside, in nice sunshine, trying to make my way downhill to the valley, and then uphill to the four fingers, aiming for the pass between the two leftmost ones. (Because — you remember that photo with the guys at the scene of the murder? I turned it around, and the other side said, the place of the proposed memorial. So I wanted to know what it looked like.)

Well, the valley (“the palm”) is maybe three hundred meters down, a rocky but not too steep slope: but once you get down there, it’s a crazy morass. I swear — I kid you not — it’s a plain of stones and none is smaller than my head. Some are the size of buses. Just strewn here, there, everywhere. A pit to bury your ankle in every two paces. These small hill-lets that quiver when you step on the lowest stone — just crazy and impassable. I spent an hour trying to find a way through, but every way I looked it was stuff I didn’t want to try going through, alone and away from places ambulances can back into.

One time I almost had hope because I could see someone on the other side, on the last foothill of the four-mountain line, less than a kilometer from me.

I waved; they waved back. I yelled, but they didn’t hear; or what’s more likely, chose to ignore the foreigner. I couldn’t come up with a yell-and-gesture that would communicate “Hey! How do I get from here to there?”

Went back, then, and read some more.

This is a fascinating manuscript. I wish I knew how scrupulous the author was — well, it can’t be all made up, with this many photos and news clippings;

that's not authorship, that's reality. (Or a really high-tech mania; eh.)

So the police couldn't find any prior trace of the woman, and were spooked by the wounds within her and the lost cord — they then reasoned that they should look into the idea that maybe the woman had been killed — this was suggested by the fact that despite much searching no trace of clothes had been found on her, around her, or in the surrounding terrain. Nude people would attract attention; also, nude people would get cold, and hurt their feet. The body's feet were the sort your average shoe-wearer has — distinctly not cut by the rocks and stones of the mountainsides. So it seemed reasonable to suggest she had had shoes and a cloak at least — that they weren't there suggested that either she had tied them to a helium balloon, or that someone had been there with her and taken them away. Maybe fed her whatever had been in the empty medicine bottle, maybe burned the papers found destroyed beside her. Maybe a murderer; maybe an accomplice in a weird ritual suicide.

I get the sense from the author's work that this was something some of the police felt was the correct answer, but they were all very keen to not give that impression to the locals. Maybe they feared some kind of a witch hunt.

Thus, they widened their search. A suspicious person or persons, any size, shape or number, that had inquired about the mountains beyond Untergalen village? Anyone that didn't seem to have a reason to be in the area? Secretive or suspicious people? *Foreigners?*

There were loads, obviously. Those that could be tracked down, were deemed harmless. Many weren't.

In the meanwhile, they had to do something about

the body. There's a news clipping with "sad!" written on the side of it: some local had written to the newspaper expressing concern over the possibility that the woman could be buried in the local cemetery — there was no way to know she had been a Christian in good standing, you know...

They were keeping the body at the funeral parlor — there's a picture of the building, I think I've seen it — refrigerated somehow, there among the local dead.

The body had been found on the third of January, 1990. Taken in by the police the fifth of January. By the middle of January it was really the time to bury it— but then, the night between the fifteenth and sixteenth of January, someone or several someones broke into the funeral parlor. Of all the things there — the cash register, the chemicals, the nice dark suits — they stole only three.

The body of the mystery woman, and the two bodies of the local dead in-house at the time.

The morning, the undertaker came and found the back door broken, the lock smashed in, the wood around it splintered, like from a tremendous impact, one of those police battering rams or something. Inside, nothing disturbed, but the body boxes gaping empty, refrigerant pooling on the floor, making mist — and the three dead all gone without a trace.

There's a news clipping, a three-line story, of police asking the public about people that might have seen the hooligans responsible for "vandalism" at the funeral parlor. No word of the missing bodies.

After this, it seems the police couldn't find anything more to do, or if they did anything, it didn't reveal anything. They hit a wall everywhere, all they had had had been the body, and they didn't have

even that anymore.

If I'm reading this manuscript correctly, the author's about to move on to the part where he presents his own heroic research. So in the next e-mail expect to hear about that.

Recovery log

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

The log lists camera captures automated at ten-minute intervals.

Most of the camera captures for this day are darkness, fuzz, and pocket lint until about midday. Then for several hours they are a table (main camera) and rafters (front camera). Occasionally a dark figure is seen at the edges of the front camera's view, moving past the table; the front camera is too low-quality to capture more than a blurry shadow.

At 15:30 local time, the audio capture was activated for a minute. It recorded one loud fart and some flipping of pages.

At 15:32 local time, the video capture was activated for five minutes. For the first minute, the views from both cameras remained the same: table and rafters.

At 15:33, the views shook briefly. A bald man appeared in the front camera's field of vision, and picked up the phone. The views veered wildly, showing the somewhat unkempt insides of the room, and the mountains outside. The man's face stayed in the front camera, occasionally occulted by his fingers. Some ten seconds after picking up the phone he muttered "Right. Big joke." and moved to place the phone back on the table. Both cameras were covered by his hand.

They stayed covered in this fashion for one and half minutes. The audio stayed silent. At the end of this time, around 15:35, he dropped the phone screen down on the table and moved away.

There were no more sounds, no more visible movement.

At 15:37 local time, the video capture ended.

Note stuck to the front door of Aki Rauta's house

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Hey, assholes!

Stop skulking around or I'll stick a knife in your eyes.

If you don't understand English I hope you understand this: FUCK YOU!

yours,

Aki Rauta

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Thanks for the text — what do you say, won't we try to make this communication a bit less a monologue? We could try a Hangout tomorrow, if you have the time. OK?

Aki.

An e-mail from Laura to Johanna

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Sorry, I can't come over tomorrow. I have something I have to do.

Deferred kisses!

L.

An e-mail from Laura to Aki

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Sure. How about six in the evening, your time?

Laura.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Great! OK!

I'll call you.

Aki.

An e-mail from Johanna to Laura

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Pooh. You're being so secretive again. Me not like.

J.

An e-mail from Laura to Johanna

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

No no no. It's not like that — look, it's Aki. I have to talk to him, Hangout, videophone, face-to-face on the online, like what.

Hey, you're so smart you must know you're too beautiful and wonderful to worry about infidelity!

L. (kisses!)

An e-mail from Johanna to Laura

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Oh, you little tease. My nipples explode with delight!

J.

An e-mail from Laura to Johanna

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Look; I've got the call scheduled for six. Maybe I'll come over eight or nine? I promise I'll tell you what this is all about. Plus hot sweaty sex.

L.

An e-mail from Johanna to Laura

(15.11.2013)

(the same day)

Secrets and sex? How could I refuse?

See... x you tomorrow.

J.

Google Hangout video call

(16.11.2013)

(the next day)

The call begins at 17:57 Swiss time, with one person on the call. The first is Aki Rauta, seen through

the front camera of his phone. He's sitting at a table, the wide window behind him showing the mountains outside, three of the four peaks across the valley fitting into the view. He's wearing a lopsided smile, but seems tired. He fidgets for a while with some makeshift frame holding the phone in place on the table, adjusting his position so that he doesn't cover the view.

At 18:00 Swiss time, the second person joins the call. There's a blank white wall behind her. She's skinny, narrow-faced, dark-skinned, and has long straight bleached-white hair. By her appearance, she is in her late twenties.

"Hey, sis" Aki Rauta says.

Laura Rauta waves a hand and answers with a "Heya. Scenery show-off."

Aki Rauta glanced behind himself and smiled. "But it's such good scenery, isn't it?"

"So you're hard at work, right?"

Aki's smile turns sour. "I wish. Tried to go there today, too, but there was still some hubbub, the computer guys running around with printouts, plugging these... you know, thingie... drives, hard drives? into their computers, you know, the computer maintenance stuff. Barely stopped long enough to tell me work was cancelled for today too. I'd be more concerned, but the first chunk of my pay dropped today!"

He paused for a while, then continues.

"You could congratulate me for that, you know."

Laura's mouth twitches. "Isn't that sort of a normal thing? Getting paid?"

"Says the student. I, who have worked with my own hands—"

“While I write my essays with feet, obviously. So, where’s that mystery book?”

“Oh!” Aki stands up, moves out of the picture, and returns a few seconds later, dropping a thick pile of yellowing papers on the table between himself and the camera. He exhibits several, including photographs, news cutouts and photocopies, while the two continue to speak. “Here! In its whole unpublished amateur-sleuth glory!”

“Hey, so you didn’t make it all up. . . ”

Aki rears up in mock outrage. “Why! How could you even think that! Am I the sort of person to indulge in masturbatory murder-fantasies?”

Laura raises her eyebrows, similarly simulation an emotion. “I don’t know! Do you have any good ones?”

“But seriously, if I was like a computer, write-long-things person, I might start translating this shit. I’m not leaving this behind me here. I’ve been, like, taking pictures of this. I tried to look if this book was finished, like, if this was an early draft, but no, I couldn’t find any book about this thing.”

“So what? You’re going to steal a book about a murder? What kind of a *matryoshka* of crime are you making?”

Behind Aki, there’s a bright flash on the far mountainside. Neither of the two notices this.

Aki shakes his head. “Heh! Just for my own entertainment. Nobody knows who forgot this thing here — nobody that was willing to talk to me anyways.”

“So you asked nobody?”

“No, I asked the computer guys. Since this is like the place they give, apparently, when they have a short hire for the. . . the CareCare Bears company. . . and they kind of said the place had been cleaned and

supplied with what I needed. Meaning a pair of nail clippers and this.”

“Yay, honesty.”

There’s a second flash on the mountainside. Laura’s eyes flicker in its direction, but she doesn’t otherwise react to it.

“Who knows.” Aki smiles. “Maybe I can find someone to talk to, to tell what the people here know about this case.”

“Case. Great, now comes the CSI talk. You mean you haven’t asked. . . ?”

“Not the most natural question to spring on people you don’t know, is it? Would make you seem kind of weird. Plus with these people. . . they don’t know the language, or won’t talk. This whole experience is killing my faith in English as a world language. And German, shit, you’d think Nazis raped the grandmothers of everyone here—”

“Hey. Not funny.”

Aki blinks. “Wait, they did? Look, my history is kind of—”

“Ah, never mind. Just don’t go around attributing people not wanting to talk to you to mass rape.”

Aki laughs. “Hey, at least it wouldn’t be my fault!”

Laura winces; Aki doesn’t notice. There’s a third flash from the mountainside; neither of them notices.

“So anyway, as long as they keep paying me I can keep up not showing up to do their job. I’m not picky! Plus I can keep up with my walks, and— I should try this video thing when I’m at that resort place, it’s really nice in a spooky ghost hunters kind of a way—”

There is a bright flash of light visible on both cameras. On Laura’s, she flinches away from the camera,

shielding her eyes. On Aki's, he yells out in surprise, a dark figure in the light flooding from behind him.

After a second, the light fades.

On Aki's camera, we see him staggering to the window, looking outside in confusion. On Laura's, she rubs her eyes and grimaces. "What was that?"

The phone barely catches Aki's answer. "I don't know... there's nothing that... "

"You're not playing tricks on me?"

Aki shakes his head and turns back towards the camera. "No. I... wasn't thunder or anything, I didn't hear anything. Maybe it was a plane... "

"Sun reflecting off something." Laura shakes her head, clearly annoyed. "Ahh, I need to go rest my eyes, okay? I need to find an aspirin or something. Fuck that light was bright."

"Oh. Okay. Well, let's talk again later... I'm going out. Maybe I can see what the fuck that— okay, bye!"

Aki reaches towards the camera and ends the call. A second later, Laura does the same.

An extract from Johanna Harmaja's lifelog

(16.11.2013)

(the same day)

The glasses to which the lifelogger is attached are on a bedside table, turned to face away from the bed. They catch the following postcoital conversation.

Laura: "So you know me and Aki aren't full siblings, right?"

Johanna: "To quote Homer Simpson, the paragon of our age, well duh. He's pale as a fish, you're... chocolate."

Laura: "Don't distract me, please. So we have the same mother—"

Johanna: "OK."

Laura: ”—and she married this Finnish backwoods guy who died the year Aki was born. In nineteen eighty-three. ‘Rauta’ is mom’s surname; she knew this guy for such a short while and. . . ”

Johanna: “It’s OK.”

Laura: “So soon after she meets my father, and they get married, and I’m born two years after Aki. So he’s never really known his. . . his biological father, so in a way we really have the same parents. Except since Aden’s—”

Johanna: “Your dad?”

Laura: “Yeah. Since he’s from the cauldron of violence that is sweet old Somaliland, you can see I’m his daughter—”

Johanna: “And I do!”

Laura: “Distractions. . . but like you said, Aki is as pale as they come. That was really fun once we got into school. He was bullied for Aden. . . well, for his father. I was bullied just for being me. So we grew up kind of close for having to kick the same kind of people in the face all the time.”

Johanna: “Ooh, violence.”

There’s the sound of a kiss.

Laura: “Maybe that keeps you for a while. So it wasn’t nice, but it got better. Religion was the worst part.”

Johanna: “I don’t remember you—”

Laura: “No, I don’t mean what you think. See, dad got out of Somalia because religion had really killed his family. Like, literally. He won’t talk about it, except to mom, and mom won’t tell us. So he has no religion and won’t have one spoken about around him, and mom never was religious. So neither me nor Aki have been all that big about religion. Not

that I wasn't called a Muslim all the time; don't people think that someone in a miniskirt and a Bad Religion t-shirt is, at best, a very bad Muslim?"

Johanna: "Uh huh."

Laura: "For a while it seemed everybody was coming to me to learn about my exotic foreign religion, its festivals and beliefs. . . and they took it *personally* when I told them music and masturbation were my religion."

Johanna giggles.

Laura: "Well, music and dancing. I might have said music and dancing. Like I'm somehow a bad person for not being an exhibit for them. Fuck, it didn't help when I started quizzing them about Kalevala and other Finnish shit."

Johanna: "It's okay."

Laura laughs.

Laura: "No, I was kind of an asshole when younger. . . oh get your hands out of there. All I'm saying is, me and Aki were close, which is why it came as such a shock when mom died."

Johanna: "Shh. You don't have to—"

Laura: "No, I really have to. It was in two thousand and seven, I've told you about that, right?"

Johanna: "Yes."

Laura: "I was nineteen, Aki twenty-two. You know she was murdered."

Johanna: "I'm here. I'm here. . ."

Laura: "Me and Aki were just hanging around, both of us home from the university. I was reading a book, he was. . . just around. Dad was at work. Mom was doing the laundry at the back of the house. It gets dark outside. There's a scream from the back of the house, but—"

Johanna: "It's okay."

Laura: “—and I sit up, and the scream was from the outside really so I run to the door, and there’s this, this jogger outside, pointing and screaming, and he’s pointing at the laundry room’s window, which is full of light, you can see everything inside, and red—red—”

For two minutes, Laura cries.

Johanna: “Take your time.”

Laura: “When— when police come, we are all in the laundry room. She— Mom. She was— it was a knife. A murder. We never heard anything.”

Johanna: “Shh.”

Laura: “No no. This is not yet why I’m telling you this. We’re in the room, I don’t know why the police didn’t drive us out, and I’m leaning against the wall, crying, as they carry her away, and I see Aki walk to the back door — the door’s in a kind of an alcove, behind the clothes-drying rack — and I see him flip it open — we had an old house, so it has no lock, but it has a handle only on the inside. He leans out, looks into the darkness, the path where the jogger had been passing by. Looks out for a while, until one of the the policemen notices him. And asks, hey, boy, was that door open?”

Johanna: “Shh.”

Laura: “And he says *yes!* Yes it was! And I’m screaming on the inside, please Aki, please don’t lie to the police, not when it’s— it’s—”

Johanna: “Shh.”

Laura: “And you know, in the end they can’t find the one who did it. They end up saying, mom left the back door open and someone just came in and— ahhh.”

Johanna: “Don’t— I mean, even if he hadn’t. . . ”

Laura: “No, don’t you see? It took me months before I got this damned sick suspicion in my head and now it won’t get out. Look, if Aki opened the door, and I saw him do it, saw him and didn’t say anything. If he opened the door, it was closed, so the murderer didn’t come in that way. And the murderer didn’t come in through the windows either. And on the other side, the laundry room’s connected to the house, and there was no way for anyone to come through that way without alerting one of us.”

Johanna: “You’re not—”

Laura: “Not unless it was one of us. Not unless the murderer was one of us.”

Johanna: “Oh, Laura.”

Laura: “So yeah, if I’ve been keeping you away from my brother it might be because I think he killed our mother.”

Johanna: “Oh.”

Laura: “Or I’m just crazy but... but it’s not something you can ask. And every time he says something I think, is he teasing, gloating, expressing some need in him... ”

Johanna: “He didn’t— I mean, your mother wasn’t—”

Laura: “Please kiss me.”

An extract from Johanna Harmaja’s lifelog

(17.11.2013)

(the next day)

Timestamp: 9:20, Finnish time.

The glasses to which the lifelogger is attached are on Johanna Harmaja’s head; she is looking at a three-part vanity mirror, side-reflections of her occasionally coming to view as she turns her head. The lifel-

ogger's camera views the middle mirror, and captures her face in the soft glow of a lamp somewhere behind her head.

Johanna Harmaja is a tall, pale woman, twenty-five or so, with white skin, lightly freckled, and short, spiky blonde hair. She looks tired.

"Mirror mirror", she says. "And I thought I'd be a documentarian of the unexceptional, recording for posterity the incidentals nobody else thought to, from toilet habits up and down. And now, what, now this will be a record for my grandchildren to look at and says, Zounds! Grandma's brother was a murderer.

"What now? Now... now this is one of those parts where heavy encryption and paranoid secrecy comes into play."

She smiles.

"So basically if you're hearing this, either you're a king of hackers, or then someone I trust with my deepest and darkest secrets, for there are none that are so dear to me as the confidences given to me. Especially by someone I love and want to spend the rest of my days, and the labors of my days, with. The dancer and the diarist, hah.

"I wonder if the people of yesterday had problems like this — writers of paper diaries, did they worry would someone steal the secrets they had written down? At least they didn't have to worry some alien government would, or some corporation looking for marketing opportunities... 'We've noticed you have liked MURDEROUS SECRETS. Would you be interested in more?' No thank you, Google."

She looks at herself in the mirror, and runs a hand through her hair.

"Feh. Diarists of old didn't have to worry about how the looked.

“Okay. It’s decided. Decided. Everything will be encrypted the best I know until this situation with Laura’s brother shakes out. Whatever that means, whenever that’ll happen. I’m not hurting you, Laura, no matter what happens — if something happens to me, you’ll hear this.”

She shakes her head.

“Feh. Laura, beloved, you could have left that last piece of disturbance unsaid.”

She looks in the mirror for a minute and six seconds, unspeaking, and then whispers.

“If he did it once, did he do it more than once. And will he... ”

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(17.11.2013)

(the same day)

What a fun day I’ve had.

You’d think once I get hired for a job, they would use me, instead of telling me to piss off and sit and wait.

Yep, went to the village again.

Was again told to go back and wait, for reason Mystery-Majestic-Twelve.

Grumbled, went to sit in a cafe. Had coffee and cakes. Watched the locals mill by: old people, courtesy of time and a CareCare Steads retirement home. Drab and boring. Locals, lost in the time warp of the backend of nowhere, clothing and everything dragging years behind civilization...

Then I hear whispers from behind me. I can make out a word: “Stasi”.

And I think, the fuck?

One surreptitious look later, I know there's a gaggle of oldies at the table one table over behind me, three guys and three gals. Heads together, sneaking glances at me.

I hear "Stasi" again, and I am not amused; so I try to listen.

They're talking in... Italian or French, how should I know? I hear "policia secretia" and "perilouso" and the like, and I think: great, East Germany is dead for a quarter-century, and these cooters think a man of thirty is a Stasi agent!

So I take out my phone and mimic calling and start talking in loud, harsh German.

Giving the identifying marks of the cooters sitting behind me.

Urging the rest of the squad to hurry and arrive.

I overplay it a little, and they get up and leave, clearly offended.

At which point the cafe-keeper comes and throws my coffee in my face and kicks me out. These people have no sense of humor!

Security camera footage, Bar Canton, Untergalen village

(17.11.2013)

(the same day)

The camera is black-and-white, without sound; but it shows the inside of the bar with great clarity.

At 9:20, a bald man in a leather jacket enters, orders, and sits down. His drink arrives in a pint glass.

At 9:40, he orders another.

At 9:45, a part of four elderly women enters and takes the table next to the bald man.

At 9:59, he motions, attempting to order a third drink, but the bartender is busy attending to the four women, who dither and debate over their order.

He says something that makes the bartender look over his shoulder and throw a comment at him. The women glance at each other, confused.

The bald man stands up, swaying slightly, and points a finger at the others. The bartender turns, making placating gestures with his hands. The bald man takes a step forward, yelling indiscriminately at the bartender and the women both, gesturing in exaggeratedly military fashion.

The women stand up and leave, frightened. The bald man stares after them, then sits. He turns to the bartender, asking something. The bartender shakes his head. The bald man pounds a fist on the table, gets up, and leaves.

The bartender walks to the door, seemingly checking that the bald man is leaving in a different direction than the women. Having checked this, he returns inside.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(17.11.2013)

(the same day)

Since the world will not have me, I will go hiking. There's a way down from the ski resort, across the valley, and up to the four peaks.

Aki.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(17.11.2013)

(the same day)

So I'm walking through an open space down in the valley, and midway through the open space I freeze, sure that someone is close.

I turn, and to my right, maybe twenty paces away, is a bus-sized rock and sitting on it is a girl.

I react in the obvious way: "Hi!"

She doesn't notice; she keeps looking past and over me into the distance, or into the valley below, in the direction of Untergalen.

I try a "Guten morgen!" in case she knows German, then feel foolish when I realize it's not exactly a morning anymore.

A "Guten tag!" doesn't get a reaction, either.

She's not dressed like a local yokel; a big-city punk fan or goth girl, I guess.

I know a single word in French, so I yell "Merde!" in an amusing way and do a little dance number, trying to get *some* reaction.

No reaction.

Not to "Quattro stagioni!" either.

I try some English — no dice — then German again — and finally she turns her head and looks at me.

Cold eyes for such a young face.

I shut my mouth in a hurry.

She yells something; I don't recognize the language. There's this *growl* behind me — and then I'm being chased away by the ugly fucking dog.

Crazy twit!

The dog's like... like you took one of those ugly bald cats and asked, "How would a dog of this look like?" And it chases me like it's bred to nip at heels and breathe down your neck. After like a kilometer it gives up; after another, I gasp and spend a few minutes retching and shaking.

This is not how you treat foreigners!

You maybe like say, “Hey, piss off” — you don’t need a common language for that. You don’t sic your dog on people!

Aki.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(18.11.2013)

(the next day)

All work and no play... I mean, no work and no play makes... ahh, I’m going rambling again. If I’ll see a dog I’ll kick it.

A sketch by Aki Rauta, left on the table of his house

(18.11.2013)

(the same day)

The sketch is a side view of an animal, made with a pencil on the back of a paper from the murder manuscript. The head and the body of the animal suggest a dog, inexpertly drawn.

The figure is little more than a canvas for markings made on it: a collar, and lines radiating from it along the dog’s sides like skeletal wings, curving in several arcs down to its belly, the arcs decorated with circles that make the viewer think of breasts: human, not animal. Wavy lines from the back of the collar crowd the dog’s back above the wing-pictures. Lines suggesting a butterfly are drawn around the dog’s eye.

A single word in Finnish is written above the dog, with a question mark after it: “Tattoos?”

* * *

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(18.11.2013)

(the same day)

Great views; no sign of the memorial.

(Attached to this e-mail is a phone camera picture of an outdoors scene: the fall to the valley, and the village of Untergalen and the ski resort on the other side, slightly lower. The sky is brilliantly blue, cloudless.)

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(18.11.2013)

(the same day, an hour later)

Fucking Google Maps. Does this look like “empty mountains, rising higher” to you?

(Attached to this e-mail is a phone camera picture of an outdoors scene: the fall to a different valley, with a rougher, steeper fall, and a shadowed lake at the bottom. Beyond the lake, the mountains do rise again, slowly, in stone sinews parallel to the cameraman’s line of sight. The lake seems to be maybe two kilometers away, and one long left-to-right and a few hundred meters across. Beyond it, on the first foothill of the rising mountains, half the height of the cameraman’s position, is a castle, a stone rose of a Neuschwanstein made of concrete and iron: a obvious later copy of Wagnerian fever dreams of medieval fancy, fallen to disrepair, built to the plans of someone brutal with pretensions of art. In front of the castle is a wide flat courtyard of paved stone. Most of the stones are white, and black ones mark out the shape of a realistic, hundred-meters-wide skull on

them.)

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(18.11.2013) (the same day, half an hour later)

Like, I'm just sitting here, looking at that castle. And Google fucking Maps keeps saying there's no valley here on the other side, no valley, no castle, no road leading away from it — is this some Secret Swiss National Security Zone or what? I don't think skulls feature in any Swiss flag I've seen. . .

Fuck me, I don't care if the job doesn't want me. I need to pack a picnic and come back, get down — this is across the pass from the memorial that couldn't be found — and look at that castle. I haven't seen any movement except a few birds, so it just might be deserted.

Come to think of it, maybe this is where the mystery woman was going. I just can imagine some perverts meeting there for boinky-boink on the stones of the skull. . . or something like that.

I got to get back and look what the manuscript says about this place. I bet this is the thing the police missed. Yokels probably are so set in the ways of their valley they have no idea what's in the next one over.

Recovery log

(18.11.2013) (the same day)

The log lists camera captures automated at ten-minute intervals.

At 12:32 local time, video capture was activated for a minute. The captured video from the main camera shows a shaky view of rubble and scree from waist height, and occasionally fingers occulting the lens.

The captured video from the front camera shows darting fingers and looming behind them Aki Rauta's face, lips pursed, frowning.

Video capture was activated again at 12:34, 12:36, 12:37, 12:38 (twice) and 12:40, for five to ten seconds each time. The captured video was similar, except in the last case, when it was darkness.

An e-mail from Aki (unsent draft; last timed 16:04)

(18.11.2013)

(the same day)

I almost killed somebody.

Fuck.

I went back, and kept an eye out for the girl and the weird-ass dog. No sign of them, the freaks.

No, but when I round this big rock I walk into someone, someone that's been squatting just behind the bend. A tangle, I scream, he or she grunts, a hand shoots at my face and I see black nails as a palm hits me in the forehead.

Then I hit the rocks, and right in front of my face is a face. Eyes red dots in pupils the color of the face, and a pale enough face, and a wide mouth full of pink worms—

Then the eyes roll back, and eyes, normal, green, look at me. The worms disappear, and a tongue reaches at me—

I do what seems natural and swing an arm at the face, there's a stone in my fist somehow, and it's only

because of the angle that I thump the stone to the rocks between us rather than at that fucking face.

A second, and I understand what I'm seeing. Another freak. Who blinks, showing a red dot painted on each eyelid. And gives me a toothy smile, and each tooth — each tooth is engraved to look like wriggly tentacles, and painted pink and dark red.

I just lay there as the... the whatever gets up and runs away. A hint of black cloth. Youth. Lack of any emotion.

I, I mean...

Fuck.

No.

An e-mail from Aki to Laura

(18.11.2013)

(the same day)

What a day!

If tomorrow is off work too, I'm packing lunch and going exploring at the mystery castle!

I'm pumped!

Aki.