



Short story sampler

Heikki Hietala - 2011

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THE SUMMERHOUSE

The summerhouse perched on the side of the hill on the little island in the lake. It was an old log barn, and it had stood there since 1913, when it was moved over from the mainland. Local carpenters worked all summer converting it into a summerhouse for the family of a wealthy attorney. They added a second floor and a glazed porch, and built four bedrooms. A couple of carefree summers, a civil war, a world war, and a twenty-year stretch of peace later, it had settled in its surroundings so perfectly it was hard to see from the lake.

Every spring, servants came to set up the summerhouse for the season, and every fall, servants were the last to leave after preparing it for the winter. By then the owners had already returned to the city with their memories of summer fun. The house huddled up, shutters on windows, everything locked up and secured for the rule of snow. Only the crows kept it company during the fleeting winter days when the sun appeared over the southern horizon for a few pale hours.

Fortunes rose and fell, summer months turned into years and decades, and the attorney's family sold the island. The new owners enjoyed the little island for forty years, spending every free moment there, raising four children into adulthood, and then sitting out on the cliffs at the western end of the island to see the sun kiss the forest in the northwest and fade for a few hours.

But now it was November; the lake had a crystal clear frozen cover, and the ground sparkled with tiny diamonds of ice. It had been two months since the last family members visited the island, bolting up the place, stowing away garden chairs and hammocks, and turning boats over. The house knew well the routine by now, and it even looked patient as it bided its time.

On one particular evening, the local crows had gathered in one of the large pines by the house. Twenty strong, the assembly of birds settled their internal pecking order issues, cawed and fluttered about, and acted as crows do, until one of them saw something it had never seen before.

A luminous ball appeared, or rather, formed out of nowhere, at the foot of the porch stairs. The crows ceased their cawing and cocked their heads to see better. The ball of faint whitish light elongated itself and separated at the edges to form an apparition of an old man. When the crows could see the apparition in detail, one of them lost his nerve, and then the whole flock took off any which way in stark fear, a ball of black wings dissolving into single fleeing birds.

The apparition was that of the owner of the island. Only two weeks ago he'd been among the living, doing his daily tottering and pottering as was his custom. An aneurysm fell on his life like a butcher's cleaver, and nothing remained the same. For two weeks he'd been taking stock of his life, not as a man anymore, but as an apparition about to

cross over outside of time and space. For a brief period, a mere thought brought him to any time and location in his life. He still had access to the places and people he knew, but interaction was what he craved – and what he was denied.

Seeing his grieving widow at the crematorium nearly drove him mad, if that can happen to apparitions. He'd watched his ashes being interred in the holy church ground of his native town, and seen his name written in golden letters on a solemn granite slab. He'd tried to tell his family that he wasn't in that hole in the ground, but every time he stood close to one of them, they'd shudder and say, "Mom, you really need to get that radiator fixed."

He had to admit the Bible was right in one thing at least, when it referred to man's days as grass: *when the wind passeth over it it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.* A cold wind had blown by him, and he was that wind now. But as he now stood at the stairs of his loved summerhouse, he made his apparition look the way he was in his prime, two years before retiring from law, still full of life.

He floated to the top of the stairs and through the snow screen that kept the winter out from the porch. No need to walk; he felt the appropriate method of movement was a drifting at a solemn pace. The thought of entering the summerhouse for the last time, and yet first time as an apparition, appealed to him. He let himself fade through the door and into the hallway.

Inside it was dark, what with the shuttered windows and all electricity switched off, but it made no difference. He provided his own light, like that of a storm lantern, but with a wick without heat. As he passed the long mirror in the hallway, he paused to admire himself. Had it not been for the clothes, hung on pegs on the wall, showing through him, he'd have passed for a handsome man, or so he thought.

When he reached the living room, he noted everything was exactly where he'd instructed his oldest son to leave them. His wartime binoculars, its lenses out of whack and useful for one eye at a time only, hung in the reindeer horn as they had done for the past forty-four years. The Agatha Christies and Maigrets, read a thousand times, were neatly stacked on the corner table. His rainy day pastimes, the three-thousand-piece puzzles of classic paintings, were side by side on the top of the bookshelf, ready for easy access. He approved of all he saw; it will be nice to return in May and blow the dust of winter off the house, and turn the boats right side up, and take firewood to the sauna.

Only he was not coming back.

The thought stabbed him and killed him a second time. No, a third, the second was when he saw his wife shattered at the thought of widowhood at 87. Wait! What about seeing his two old friends at the funeral, when they realized they were the only ones left of a class of 34 vigorous young men? Or seeing all was not going to be well at the settling of the estate, among children who'd become estranged from one another and prepared for battle...

One dies many times, he thought, as he thought of himself settling on his wicker rocking chair in the corner of the room to face the northwest and the summer sunset. Now there'd be no sunset; the Sun had done its day and wouldn't be near that direction until June. But as he sat there, he let his thoughts wander and recreate past days.

A hollow image of a hearty fire appeared in the fireplace, emitting the ghost of light and heat. The long rustic dinner table was set all at once for eight people, and as the apparition watched, seven of his family friends appeared out of nowhere and sat down on the table, a transparent parade of lifeless visions. It was Midsummer 1969, and as the shutters melted away, the remembrance of the sunlight of that evening flooded the room with its faint red hue. Sounds he remembered, such as the banter, the laughter, the jokes and the impromptu speeches seemed to fill the air.

As quickly as the cavalcade had entered, it faded away and was transformed into the memory of the first grandchild's appearance on the island. The apparition, as the proud grandfather, wore a phantom of a smile on his transparent lips as memories flowed freely and became second-hand reality for a fleeting moment. The scenes followed in rapid succession, but with every new memory replayed, the apparition grew more restless. Was it really so? Did nothing remain but translucent holograms? Was there nothing he could touch here? Was there nothing for him to take with him as he left?

His thoughts turned to a German beer stein that had a tin lid and was engraved with images of voluptuous maidens serving Löwenbräu. This had been his favorite souvenir of all; he had brought it from Munich in 1958, and for many years it held a place of honor on a little shelf of its own, high on the wall facing the setting sun. The apparition yearned to hold the stein, to feel its heavy weight and the intricate figurines on it, as if to have his life back for just a moment. But his hands passed through the thick ceramic of the mug without moving it a bit on its shelf.

Then he collected all his energy and focused on lifting the stein. He tried to bring volume and strength to the transparent hands that cupped the mug, and after a while it seemed to work. The hands became more opaque and not so much of the stein shone through them. The apparition felt his energy drain on this futile effort, but nevertheless he concentrated all his mental force on the stein. Finally it rose off the shelf, a millimeter, then three, and finally a full centimeter off it.

When the apparition realized it was not his hands but his mind and thought holding the stein, he had to release its grip, exhausted and exasperated. The stein fell back on the shelf, but as it had moved slightly sideways too, the impact toppled it off the shelf. The apparition watched in horror as the stein travelled the two meters through the air and hit the log floor, shattering on impact and shedding its bits in a cloud of ceramic dust.

The apparition had one last look at the stein's tin lid. Then he left, in full knowledge of his last moment in this lifetime being at hand, and when he floated through the wall to the yard, he became aware of a bright needlepoint of blinding white

light awaiting it. He succumbed to the light, was sucked into it, and within moments, there was nothing but the summerhouse, the dark pines, and a flock of wary crows in one of them.

The summerhouse huddled back into its long and lonely winter.

And then in due course, spring arrived, bringing part-time immigrants.

“Oh no! Look what the mice have done!” shouted one of the family. “They’ve broken Dad’s stein!”

“Dropped it from the shelf? I’ll go set up the mousetraps. I knew I forgot something, I should have set them before the winter,” another answered.

The summerhouse knew better.

THE CAMPSITE vol 1 - FORSSA

It was a hot, humid, overcast August night, pretty dark even for Finland. Since it was 3am, not much was happening. I sat in the reception of the camping site I was working at for the summer, together with my co-supervisor, friend, and night shift specialist Jore. He was bouncing a golf ball against the floor and then the wall, and catching it. He counted out the throws. "Seven-forty-two... seven-forty-three... seven-forty-four..."

I was arranging the traveler identification forms that would be taken to the police in the morning, since the police had told us in no uncertain terms that they preferred them alphabetically by surname. The third slip in a stack of three copies only had a faint imprint of the information written by the travelers, and it took all the movable illumination we had in the reception to see the data. Three lamps on the desk made life hot for me.

"Eight-twenty-yy... eight-twenty-one..."

The defeatist mood of the night shift was worsened by the fact that the cashier girls had denied the supervisors access to their music cassette collection for the nights. This was because our smoothest operator had successfully courted the shapeliest of the cashiers, only to drop her at the sight of a new sport coupe model among the gardener girls. The battalion suffered from the action of a single soldier.

"Nine-forty-one... nine-forty-two... damn!" Jore said as the ball bounced off his knuckles and rolled under the sorry excuse of a fridge we had for keeping our food two degrees cooler than the ambient air. Rather than brave the ogres living under the fridge, he picked a new ball from our depleted minigolf stock.

The only cassette we had was better than nocturnal Finnish radio programming AD 1987. Still, playing the same plastic pop song every 60 minutes should be proscribed in the Geneva conventions. Jore scanned the pitiful set of channels in the sea of static, only to drop the chase in desperation. "There's only talk available, on farming and such, and then there's last week's football analysis", he said. He started bouncing his golfball.

I needed a bit of fresh air, and as it was on the hour, I went out and did the rounds of the site, checking that the saunas were locked, all boats were drawn up far enough on the beach, and the gates were locked. I loved walking the beat. The fullness of the summer was upon us but none of the melodrama of autumn had fallen yet. I knew every rock along the paths, every hole ripped into the perimeter fence by enterprising bottle collectors and all the nooks and crannies our site had for impromptu lovers and their quick snuggles.

All the locks were in place, and nothing out of the ordinary was to be found along the beat. As I wound my way back up to the reception, I saw a beat-up old Toyota Corolla parked at the far corner of the reception parking lot. It wasn't there when I left.

It was just within the tired yellow streetlight's cone. There was one man in it, and he was watching me as I went into the reception.

Jore made it past one thousand bounces and told me as much, but I cut him short.

"What's with the Toyo there?" I asked.

Jore looked surprised. "What Toyota?"

"That one" I said and took him to the back room which was dark and only had a row of windows at the top of the wall. We stood on the sofa which had seen better days and peeked out.

Jore said, "Never seen that before." He dropped down to sit on the sofa.

"Some supervisor you are too," I said and went back to the front with Jore in tow. "We got to check him out."

I grabbed the gear, which meant a can of mace and a rubber truncheon, usually referred to as the youth guidance counselor, and then I glanced out of the window into the null-color neon lit front of the reception. A long shadow preceded the Toyota man as he sauntered up to our service windows. My first thought was one of relief, as he was skinny and small, but at that time, one always thinks of possible concealed weapons. Jore and I both slipped the mace cans under the desk for quick access, and opened our windows. After all, we were there to serve prospective campers.

The guy slithered up to Jore's window and we got our first good look at him. He appeared very gaunt. A five o'clock shadow looked more like a five days' shadow. His hair was worn in a greasy fountain directed up from the lobes and then down and back towards the neck, and a barber was sorely needed to make it look remotely human. He was in his early thirties, as far as I could tell.

Still, the oddest thing was his attire. He was dressed in a worn-out national costume, of which there are dozens of local subtypes, but I couldn't tell where he was claiming to be from. National costumes in Finland are worn by three groups of people: the Romani minority, retired teachers when reciting the Kalevala or attending a country festival, and finally, folk dancers.

This guy looked definitely mainstream, not Romani, who take pride in the way they dress. He didn't strike us as a dancer of any sort, and teaching was right out. Jore gave me the slanted look with the notched-up eyebrow. There was an awkward pause as both parties pondered which one should open the channel. He beat us to it with a "Hello" so muted we hardly heard it.

"Hello. What can we do for you?" Jore asked the guy. "If you'd like to come and camp for the night, we're sorry, but the site is closed. We could let you in, if you pitch your tent right behind the reception and keep the silence," he suggested.

The guy pivoted his head on the top of his skinny windpipe. I'd never seen a bigger Adam's apple, and it lolled up and down as he prepared to speak. It looked like he was swallowing a yo-yo.

"I'm not here for camping." He put his hands into his jacket pockets, deep enough to take in half the forearms.

"Well, in that case, you can stay in your car until the morning and we won't charge you for the night. Some folks sleep on the parking lot, and we don't mind. Just keep quiet, will you?" Jore must have thought the case was about to be closed.

The guy shot his line and caught us both by surprise. "I get impulses."

"Come again?" I asked. For the first time he noted me. I didn't like his eyes. The gaze didn't come from the eyes, it started deeper than the usual retina level.

"I get im-pul-ses."

Jore gave me a hand signal under the desk to grab the mace in case things turned sour. "What kind of impulses would that be, pal?"

"Criminal activity impulses."

I looked at Jore and he looked at me. No one had told me of such impulses before.

"How so?" he asked.

"When there's a crime being committed, I get impulses. They're like electric shocks. If I'm close to the crime scene and the criminal activity, I get them real strong." The yo-yo resumed its oscillation and the guy went silent.

Under the desk, Jore motioned for me to dip in, so I did. "So, what do you do when you get these impulses?"

The guy moved towards me and took a stance halfway between our windows. "I used to call the cops. But that was too hard on me. The cops would always ask me to take them to the crime scene. But as I got close to it, the impulses got too hard to take."

I felt sorry for the little guy. He was obviously the result of cuts in the mental health sector. Impulses... yeah right. "So what do you do these days? You don't call the cops anymore?"

He looked straight into my eyes and said, "I have a deal with the chief of police of my home town."

"Where's home?" Jore asked.

"Forssa." Jaysis, this guy was 250 kilometers from home.

"What's the deal with your chief?"

“The chief of police told me to do this: whenever I get impulses, I don’t call them anymore to tell them there’s a crime. I just get in my car, and I drive in the opposite direction, and they’ll see me go. Then they know there’s a crime scene in the other direction and get there and take care of the trouble.”

I said, “Let me get this straight. You’ve just hopped in your car, like three or four hours ago, in the middle of the night, and drove up to Jyväskylä, just because you have these impulses in your head?”

The guy looked at me. I looked at him. This time, in the colorless light of the neon tubes, I saw into his eyes, and I saw it wasn’t my world there. It was his world. In his world, he was the telepathic crime buster, friend of the chief of police of Forssa, and I was the peon, working my way through college to reach a mediocre position in civil service, while his supernatural impulses helped solve crimes.

And in his world, he was not affected in the least by cuts in the mental health sector.

All of a sudden he put his thumbs to his head, using his palms as antennas. He rotated his head again. “Oh... I feel another impulse. And another one.” He seemed to triangulate the origin of the impulses, and managed to find southwest from whence he had come. “Look guys, nice talking to you but I got to go on. I’m not far enough from the crime scene yet.” He turned and took off. Gone were the slinky toy movements, this was a man on a mission half running across the parking lot.

When he sped off northwards, we sat silent for a while. Then I said to Jore: “So... what do we write in the supervisor log?”

He looked at me and said, “I’ll think of something if you’ll do the remaining beat.”

I was only too happy to oblige. The site was calm, even the last night fever people had passed out in their tent or close to it anyway. At the boat beach I saw a pair of proud ducks with ten battery-operated hatchlings in tow, on their way to the reeds for a morning meal. I was delayed by a talkative retired policeman who often appeared very early at the site gate, eager for a chat, so by the time I got back to the reception, Jore had left.

In the evening I reported in for another night, not with Jore this time but another guy. It always was a busy time, that seven o’clock switch. Campers came and went, people hired minigolf gear and asked whether canoes are safe for beginners, and the cashier girls flirted with a busload of Dutch volleyball players.

At some point in the middle of the hustle I had a look at the supervisor log. Jore had written a Spartan entry:

“August 8-9th. Calm night. The police chief of Forssa is a GENIUS.”

LORD STANTON'S HORSE

I leaned back, stirring my tea with the spoon. She leaned forward.

“And then?”

“We charged. Damned thing it was, uphill again, straight into a copse loaded with the Boche. A ghastly affair. We were a hundred strong when we launched, and by the time the spearhead reached the brambles, thirty had fallen already.”

“And Charles was among them?”

“No. I was with him in the second group, if you could call it that, a gaggle’s more like it. We made it to the top of the hill all right, but then things started to go wrong. They had four heavy machine guns in that bush, and just as I was about to go in, they hit me right above the elbow. I fell off my horse and was knocked out for a while. I came to with Charles cutting the remaining sinews and applying a tourniquet to the stump.”

“Oh! That must have been terrible pain. Was he hit then?”

I straightened the shoulder titles, first the left, then the right, touching the brass letters LSH to bring me some solace. *Esprit de corps* and all that.

“No. It was miraculous actually, with all the shrapnel and bullets flying about. Charles made sure I was okay and then he said, ‘I must go and see to Brownie.’ It was absolute hell for the horses. I mean, I lost my first horse, Amethyst, at Ypres, and Nutmeg on the first day of the Somme. Ivory was shot under me at Passchendaele – after that, I didn’t even give them names.”

I had a sip of my cold tea, wincing at the taste. Too much sugar.

“But Charles and Brownie went on together right from the start. He always said Brownie was his good luck charm. No horse was ever better seen to than that beautiful gelding. You just can’t understand the bond between them if you’re not a cavalry officer yourself.”

She was getting impatient. “Pray tell me: what happened to Charles? Did he suffer? Was it German shrapnel that killed him?” A tear fell on her silk lapel and made a run for it, but was absorbed, disappearing from view.

“You have to understand this correctly now, Emily.”

Her eyes forced me to continue.

“As I lay on the ground, a grenade exploded nearby.”

“Oh, my God! He must have suffered terribly!”

“No, not at all. Brownie took the brunt of the blast and was ripped open. He fell on the ground, bleeding and whinnying. Charles was unscathed. But he saw that Brownie was beyond help, and there was just one thing for him to do. I watched as he took aim with his revolver, right at the white star under his forelock, but I had to turn away before the shot rang.”

“Oh...” she said.

“And then there was that other shot.”

CARBON-BASED

I never thought, until very late, that there was anything odd about Robbie's little imaginary friend. I mean, everyone has them at some point. I myself had one, a boy my age, who lived behind the glass greenhouse and liked to eat tomatoes. He also liked to throw rocks at the glasshouse, and when my father came to see what happened, my chicken of a friend scrambled and left me to take the heat.

So when Robbie was almost six, and asked me to add an extra plate for his friend, I thought nothing of it. "Would you like him to sit next to you?" I asked, and set another rabbit plate beside Robbie's when he nodded. He'd eat his oatmeal in solemn silence, every once in a while glancing over to his little friend's empty plate. I guess he imagined oatmeal on it too.

"What's his name?" I asked to make conversation. Robbie answered with a strange set of phonemes – I thought it started with a K, and it had some r's and many vowels. The pitch also varied a lot, and he sounded shrill when he said it.

"That's a funny name," I said, and looked out of the window, past the farm, and into the endless wheat fields beyond. Robbie had always been odd in a way, precocious, born old as my father said when Robbie finally started to speak. It was late for him to do that, his cousins were younger than he was, and yakked away already at two.

So, both me and Rick felt elated when he began to talk at four and a half. He bypassed the one word stage and went for carefully crafted sentences right off the bat. It amused my father no end. "We'll see someone get away from this farm yet," he said just before he died.

I knew Rick was out on the fields, beyond my sight, but I missed him nevertheless. Running the household alone was a chore, even if the older boys were already independent and sometimes even able to help. Having Robbie's imaginary friend on my back all the time was no help either. He'd ask a million things before lunch, and another three million by nightfall.

Robbie never slept more than four hours. That, added to the loss of sleep caused by running a farm, drove our marriage to the edge. When he turned seven, I didn't fret over it anymore, since he could read. But when he was five and began his endless quest for information, I could have strangled him, so help me God.

At first it was just regular kid stuff. "Mommy, how can a cow make milk out of hay?", or "Mommy, why does beef turn brown in the oven?", or "Daddy, what makes a car run?" We answered as best we could, at a rate of a question a minute. I remember being very tired, especially when he began to ask the astronomical questions. "Mommy? Is the Moon like the Sun, but only in the night? Then why don't it make me sweat?" or "Daddy, how much time does it take to drive to Venus with our car?"

When I asked him instead, where did he get the questions, he just said, Kyxrryy made him ask. We'd taken to calling his little friend Kyxrryy. It wasn't really like his name, but we couldn't figure out what it was. And when Robbie learned to write, I asked him to write Kyxrryy's name; he picked up the pen and made thirteen strange marks on the page. Not one of them was a letter of the alphabet.

"What's that? Why don't you use normal letters," his father asked.

"These are normal letters there in Kyxrryy's language," Robbie said and looked at me. I could see he was not lying. "He has taught me how to write his name."

Rick and I exchanged one of those 'here we go again' glances. Rick took his jacket and cap and left. When the tractor started and zoomed down the field road, I sat down with Robbie. "Honey, I'm a bit worried about you and Kyxrryy. It seems you think he is real, like Dad and me and you, and little cousin Dupree. But you should understand that there's a difference between him and the rest of us. We're real, and he's not."

Robbie pulled himself away from me. "Kyxrryy is real, just like you and me. You just can't see him." He began to sulk.

"Robbie, there'll be the day when Kyxrryy doesn't come to visit anymore. I know, I had a friend just like him when I was a little girl. His name was Adam. He lived behind the greenhouse, and I played with him every day. Then one day I waited for him all day, and he didn't show up. Nor the next day, or the next. That was when I knew that I was just a bit bigger again, on my way to becoming a big girl."

Robbie stood up. "That's not how it goes with Kyxrryy. First of all, he only comes in at night, and he doesn't play with me. We talk about things, and have conversations. So there." He went to the window and peered into the descending darkness.

I was at loss what to do so I thought, let time run its course. Kyxrryy will eventually evaporate, as all of the imaginary friends do.

With time it became evident that Kyxrryy was not going away. Instead, he made Robbie ask all the more questions, and all the harder too. One morning, while I was making breakfast for him, he had another go. "Mommy," he said, "what is a solar system? Are there other solar systems in the world?" Now, I flunked out of high school, and never was any good in science, but this was one question I did have an answer for.

"Yes, dear, there are many millions of solar systems. Basically it means a sun and its planets, and out there in the universe, there's many more solar systems, but the only one that has life is this little system we live in." I smiled at him.

"That's not true. Kyxrryy is from a different system so there must be at least one more star that has planets that have life."

So this little imaginary friend wasn't from behind the glass greenhouse. It had to be from a different planet even. I sat down with him and put my arm around him.

“Robbie, sweetheart, you need to start letting go of Kyxrryy. You’re growing up fast, and you just can’t keep imagining things.”

Robbie threw down his napkin and pushed his half-eaten breakfast plate to the center of the table. “I’m not imagining. He’s real, just like you and me.”

“Then why can’t I see him?” I asked.

“Because you’re asleep at four in the morning when he comes to see me. Besides, he doesn’t want to show himself to you because he’s mad at you. He’s heard what you think of him.” I didn’t want to make Robbie mad at me before going to school, so I tried anew.

“Okay, okay – I believe you. But we’d like to see Kyxrryy, so next time he comes around, wake me up, okay?” I smiled and he smiled.

“Okay. Now I’ve got to go to school. See you!” And he was off with his backpack and favorite cap and the red jacket that was too small for him already, but he would not consider throwing away.

Three nights later I woke up in the dead of the night. Robbie was standing next to me and gave me a royal fright, just standing there and looking at me and not saying a word. “Robbie? What is it? Jesus, what time is it?” I shouted, waking Rick up too. He was belligerent from the start.

“What’s this noise? Can’t we just sleep, for God’s sake! Robbie, get to your bed already and let us sleep,” he shouted, then buried his head under the pillow.

“But Mom, you said I should get you when Kyxrryy comes around next time,” Robbie said. I got out of bed, put on my slippers and grabbed my robe. Robbie led me to his room. The window was slightly open, and Robbie’s toys had been cleared from the center of the room. There was an odd scent in the room; I could not really make out what it was, it was so faint. Short circuits smell like that.

“Why have you pushed all your stuff to the edges of the room?” I asked him. Robbie climbed on his bed and put his arms on the footboard.

“This is how we talk. I sit here and Kyxrryy tells me stuff, and he needs lots of space so he doesn’t knock things over when he moves around. Tonight he was telling me of galaxies, and he needed extra space, and then I thought I’d go and get you so you’d learn something too.”

“So where is he?”

“He must have left while I was getting you. Next time, I’ll make sure he stays until you get here.”

“Thanks,” I said and hauled my sorry self to my bed upon which I collapsed and slept immediately.

In the morning Rick told me to go see a doctor with Robbie. “It’s not normal anymore. This Kicks character – “ “Kyxrryy,” I put in – “is not normal. I mean, these little friends are supposed to do practical jokes and little mischief here and there and take the blame for breaking things, but talking about galaxies in the middle of the freaking night? Sheesh!” He went to the door to go and bale the hay.

I had to agree. “I’ll see Doctor Weiss about this. As soon as possible. See you for lunch,” I said, and he was gone. I called Dr Weiss’s office right away and got an appointment for the coming Friday, after school.

Dr Weiss, our family doctor since the stone age, was more than happy to discuss Kyxrryy with Robbie. While they were in his office, I had to choose between an ancient *Readers’ Digest* and a surprisingly recent *Sky and Telescope*, from July 1979. I went for the one I could understand, and then paced around the waiting room and bit my fingernails to the bone. Dr Weiss spoke with him for an hour and a quarter, then came out to greet me. “Robbie, have a seat here while I have a word with Mommy, okay? Good seeing you,” he said, and guided me into his office.

I did not know what to expect. “Rosemary, I think you’re just worrying too much. Robbie is clearly a very intelligent boy, and if he gets a good science teacher, he will go places. He knows an awful lot of many things, and astronomy especially. I mean, I’m an amateur astronomer myself, and could not explain the difference between a true binary star and an optical binary star better than Robbie. You must have bought him tons of astronomy books, but consider that an investment in the future,” he said and smiled the perennial family doctor smile.

I did not tell him we had not bought a single book. The only thing was, we let him watch *Nova* on PBS. That was also the only thing on TV that ever interested him.

Back in the waiting room, Dr Weiss stopped by the table. “If I were you, I’d get him one of these telescope kits,” Dr Weiss said and picked up the magazine. He scanned through it and found the ad he wanted at the back. “I believe Robbie would benefit from having a telescope like this, and it also might help pull him away from this Kicks character that’s following him around. Mind you – I think a little father and son activity would work in that sense too.” Dr Weiss gave the magazine to me, and took his leave. Robbie and I drove home in silence.

That night, as we were going to bed, I took it up with Rick. “199 dollars? We can’t afford that,” he said. “The combine works now, but when we go into harvest for real, I’m sure the main drive belts will snap and they alone cost that much. Besides, the ball bearings in the thresher sounded mighty bad already last year, and they may freeze any day now, and that’s a thousand bucks.”

I put up the spaniel smile I know he can’t resist. “Honey, we need to think of Robbie. Dr Weiss said it’d get his attention of Kyxrryy and help him focus on the real world. I’m sure he would benefit from having your attention too. You know, he needs

his father. You don't spend any time with him, but if you had this project, you'd see just what a wonderful kid he is."

Rick thought it over for a while, then turned away from me and turned his light off. "Okay... but if the belts snap, you go to your parents for money, not me to mine."

I smiled in the dark.

The telescope kit arrived two weeks later. I did not tell Robbie I had ordered it, because I wanted to see his face when it was delivered. When Rick pulled the box off the flatbed, and Robbie saw the StarTracker Telescope Company logo on it, he smiled, for the first time in months.

Rick and Robbie put the telescope together in a couple of hectic evenings. When darkness fell and they hauled it out to the far corner of the yard, I looked at them with a glimmer of hope; maybe this'd all work out and Robbie would become a normal kid with a burning interest in science. I watched them carry the telescope out to the far corner of the yard, and align it to the North Star. For two hours they pointed at the sky and swiveled the telescope and talked and peeked in the eyepiece. I felt happy.

But just a couple of days later, Rick came in from the dark night and said, "That kid drives me nuts. All he wants to look at is this one star, Sirius. And it's just a goddamn star, I mean, if you look in the eyepiece, it's a little pinprick of light, and he keeps claiming it is a binary star. Well, I don't see no second star there, just a bright blue one. Sheesh... 200 bucks down the drain." And he was off to bed. I looked out of the window and there Robbie was, standing on a box to reach the eyepiece, peering out into the universe. My heart sank.

It must have been a couple weeks after that when Robbie came to me. "Mommy? What is an adnimi... amidni... administerative error?"

I put the casserole in the oven and looked at him. "Administrative error? What do you mean, dear?"

"Kyxriry says I am administrative error."

I stood up and went to him and hugged him. "No, dear, Kyxriry has it all wrong now. You're not an error. You're our son and we deliberately wanted to have you, and administration has nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure?"

I felt a chill all over me, when I looked in his eyes. There was a mixture of emotions there; part of him wanted so hard to believe me, and part of him was sure Kyxriry had it right, and he was not supposed to be here at all.

And then he put the weirdest question of all to me. "What does carbon-based mean, Mommy? Kyxriry says I am carbon-based, but I should be silicon-based like he is."

I had absolutely no answer to this question. I had never heard anything being carbon-based or silicon-based. “Honey, I need to find it out for you. I’ll call Dr Weiss and see if he has an answer.”

When Robbie went to school, I called Dr Weiss, and broke down completely on the phone. I wailed and wept and let it all hang out about Robbie’s weird questions and his astronomy quest, and his studies of the star Sirius. Dr Weiss listened patiently and then told me to come see him again with Robbie.

This session lasted only half an hour. When they came out of his office, I could see the worry in his face. When Robbie was out of hearing range, he said, “I’m not going to beat about the bush. I think Robbie is one very smart young man, but he’s also a troubled one. I believe he’s in need of a psychiatric assessment. I’ve never seen anyone get schizophrenia at that early age, but I know it has happened, and I want you to go to the University Hospital for a thorough neurological check-up. I can’t do more than this here, but they’ll know what to do. I’ll refer you to a friend of mine.”

I had to tell him we could not afford anything like that. He said he was going to take us to Denver himself, and that we need not worry about the costs. Two days later we were in his car, driven to the University Hospital Juvenile Psychiatric Ward, where Dr Weiss introduced us to his old friend, one Dr Mason. Together they entered the ward with Robbie, and I was left in the lobby. With a heavy heart I went and got a room at a motel close to the hospital, and waited.

Dr Weiss and Dr Mason would not tell me anything until four days later. Dr Mason bought me coffee and we sat down in the lobby. “Robbie is unlike anything I’ve seen,” he started. “He’s clearly very intelligent, and his concentration and attention span are superior to any other child I’ve seen. His knowledge of astronomy is beyond my understanding. But this imaginary character of his is also something I’ve never seen; I asked him to draw a picture of this creature, and this is what he gave me.”

Dr Mason pulled out a picture and showed it to me. It was definitely not a person, and it looked like no animal I knew. If I had to describe it, I’d say it was a glass turtle with porcupine spikes along a ridge on his back. “What’s this?” I asked.

“We have no idea. But he insists it is some other life form, not from Earth. Which is why we do think he’s in need of extensive therapy.”

When we were driving back home in the night, Robbie sleeping snug under my arm, I wondered about the future. We could not pay for his therapy, and Dr Weiss was not capable of providing it in any case. And if Kyrrry stayed on, and did not leave Robbie, what would happen then? I fell asleep myself but had no rest at all, and then Dr Weiss woke us up at our farm.

Rick signed off completely when he heard of Robbie’s need of therapy. He barely talked to me anymore, and Robbie, sensing his irritation, stayed out of sight; he went to school and did well, but spent all his time in his room, or if it was clear, at the telescope.

He'd taken to packing sandwiches with him so he could stay there longer, but he always came in by midnight.

That Monday evening he packed more than usual. Besides six sandwiches, he took three apples and a bar of chocolate. "Staying out long tonight?" I asked.

He looked at me and said, "Yes, I plan to observe Sirius with Kyxrrry. He tells me there's something new to see tonight, something that will move in the sky."

I said, "That's nice, but be home before midnight," even if I wanted to scream out, 'Kick that character out of our lives!'

Robbie grabbed his lunch box and the apple bag, put the chocolate bar in his jacket pocket, and put on his cap. "Goodbye, Mommy. Say hi to Daddy for me." Then he went out and I could see his red flashlight shining by the telescope. I sat on the sofa, and checked up on him every now and again, but then I fell asleep in front of the TV.

The morning came, cloudy and dull and windy and just like any morning in my dreary life. I woke up, surprised about having slept all night on the sofa. Then I made breakfast and called for Robbie, but he didn't answer me. I went to his room. His bed had not been slept in. I ran downstairs, grabbed the car keys, and drove like mad to Rick who was fixing a fence on the north side. "Robbie's gone!" I yelled from the moving car, then stopped in a cloud of red dust. "Robbie's not home! He hasn't come in last night. I have no idea where he is!"

Rick got in the tractor. "You go home and call the sheriff! I'll go and get the guys for a search party. Meet you home!" And he sped off. I drove home as fast as I could, then called the sheriff.

He was at our farm in half an hour and left the blue lights of the patrol car blinking in the bleak morning. He listened to my story, nodding, taking notes, asking questions, and calming me down. "I've already sent for Stan Peters, he has the best bloodhound in the whole state. We will find him. Do you have any idea where he might have gone?" he asked.

"No... he's always home, never goes far. He has been using his telescope lately but he always came in by midnight." The situation was grinding me to a pulp inside my head.

The sheriff's radio crackled to life. "Boss, we got another situation for you," the inharmonious voice said in inside brackets of static. "We just got a call from old McMahon. Seems someone tried to torch his field last night."

The sheriff looked annoyed. "You take care of him. I got a runaway kid to find now. Out."

"No can do, Boss. You know McMahon, he won't talk to us, he wants you on the site pronto. It's kinda weird he tells us, there's like black charred areas on the ground. Big'uns, like forty-fifty feet in diameter. You gotta come and see, over," and the voice turned into that vicious hiss again.

“Where is it? Over,” the sheriff said, making faces at me.

“Ah, it’s... sort of in the southwest corner of his farm.”

The sheriff turned to me. “Isn’t your farm to the south of old McMahon’s?”

I said yes. At the same time another police car came in and out of it came a man and a droopy-eared bloodhound. The dog took in the smellscape by putting his nose as high as he could, then sneezed.

The sheriff looked pleased. “Tell you what Gary, Stan’s here with the dog. Lemme start the search here an I’ll get back to you in ten okay? Over!”

“Ten-four.”

We went to the yard, and I handed Robbie’s favorite sweater to the sheriff. He shoved it in the dog’s face, and the dog let out a yelp. Then he started turning like a compass needle, and stuck his nose in the ground. A few seconds later, another yelp. Then he started pulling like mad towards the northeast.

“Atta boy!” said Stan. “He’s got the scent! Don’t you worry, Rosemary, we’ll have him in a few minutes. Go, Mohawk! Go!” he egged the dog on. With his nose on the ground, and the antenna-like tail pointing up, the dog made a beeline towards the trees in the northeast. We ran after him, jumping over ditches and fallen trees and brambles.

“Oh Mary, Mother of God, please don’t it let it be what I fear it is,” I thought as I ran.

Our farm is on a slight rise from McMahon’s, so after we’d covered the half mile or so from our house, we came to the edge of the wood and saw out to the lower plain of McMahon’s. The dog started down the hill, but turned back and sat down behind Stan, whimpering.

Out there, just a hundred yards away from us, we saw three circles on the ground, burned black. They were like at the ends of a triangle; the circles had smaller circles in them, concentric, and alternately light and dark. The three big circles were connected by straight lines, maybe a foot wide, also burned to cinders.

There, in the center of the entire triangle-circle system, were the molten remains of Robbie’s lunch box.

FILTERED LIGHT

I lie on my back on the bottom of the creek. I can tell it's winter, because there's a cover of ice on the surface. It's almost evening, since there's just enough light to see. The water flowing past me has me pinned to the bottom, among the sunken flotsam and jetsam that accumulates down there. The water has to be cold but I don't feel cold at all; instead I feel all warm and cozy. I don't breathe – I have no need to do so.

A map case floats by me, and its belt drags down my face and my body, tickling me. In a moment, a balaclava drifts down with the current and travels down my face like an amoeba feeling its way. I shiver. I already know I will soon see a pair of boots still on the feet of the dead man, then his Batman belt buckle glimmers as his hips pass me, and then his faded and worn-out anorak appears.

And then, the face floats into view. The mouth is open and a few bubbles exit, the last to be contained in the lifeless lungs. The nose is raw and red from being blown so much. There's no soul in the eyes anymore, but they're open, and I see into a world I should not see when I look at him. Finally the hair, once a miserable comb-over and now the tentacles of his jellyfish head, trail after the guy as he floats down the stream. I stare at the ice above me again and sense the darkness falling.

Then I wake up, and even if I felt dry at the river bottom, I'm soaked with sweat. This dream comes to me a few times a year even now, but when I was a teenager I had it twice a month at least. The first year after the incident was the worst, but it's amazing how kids recover and manage to push things to the background.

I was fourteen when it all happened. My mom was working her ass off with two jobs, but unskilled labor rarely makes ends meet. She tried her utmost to give me a good home and I know she loved me very much, but with the bastard who was my father still harassing her over the phone and even paying us the occasional visit, we lived in fear much of the time. We moved around a lot, trying to find a place far enough from him but with work opportunities for her. I made friends quickly but had no means to hold on to them, and that made me moody and temperamental, which converted me into a loner.

I did okay in school as a small kid, but when I went into puberty, my grades took a nosedive. This was painful to mom, who wanted me to get out of the poverty loop and have a life that was worth something. I was harassed at school by the older boys, and girls thought I was too weird to approach. My solution to the pressures was to become a good fighter, and I managed to scare away my father too. The trick is, with a carpet knife you don't slash but stab. That way the hole was deep enough for him to get my point, but not wide enough for me to get into too much trouble over it.

The first friends I made after we moved to Jyväskylä were a bunch of bullies. They tried to pick on me, but I was too fast and experienced for them. After the first two push-arounds I took a blood sample from one guy's nose, then threw another one to the

ground and sat on him, my bony fist poised above his face to draw more blood if necessary. The one I hit spoke, bloody bubbles under his nose: “Wanna join us? We could use a fast fist like you.”

“Who’s us?”

“The Crocodiles”, he said. I laughed and had the shit kicked out of me, but I was still allowed to join. I learned the name of the leader was Lare, and he pointed out Ake, Juspe, Mara and Mikko.

I gained street wisdom fast. The Crocodiles taught me how to pilfer cigarettes and how to smoke them without coughing my lungs out, and where to find guys who’d buy beer for you from the store, and how to use the rush hour buses for picking pockets. I set high goals for myself and was soon among the best in each category.

The only thing that really got to me was the infinite sorrow in my mother’s eyes when she came to pick me up from the police station. Still a juvenile, I did not face charges, but counseling and whatnot, and the authorities would have a suspicious look into my life with my mother. I could not face her when she spoke.

“Pekka, you just can’t do this to me. You’re all I have, and if you stray away from the straight and narrow, you’ll kill my dream.”

“I’m not straying anywhere.”

“You are. If you go on like this, they’ll take you away from me, and I don’t get to watch you grow up to be a good man. That’d just finish me off.”

“Don’t worry Mom, I’ll be fine. Promise.”

That time, she bought it. But when the same thing happened a second time, and then once more, she was heartbroken. “Why are you doing this to me?” she said at the police station. “You know my life’s wasted already, but why do you want to waste yours, too?”

I had no answer. All I knew was, I didn’t have much to look forward to anyway. I was more interested in hanging around with the Crocodiles and raising hell.

Come March, I completed my education. I was a respected member of the meanest team of bullies in town. We had our own hut in the forest by the stream, custom built with nicked lumber and materiel, and no one sane ventured there.

That’s why we were surprised to hear someone mucking about our place one day around dusk. At first we didn’t see who it was, but then Juspe recognized the intruder. “It’s Lieutenant Steele! What’s he doing here?” We all scrambled out of the shack and went into the bush to watch the guy get closer.

Lieutenant Steele was a local wacko. He was in his twenties, but retarded, so that he was more like a ten-year-old than an adult, despite his burly size. His real name wasn’t Steele, of course – he was Hannu Routala, but he liked to make believe he was a

World War II hero, slashing his way through steamy rain forests, a Special Operations Executive agent. He picked up a map case and a compass somewhere, and a threadbare balaclava completed his outfit. Machetes are hard to come by in Finland so he employed a huge Lappish knife for slashing.

He was probably unaware he was trespassing on the Crocodiles' territory. Mumbling to himself, he approached us, bouncing from stone to tree to bush. "Watch it!... damn the vines, snagging me... must reach HQ by eight or the battalion will be *wiped out!* Snakes! I hate snakes!..."

We watched him, not knowing what to do. He wasn't in our league, a grown man, and yet, he was trespassing on our turf. Any other gang we would have just beaten up and carried the remains to the roadside. "See, guys, the moon's rising. My dad heard someone say Steele only goes out on full moon nights," Juspe said.

Lare stood up and made himself visible. "You! Hey, you! Lieuuu-tenant *Steele!*" he shouted.

The fearless reconnaissance officer hero stopped cold on his tracks. "Who's there?" he hissed.

"We're the Crocodiles, and you're on our property."

He looked around. "Don't see any fences. This is common land as far as I know. Besides, I'm on a mission, gotta go." And he prepared to head on his way.

"Where you going?" Lare asked when his back was already turned.

"Across the Amazon, of course."

We chuckled. This guy was seriously retarded. The Amazon, our little Fox Creek, all of six-seven meters wide! The only common thing was that water ran in both, though the creek still had a cover of ice and snow on it. In places where the current was stronger, the water ate through the ice and formed black swirling eddies with foam on the edges. Lieutenant Steele took a bearing with his compass and started towards the south where the closest bridge was.

Lare said, "Let's work the sucker a bit. I bet we can get him wet. *Hey! Lieutenant!* You're not going to use the bridge, are you? If you were a real Special Ops guy, you'd cross it with style!"

Lieutenant Steele came to a slow motion halt. "Like, what? If Lieutenant has to cross the river, he uses the quickest route. The bridge."

"No, he wouldn't. The real Lieutenant Steele would use his wits, and figure out something real flashy, but you don't have any," Lare shouted and we all laughed like hyenas.

We saw Lieutenant Steele weighed the issue and could almost hear the gears whirring in his low-brow cranium. “The mission comes first. Fast and dependable, that’s Lieutenant S for you.”

Juspe said, “We cross the river by climbing into the aspens and bending them over the creek – Amazon I mean. But you’re so lame you can’t even do that.” This was true. We crossed the river the previous spring by bending young trees, but all of us got drenched in the process.

I looked at the guy and thought, the man on a mission is considering the variables. Lieutenant Steele could not lose face in front of snot-nosed kids, but on the other hand, the creek looked menacing with its white cover and bottomless black eyes. Finally he seemed to decide Lieutenant Steele’s honor was worth a try, and he turned back to walk straight to the creek’s edge.

He took a long while to select the tree and finally settled on a very tall but still slender aspen. With surprising agility he started up the tree; I was reminded of an ancient documentary I’d seen on TV, where Samoan natives went up a palm tree, thirty meters in as many seconds. We could hear him panting when he reached the middle of the tree, where he took a rest.

Then he climbed a couple more meters and tried to make the tree swing. “Wow, he’s not so stupid after all,” Lare said. Lieutenant Steele got the tree to sway, a little at first, but more with every movement of his stocky body. Soon he was able to extend his arms and hang down, and kick his legs sideways for more momentum.

When Lieutenant Steele did the last kick, the one he hoped to propel him across the creek, the aspen cracked, a rifle shot in the dimming light. The thing no one thought of was, we did it in May, and this was March. Sap ran free and copious in the trees then. Now they were barren and frozen stiff. In our full view, Lieutenant Steele fell towards the thin ice collecting speed, and plunged halfway through it. The map case, still hanging from his neck, slapped down on the ice.

The water got hold of him and started to pull him in. We watched, unable to act, as he hung on to the snapped tree, hoping to pull himself up and escape. The freezing black current filled his boots and his pants and weighed a ton, and his strength waned fast. He made one last effort to get to the surface, then he gave up. I saw his torso go into the water, and then his head went in with a look of boundless surprise on his face. For a second longer he held his grip, but then the fingers let go of the tree and he slid under the ice in a split second.

His map case was snatched from the surface by an invisible hand and followed him into the creek. All of us stood there without believing what we had just seen, but when one of us dared to move a muscle, we fled and ran the three kilometers home as fast as we could. Mother was not home, she was still at work. I took a shower to lose the clammy cold sweat and went to bed, staring at the model airplanes hanging from the

ceiling, feeling just as dead inside as I knew Lieutenant Steele was as a whole. I didn't go to sleep until after she returned home around two in the morning.

Lieutenant Steele was never found. The cops had some inkling of his last moves, but could never fully understand what happened, and as none of us spoke, the file was moved to the bottom shelf to collect dust.

The only good thing to come out of this was the Crocodiles dissolved. I shunned all of them and to the eternal surprise of my mother, started going to school again. I caught my class, surpassed them in some areas, and graduated with high marks. Getting into law school was a piece of snake, as Lare would have put it. Still, I am a lunatic: no full moon passes without a nightmare, always identical, always silent.

At first I used to dream of the incident, and relive the hollow horror of watching a man die, but later, when it became obvious Lieutenant Steele would remain lost, the dream changed. I was then on the riverbed watching the corpse pass me in the subdued, filtered light of the failing day.

I tried to work it out through indifference. What good was his life anyway? He was a retard, a mail sorter, an automaton that liked sausages and beer. He had no prospects beyond becoming the fastest mail processor in the history of the Finnish Post. No one would ever have loved him, or missed him, and the only thing that gave him pleasure was playing soldier in the bushes. So, while lying in bed waiting to fall asleep, I pictured myself watching indifferently as the Lieutenant floated past me; but when the time came for that in the dream, I found I could not turn my face away and I had to look him in the face.

Another route I took was through hate. I prepared myself on the eve of the full moon nights, loaded my consciousness with scathing anger to project at the floating corpse, to puncture it and cause it to settle with the sediment. And yet, when I was all poised to scream my guts out, and let him really have it, fear would grip my windpipe and keep me silent, and his ability to float past me again and again, forever, remained unharmed.

Watching news on TV one evening reminded me of the comprehensive health care we have. I went into the therapy queue, and within four months, I got a series of appointments with Dr Stenroos, a psychiatrist. She was nice, good-looking too – I spent much time watching the way her chest moved when she breathed, and what kind of heels she wore to each of our sessions. When I told her my problem, she listened carefully, oozing empathy from her very pores. When my story ended, she said, “But Pekka, you must have pity on yourself. Surely you understand that given your social environment at the time, and the crushing peer pressure, you had absolutely no chance to do anything to terminate this terrible chain of events?”

I said, “So, to you it’s just fine I watched a guy die, and didn’t so much as move a muscle to stop it?”

She took off her glasses and sucked on the temple arm. "Do you think you should have?"

"Hell yes."

"*This* is your problem. You can't forgive yourself, even though you were under the influence of these other people, and were a minor. My advice is, forgive yourself, and the dreams will vanish."

"Are you saying I am the victim here?"

"You're on your way to recovery."

As much as I wanted to ask her out to dinner, I just smiled my thanks and left. I tried her method once. I sat in the sauna and tried to relax my every muscle. Then I visualized the situation once again and hoped to convince myself of how absolutely incapable I was of affecting the outcome. Nothing is as easy to conjure up as self-pity, but just as it seemed to be working, I remembered how hard I'd laughed at Lieutenant Steele, and how much I'd admired Lare for taking him on, and how all of us wanted to watch him get all wet and cold when he fell in the creek.

That he would die was an option we didn't consider, and that made it not at all easy to forgive myself for what I'd done. I was once again tense all over. Gritting my teeth, I poured the bucket of water on the stove, sat in the steam until the skin burned off my ears, and then lived my life with the nocturnal acquaintance of Lieutenant Steele.

Years later my mother, stout of heart and strong in faith, was overjoyed to hear I was made a District Attorney. When I went to see her, she told me of her cancer. That night we sat up until 4am and talked through all the things we should have discussed when they happened, but at the time she was too tired, and I was too intent on being a rebel. I told her what happened to the Lieutenant.

"It's all my fault," she said, "if I had time for you then, none of this Crocodile crap would have taken place." If anything, this pushed the wedge of guilt deeper into my calloused heart.

"Mom, I had no choice, you had even less, if we were to survive."

"Put the blame on me, and I'll take it away when I go."

I hugged her and gave her a kiss, and she ruffled my thinning hair, and that was that. Three months later, she didn't manage to negotiate with Lieutenant Steele. She never saw me get married either, but then, who'd shack up with someone who becomes rigid like a floorboard, sweating and screaming in the night once a month?

Last weekend, it was All Hallows' Eve. If there's something I hate, it's the Finnish way of celebrating by closing down the country on a Saturday. Instead of sitting it out watching Eurosport, I surprised myself by hopping in my car and calling a hotel in

Jyväskylä for a one-night stay. All through the four hour drive up north, I asked myself, why am I doing this?

And yet, when I stood at my mother's grave, I knew why I'd come and what I wanted to ask her. I lit the three-day candle I bought at the flower shop by the graveyard, and set it down on the ground so its little yellow flame made shadows dance on the headstone. I asked her, "Mommy? Have I lived my life well enough for you?" There was no answer, and indeed, had there been one, I'd have returned to the shrinks. But still, in my heart I felt a soothing wave, and ascribed it to her.

On the way out I bought another candle. I drove out of the city, to my boyhood forest, and got out of the car. I walked a familiar path north, until I came to the little creek. I lit the candle and laid it among the grass, and took a few steps back. The flickering flame on the wick of the candle seemed the only thing really alive in the world, and its warm light seeped through the opaque plastic cup. Then I looked at the creek for the first time after thirty years.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Steele," I said in a quiet voice.

I walked back to my car, cancelled the hotel with my cell phone, and drove home through the night. In a week's time I will know if it worked.

Heikki Hietala - Author Info Sheet

Heikki learned to read at four but is still trying to learn to write. He usually writes in English, which somehow feels more natural at the moment, but is working on a draft of a novel in Finnish. Many of his short stories are available at his website at www.sabulo.com, where they can be read for free.

There's currently about 110,000 words in some 35 finished short stories, most of which are slightly supernatural or twisted in nature, but some are out of real life. Heikki is a member of Year Zero Writers and The Bookshed, which are writer collectives dedicated to better writing.



Published works:

"Tulagi Hotel" (Dragon Independent International Arts, London, April 2010 – see www.diiarts.com)

- A novel of 134,000 words (366 pages), available in hardcover, paperback, and Amazon Kindle
- Genres: Historical Fiction, Literary Fiction, Romance, and Popular Culture
- Ranked #15 on HarperCollins' website www.athonomy.com among some 8,500 books in May 2009
- Will be reissued in 2011 by Pfoxmoor Publishing, USA.

Short stories in competitions

- "Lord Stanton's Horse" (467 words), first place in the quarterly Flash500 competition, Fall 2010
- "The Campsite vol 1 – Forssa", highly commended in the Global Short Stories competition, March 2011

Short stories in print anthologies

- "The Summerhouse" (1,800 words) in *Brief Objects of Beauty and Despair* (2009)
- "Yessirree" (405 words) in *Bits, Bobs and Baubles* (2009)
- "Carbon-based" (4,072 words) in *Thirteen Spirits Waiting for Sunrise* (2009)
- "The Ephemeral Man" (2,861 words) in *Bits, Bobs and Baubles* (2010)
- "The Crib" aka "Society" (2,281 words) in *Words to Music* (2011)
- "She Blinded Me with Science" (4,509 words) in *Words to Music* (2011)

Short stories on websites and e-zines (partial list)

- "The Dispatchers" (3,450 words) at *Year Zero Writers*
- "The Summerhouse" (1,800 words) at *Escape Into Life*
- "Lord Stanton's Horse" (467 words) in *Words with JAM December 2010*
- "Les Feuilles Mortes" (4,900 words) at *Year Zero Writers*
- "The Campsite 1 – Forssa" at *Emprise Review vol. 9*
- "Wind in the Pipes" (6,850 words) at *Year Zero Writers*

- “The Photo Opportunity” (2,623 words) in *Words with JAM February 2010*
- “Flash in the Pan” (4,087 words) at *Year Zero Writers*
- “Stuorra-Jouni” (3,600 words) at *Year Zero Writers*

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