



MAINE FINLAND

Story by Pihla Hintikka

III.

The tacky old express train seat feels safer than the pendolino one and I can't help picturing Eeva running after cows and away from goblins right here only sixty years ago. Hiitola is no longer part of Finland. The eastern Karelia of the Maiden of Finland ceded to Russia in the Winter War. Karelia is never forgotten in politics but how many people remember the area in general? Does anybody go there anymore?

Suddenly my computer makes a weird noise. I try pushing the buttons, nothing. Battery checked. Wire checked. Electricity! I swear out loud and seek for sympathy. Communal complaining anyone? In a surprise move, people are smiling. A gap-toothed man behind my seat hands me a strawberry. A young blond nerdy chick asks with a wide accept if I need help. I have a sudden flash back of a zombie movie. Are they drunk? High? Mentid? No, they are simply friendly. Welcome to Savo, Eastern Finland.

Next to me a family, wearing matching Marimekko striped t-shirts, are eating Karelian pies, hard rye crust with a filling of rice pudding. It takes a long time and patience to make them, but in the end it's worth it. An allegory of a Finn.

After passing Pieksämäki, the unhappiest town in Finland voted by the public for many years now, the contradiction of this part of Finland is in your face. The nickname Land of a Thousand Lakes derives from here. The landscape is absolutely beautiful with glittering water and branches swaying in the wind. Joyful and friendly people haven't heard of the words stress, burn out, nor hurry. Or maybe it just seems like it. Rather than happiness, unemployment, alienation and high suicidal rates are characteristic of this area. Finland is the only country in Europe in which anti-depressants are the most popular medicine sold. The lighter it seems, the darker it gets. One precautionary provision is always there to help and hinder a Finn. The plague is called alcohol.

IV.

In the restaurant wagon many happy passengers have red noses already. A couple of older ladies are laughing their hearts out with their pints of lapin Kulta. Young art student girls with big wooden pearls around their necks giggle and gulp dry ciders. A stiff lady sitting straight, with a silky Marja Kurki scarf, is eating meatballs and mashed potatoes with a plastic fork. In one corner a smelly hillbilly sings the Finnish national anthem and toasts himself repeatedly. I sit by the window by myself and guzzle my beer. Here we are, the mythical Finland packed in one wagon sitting next to and talking to each other without a problem. It's like in the sauna. Finns are losing their inhibition of talking. In a cruise boat on the Baltic Sea they loose it all.

A short guy wearing a four-cornered hat is winking at me. Oh please shoot me. He's moving closer. I own reindeers, he says with pride and sits in front of me. This must be a) a hidden camera show b) a new reality TV show or c) a horribly tacky bachelor party. - And some huskies, if you ever want to come for a ride some day, he adds. I can't help but ask him if he's serious. And he definitely is. According to his ID, Erkki is a 31 year old fellow born in Inari who each autumn takes part in a reindeer roundup near Rovaniemi, the city of the two most famous Finns, Santa Claus and Lordi.

What is a genuine Lapp doing in eastern Finland? To my surprise he tells me he spent the week in Helsinki teaching Sami to linguistic students in a university. Overwhelmed I try to make a joke about his hat. C'mon, nobody wears a four-cornered hat just below Oulu, or even there for that matter. - I'm proud of my background. Kappis! And just like that Erkki, one of the rare 3000 who speak Sami, a dying language, as their mother tongue and who actually still makes a living out of reindeer, is gone.

The joke is on me. I feel incredibly ridiculous with my Ivana Helsinki dress and high heels. I want to go to the bathroom and wash my face, put on rubber boots, a threadbare t-shirt and baggy trousers, wear a scarf in my hair and sit in a hammock, pick blueberries and breath the fresh air. The further away from Helsinki you go, the more exposed you feel. And little by little it starts to feel good. It feels like home.

V.

The phone rings. My brother wants to know if he should make me a birch switch for the sauna tonight. While staring at the lakes rolling by outside, I wish I were in the heat already, by the lake of our summer cottage, naked, dipping into the water, under the glowing sun that doesn't go down until 11 pm. I want to be throwing more water onto the heater where a sauna elf sits guarding the spirit of traditional place.

- He's an elf, a guy whispers in my ear and bursts out laughing so that I almost spill my beer. I beg your pardon? Timo is a friend of Erkki's and according to him the reindeer caretaker is also working part-time as an elf in Santa Claus' office in the capital of Lapland, Rovaniemi. I see. This is a work trip to Saint Petersburg, then to Jallinn to bring as much booze as possible back to Finland. - Watch out, he might be under your window next Christmas if you don't behave well enough, Timo prattles with a wide smile and for a while I believe him.

- We will shortly arrive in Kuopio. Thank you for traveling with us and welcome aboard again, the official tape announces. I gather my belongings, say good bye to the elves and jump out of the train. I breathe my lungs full of the fresh summer night air and head to the sauna.

VI.

After a relaxing weekend in the summer cottage, built by my grandfather himself, I feel I have energy to once again face the urban life in Helsinki. Lau Nau is singing to my ears: I'm of the sea, I'm of the sun. In two ways, staying from a place. The railway station is full of noises. Greenpeace volunteers try to persuade people to join them and there's always a baby crying somewhere. I walk through the lobby to the main gate and bump into at least five people.

When waiting for the 3T tram I can smell Chanel. A girl with white graphic hair and bright red lipstick is checking her phone with one hand and smoking a Vogue with another. Her legs are covered with flower print leggings and the black hood dress is fantastic.

She might be a graphic designer or fashion assistant but inside, she's a berry picker. She's probably heading to the trendy bar Erottaja and is going to drink some glasses of fair-trade red wine from South Africa and sing along to Le Corps Mince de Françoise's 'Cool and Bored' but she knows how it feels to sit in a hammock and ride a bike to school when it's minus 25 degrees. She knows how it feels when the first snowflakes of winter are falling down. She remembers the first spring day.

The girl probably takes trips to Berlin, Paris and New York every now and then but secretly she wishes she had time to make lingonberry juice herself and see the Northern Lights more often. Urbanism is only a mask. A Finn is always, and will never cease to be, a forest-dweller inside.

I.

Helsinki train station at noon. It's a Friday in July and the sun will be up for nineteen hours today. Two pairs of statues hold the spherical lamps on either side of the main entrance designed by Eliel Saarinen. I'm taking a good look at the art nouveau genius' work when the smell brings me back to reality. - Don't believe what they say about us, a staggering man whispers, raises his eyebrows and offers me a sip from his bottle of black Salmiakki booze. I pass. But the guy has a point. What is a Finn made of?

Track eight. About a hundred passengers are already standing next to an empty track, staring quietly in the direction of travel like robots. No one is talking. I try to scan what's happening, nothing, of course. This is a country where people plan everything in advance. You rarely see a Finn running to a train in the last minute let alone missing it. When the French deal with a leaking pipe it's already causing water damage, a Finn would never have allowed the pipe to leak. Precaution is the key, for better or worse. I've even seen a Finn marking a hangover down in a calendar. I gobble up raw peas, a Finnish summer goodie, and join staring.

The white and blue clinical looking wagon is in chaos for a minute. Everyone wants to find their place at the same time. Passengers get welcomed to the train in Finnish, Swedish and English. Stiff businessmen push the buttons of their hi-fi laptops, some stare out the window. Nobody smiles nor talks. Kids fingering their mobile phones pre desperately trying to look as hip-hop as their idol, 30 Cent. I ask the lady behind me if it's ok to recline the seat a bit further. I guess stiffening and looking away equals yes.

Outside tall yellow houses begin to change to yellow crops surrounded by thick dark green pine forests. Here and there you get a glimpse of a wooden red house and black and white cows. As soon as the landscape changes to grey you know you're in the city of Lahti. Businessmen step out. The train to Kuopio through Eastern Finland takes about five hours. I lay my head and close my eyes.

II.

Mikkeli - St. Michel. The conductor comes and demands us to leave the train. Apparently Finland's pride, the fanciest and fastest pendolino train has some technical problems, as usual. Old rusty express one is picking us up. It seems that I'm the only one who's irritated even a bit. Other passengers shake their heads, but kindly get up and step outside. No making a scene, no swearing, no raising your voice, no I want my money back. But Finns obey only in front of authority. Outside on the platform the art of Finnish communication begins: communal complaining. How can they do that? I need to be at home on time. We should file an appeal. I participate with one of my favorite lines of the genre: I hate pendolinos. People nod with sympathy. An old Finnish lady turns to me and asks: - Which city are you from?

Eeva, a Finn turned Canadian with curly gray hair and lightly slanted eyes, begins telling me how she's going to meet her grandchildren she hasn't seen in ages. Toronto called her at the age of sixteen, during the Second World War. He was half Canadian, half German and they decided to get away. - You see that rock over there? She points to the forest next to the light blue wooden station. I know who put it there, she adds and nods convincingly. I'm starting to wonder if I've met a psychic.

- The goblin from my hometown Hiitola has been here. Ok, just a mental case, or maybe not. She tells me a long story of a malicious goblin called Hiisi who lives in the Finnish forest. Beardless, ugly Hiisi is always dressed as a scoundrel and is found near ominous crevasses, large boulders and other amazing geographical features.

- When we were evacuated from our home because of the war, my family took all the cows and goats to the train. I remember guarding them, while staring outside, looking at the woods terrified that I could see Hiisi's travelling in a noisy procession, attacking people who did not give way to them. I knew we'd have to get away from the woods, to the cultivated area where the Hiisi would never step foot. Then I saw a big boulder and I thought I was going to die. But I never did. Not yet. Eeva giggles and before I have the chance to say anything, she's already wishing me a good trip and jumping in an old rusty express train. A corner of Kalevala by Elias Lönnrot I is popping out of her bag.

