

Translations

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THE ALTAR STONE

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Savinen sputtered something and Heikura told him to speak clearly. I have to get to Kikkelniemi, he said in a loud voice and began to stare out the side window into the spruce forest.

The trees swayed in different directions. Two squirrels ran up a mossy trunk and leapt to the branch of a neighboring spruce one right after the other. The branch bowed deeply, but the squirrels stayed on board. They must have a lot of practical knowledge in their heads about the strength and elasticity properties of different branches.

The last time they stopped the car in the middle of an intersection. Savinen had demanded that we turn toward Jyväskylä.

Heikura stuck to taking the highway that leads to Mikkeli. Laine sat behind the wheel. He was amazed that the men were already disagreeing about the destination. A moment ago they were arguing about the route to drive there.

Savinen shouted, was it so much to ask that we drive past his old summer cabin. Laine and I didn't say anything, but Heikura announced that we were on the way to his cabin in Anttola, and that you drive there through Mikkeli. You can't get there by any other route, unless you turn at Kouvola and drive around Saimaa on the south side through Lappeenranta and Imatra and Puumala.

Heikura had summer sheep on the island his cabin was on. His wife had gotten them. The little lambs would make the children happy, and as the sheep grazed freely they would keep the island's traditional landscape in order. The sheep would also take care of food scraps. His wife made it all sound useful and practical. Even so, she ended up having to vigorously sweet-talk the skeptical Heikura. At the beginning of the summer Heikura's kids managed to take care of the sheep, carrying them bread crusts and even fresh bread, so that Heikura ended up having to drive by motorboat to the village to get bread from the store for the people, because it had all gone into the mouths of the sheep.

After midsummer the sheep started to go wild and wouldn't let themselves be caught anymore. Now that fall had come we had to drive the lot of them into a corner of the peninsula, shoot them there and slaughter them.

Heikura told us that the sheep had been so tame at the beginning of the summer that they would even go inside the cabin. The first to get annoyed with them was Heikura's wife, whose perennial beds and herb garden had been destroyed on account of the sheep's free grazing.

The sheep were finally scared off when Heikura himself found one of them lying in the bed in the bedroom. Heikura said that he threw the first thing that found its way into his hand at the animal, which happened to be a hatchet leaning against the doorframe. Heikura drove the sheep into the woods bellowing and clapping his hands and always did so if they brought their bleating anywhere near the yard.

The squirrels darted down the spruce trunk, ran across the ground for a moment and climbed up a tree again. It was the same spruce they had jumped from onto the one they just came down. Savinen stared at us with his jaw set. He wiped his face and neck with his palm.

Me and Heikura were pushing Savinen around so much his head was glowing. We laughed and Savinen started laughing too.

"Fuck!" Heikura slapped him on the back of the head and the matter was settled.

Me and Heikura chatted together about how now it's the weekend, and as free men we can go precisely wherever we please. Laine checked the map and said that a little before Otava we turn to the west. Savinen let out an involuntary sob and on top of it he laughed along with the others again.

It was like Savinen was feverish. The whole time he described what all was along this side road that we were going down. Savinen said he had driven this road a few too many times. He claimed he knew every turn. No one doubted what Savinen said. He gave a detailed account of the course of the road like a rally navigator.

We drove past Savinen's old cabin perfectly slowly. The new residents were in the yard playing badminton. The wind blew the birdie so that the player on the upwind side hit over the back line the whole time and the one playing on the downwind side into the net. The wind seemed to be treating both sides pretty fairly. Savinen watched it all, bit his knuckle and swallowed.

"They've knocked down the flag pole!" Savinen bounded out of the car and took off for the cabin. Laine ran after him and dragged him back into the car. Savinen couldn't do anything about it. He came along under Laine's arm like a little boy. Laine squeezed him into the back seat, turned on the door's child lock and took off driving so that gravel flew into the undercarriage and up both sides of the car. The badminton players' heads turned. The server forgot his racquet gripped between his thumb and forefinger at shoulder height.

We climbed, almost crawling on all fours up the rocky mountainside. Savinen went on saying that he owed this to himself, because he had never climbed up to the huge glacial boulder that was on top of the mountain, which he had become used to looking at only from the lake side since he was a little boy.

Savinen was already a good way ahead. At the car he had set his compass in the direction to the boulder marked on the base map. Heikura wondered what we owed Savinen that we had to climb the spruce-choked, rocky slope to look at some rock, even if

it was a big one. Laine asked Heikura if it had been necessary to go talking about the uniting effect of work on men to Savinen, who had been unemployed for almost a year.

Savinen waited on a fallen tree trunk. We sat down and Savinen thanked Laine again, who hadn't let him go stick his foot in it at Kikkelnemi.

Savinen had explained after leaving the cabin how he and his father chopped down the flagpole twenty-eight years ago. It was carried out of the forest by hand, dried, smoothed down and stained four times. While Laine hit the gas, Heikura kept looking out the back window at the small and unfortunate-looking cabin that no one seemed to have the means to renovate or install electricity in. Heirs always end up having to sell those kinds of places cheaply, sixties-era summer cabins on the bad shores of small lakes. I was afraid Heikura would open his mouth and say something.

"Why did you chop down the flagpole?"

"We didn't chop it down, we put it up."

"You just said that you chopped the flagpole down with your dad."

"Sure, we chopped down a pine tree."

"Goddamn you!"

"Sort of a young pine. *They* are the ones that chopped the flagpole down."

"Now shut your traps both of you and Savinen go on with your story."

"I was fifteen."

"How can he continue the story with his trap shut?"

Laine ordered them to shut up again and now Heikura quieted down. Savinen had been an adolescent boy at the time of the construction of the flagpole and remembered the event vividly. It had remained in his memory as something that united father and son in that difficult stage of his growth.

"Sorry." Heikura took Savinen by the shoulders and said that nothing unites men like work done together. Savinen asked if Heikura was yanking his chain.

Now Savinen went off blathering and pointing with his hand. The boulder that we were climbing towards was supposedly a sacrificial altar of the ancient Finns. Boaters even traveled a long distance to come see it. The boulder was a time-honored landmark of water travelers.

Savinen told how his father had taught him to always keep in mind where the altar stone was located, because it was visible from every open part of the lake. If you kept that clear in your mind you couldn't get lost in these parts. Savinen put his forearms on top of each other and pointed at the spruce forest in opposite directions with his forefingers.

"You take a cross bearing like this."

We couldn't seem to find the altar stone by any means, even though we spread out in an open line and drew a cordon along, staying within shouting distance of each other. Savinen was in the center with the marching compass as the point man. He measured our progress in paces and commanded the column to shift by its length to the right. We turned and combed the neighboring grid square by walking in the opposite direction.

Heikura suddenly turned in the opposite direction. He lifted his knees violently and held a make-believe rifle in front with straight arms. His eyes spun mindlessly, although otherwise the man was serious and stared stiff-jawed like a soldier. Savinen

checked his compass and took reference points from the terrain. He didn't notice Heikura's screwing around.

Heikura took off in his peculiar march in the other direction and opened his trousers. He yelled he was going to piss and intended to check whether there were any chanterelles in the hollow. Soon Heikura appeared on top of a rock and yelled that there wasn't any hollow behind it, but instead a cliff and the altar stone standing on the edge of the cliff.

The boulder was tall considering its width. It resembled a wedge-nosed delivery van that has been dropped headfirst onto the ground and then left standing in that position, rear bumper towards the sky.

Everyone was of the opinion that the rock was quite a freak of nature. Savinen thought that it must have caused fear and reverence in the ancient Finns and maybe inspired artists who had gazed upon it from the lake below.

Savinen compared modern Finns to our ancient fore-fathers. In his opinion we had all turned into comfort-seeking crybabies who didn't know how to work anymore and by so doing arrange work for other Finns too. And here he was, a trained engineer who had been totally unemployed for months, a person willing to work. Savinen asked if we could guess how it felt for a man who had spent his life in the bustle of work to loaf about in forced inactivity.

Savinen said that when he walked down the street every day he calculated in his head the roof strengths of buildings and the optimal spans of bridges, what kinds of static and dynamic loads structures could tolerate, wind force, wet snow and other stresses. Savinen explained that's how he kept up his professional skills.

"We don't really have anything other than this know-how."

"We who?"

"Our education system is the top in the world."

"Hey guys..." Heikura, who had climbed on top of the altar, yelled that it moved.

At first Heikura and Savinen rocked the stone, shouting rhythmically. They found that the boulder did indeed move, but not so much that it would have gone out of balance. Savinen started calculating its mass distribution and center of gravity.

He circled the altar stone, observing it from different sides, sketched the boulder's shape into his notebook and took sight measurements. After punching it into his pocket calculator, Savinen announced that the boulder's volume was about ten cubic meters and thus its mass some thirty thousand kilos. And most importantly—Savinen took his reading glasses from his head—it was possible to throw the stone out of equilibrium.

Heikura egged Laine on with him. They attacked the boulder and rocked it back and forth violently. Savinen raised his hand and shouted that the rocking was completely futile. Getting the stone out of equilibrium would be a project that required time and understanding of the laws of mechanics.

Laine and Heikura hung on the end of a pine pole and bent it with the weight of their bodies. At each bend the lever budged the boulder and Savinen stuck little rocks between it and the cliff.

In the beginning Savinen had tried to move the stone with wooden wedges he had carved. I asked why he didn't pound wedge-shaped rocks into the gap, a bunch of which we had collected on his orders. Savinen asked if I was totally nuts.

If we started hacking at stones with the back of the hatchet we'd retrieved from the car, chips from them could fly into the striker's eyes. No production process is so important that it's worth endangering peoples' health! When they couldn't get the boulder to budge using the wooden wedges, Savinen put the levers into play.

"A lever is also a kind of wedge," I heard Savinen explaining to Heikura and Laine, who panted, their pant legs muddy.

"A lever is a lever."

"A wedge, lever and bolt threads are all the same thing."

"Yeah, yeah." Heikura left to get his cigarettes.

"They're all based on the wheel, you know."

"Now he's inventing the wheel!"

"You can think of a wedge as a sector of a circle. See..."

Savinen drew a round figure in the air and explained to us how the wedge, lever, and thread are derived from the shape of a circle. All are based on the wheel. The stone's tilting motion is easy to start and again as you approach the point of equilibrium the force requirement is small, but there in the middle you can need all the classical implements of mechanics. Laine got up and said that that they had to get on with work if they still intended to get the altar stone out of place today.

Three hours later the boulder was pried into the position that according to Savinen was its point of equilibrium. Laine attacked the side of the stone to push it into the lake gleaming below, but Savinen raised his hand and asked why use raw muscle power when the stone could be elegantly dislodged with a small tap. Savinen tapped his temple: nothing is as wise as a human.

Not a single lever was left free, because all of them had been used getting the stone into the position it was now in. Savinen said that the outermost lever wasn't holding anything anymore. The ones wedged in later had taken the burden that had been concentrated on it. Savinen jerked the outermost one out.

The other levers suddenly sprung straight up and their ends that had been pushed under the stone shattered like matchsticks when the altar stone plunked back down into place.

Savinen dug his calculator out of his pocket with violent movements and punched at it. Without saying a word he disappeared into the woods and returned three-quarters of an hour later from the car with the hydraulic jack he had brought.

Everyone tried to get Savinen to give up knocking the stone over. I explained that everyone understood what pressure Savinen lived under after ending up unemployed and relying on his wife's earnings, without any of his own income in the middle of an upswing.

Heikura asked if Savinen wouldn't rather come and destroy the big rock in the ground in the lawn at his house. Heikura had dug the earth out around the rock and it seemed to go on for meters in every direction. A mechanical man like Savinen could get the rock out of its place with levers, wedges and rollers or some kind of threads. Laine ordered Heikura to keep himself muzzled.

Savinen said he had sworn he wouldn't leave this mountain before the altar stone was at the bottom of the lake. He could get it there by himself too. We could just as well leave. Laine said we wouldn't leave Savinen – no one gets left.

Me and Laine and Heikura sat on a fallen log and watched how Savinen limped the boulder over a little at a time and pushed chock stones underneath whenever it had been raised suitably. Half an hour later the stone fell over the edge of the cliff and bounded down. It took a bounce off the shore bedrock and plunged into the lake. Heikura yawned irritably and Laine stated that we could leave now.

Where the stone had sat a moment ago, only Savinen's jack remained. He twisted the hydraulic vent open and the jack's obliquely projecting lifting arm retracted hissing into position. We took off down the slope to the car.

We weren't at Heikura's cabin until after midnight and the sheep hunting was left to Sunday. Nothing came of it, because the rifle had been knocked around on the bad roads and its scope pulled strongly to the left.

Divers paid by the Finnish government found the altar stone on the bottom of the lake and a contractor from Heinola hauled the glacial boulder back to the top of the mountain, where it was bolted down just to be on the safe side. The operation cost Savinen five hundred and seventy thousand marks. A plaque appeared on the boulder that said it was protected by authority of the Ancient Finnish Antiquities Law.

Heikura started getting phone calls during the winter from the angry women of the Animalia Association and in April he was summoned before the district court and charged with animal cruelty because he had left three lambs on his island in the dead of winter.

As his only defense Heikura said that the sheep had been completely his wife's idea, but his wife never turned up when problems started coming with the sheep and he had to start catching and killing them.

"ON THE KEMIHAARA POWER PLANT WORKSITE he once drank a bottle of Vaakuna and started singing all of a sudden. No one had ever even heard him hum, and he probably didn't even know how to whistle. It sure sounded terrible."

"HE DIDN'T USUALLY PARTAKE. Sometimes, if he drank a little he would just start looking out the window or take off into the forest."

"HE MOVED INTO THE VILLAGE TO A HOUSE, but he left himself a few plots of forest. He'd go thin them and prune them straight. He went through every tree individually. And my god did he chop firewood! There was a hundred cubic meters of it in his shed and in the yard another hundred. Somebody went and checked the stacks with a level and plumb line just for the hell of it—they were straight."

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