

The Block

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To Keppi

P. 7

It began like this: a train door closed and suddenly a man was standing on the platform.

All of the identifying marks fit. And if the details are still slightly disjointed at this stage, we may simply observe that any person who has ever loved another person with all his heart knows that it is possible to know when that right one comes along.

Let us nevertheless relate this much, that the character in question was, as such, of indeterminate age, yet presumably somewhere between thirty and forty – slim, slouching, and anemic, with light hair, whose person was indisputably characterized by nervousness. But at this point, we must already hurry to jump on board with the course of events, for by now our character had already exited the train and taken two steps forward on the shiny platform, stopped, and lowered a cracked blue leather suitcase to the ground beside him.

At the same moment, from somewhere behind him came a strangled bellow, distorted by having passed through some medium. Our character flinched, turning and looking at the train door with a frightened expression. Looming behind the glass, shaking her baggage, was a middle-aged woman, who was made to look by her face, red from her outburst of anger, and her glass-muffled fury like a person

dropped in a large aquarium to drown who is attempting in frenzied despair to communicate something along the lines of “help.” And, after a long pause to contemplate, our character finally understood and rushed in crouching position to the door and pressed the glowing green switch next to it, which in turn gave the door the command to open, upon which the woman clambered down onto the platform with all of her things, issuing forth reproaches to the air unfit for printing, and then rattled off toward the station building with her rolling luggage.

Our character turned, returned to his suitcase and remained standing there. Through the glass roof shining wet above the station platforms, the black night sky was visible, as was the gleam of a station clock looking more like a chipped moon from behind a roof beam. On the platforms, the train doors tha-wumped open and shut and the noise rose high into the air, raining back down as a wet squelching after colliding with the roof, and with all this flapping was mixed the roar of the diesel engine, the whining acceleration of the tiny cargo vehicles, the clatter of the luggage carts, and the tinny announcements echoing from the loudspeakers, and it would not be an exaggeration to assume that in our character’s receivers it soon came about that the auditory sensations were puréed into such an undiscerning frenzy that perhaps in the extreme it directed attention to other sensory sectors – to the omnipresent acrid scent of the rail bed stone and the frigid moisture slithering onto his skin from his sleeve cuffs.

Finally, by all appearances he was ready to set out, but then halted suddenly after a few brisk-seeming steps, lowered his burden to the ground, and began to fumble about in his jacket pockets with a rather exceptional frenzy. The stream of people discharging from the train swept about both sides of him, dragging along with it trails of smells and scents: skin creams, tobacco smoke stuck to fibers, excessive, failed, or neglected deodorant, old wine, new wine, the aroma of food and other things of domestic origin, as well as one scent phenomenon of a peculiarly more sublime character, which may have originated from the dried petals of a rose crammed in a pocket. But if perchance he did notice all of this, he most probably did not pause to parse his perceptions in any way, for as previously said, his attention was quite thoroughly occupied with the described pocket digging operation.

When the rummaging did not after all appear to lead to any sort of result, he again lifted his suitcase from the platform into the air and set off traipsing toward the station building door through the hemorrhage of humanity. The center platforms thrust in almost to the entrance, and at the point where the rails ended in stout blackened barriers, a sort of a wall of disturbed air churned, the restless mixture of the inclement moisture dominating outside and the dry, warm indoor air welling out of the doors. However, our character did not appear to trouble his head with this phenomenon, which in and of itself was of course quite inconsequential, but instead went with the tide entirely oblivious to the draw of the man decked out in a camelhair Ulster and underarm umbrella and had, as he proceeded in this manner,

quickly traversed the asphalt dividing the platforms and the entrance and was now already stepping towards the doors, which with an excitingly professional sighing and snapping were flinging not only people into the platform area, but also light and heat like fine-grained sand.

The door towards which the man walking in front of him was now heading was still partially open from the previous person who had pushed it out or in, but closing again at a good clip. And suddenly it came to pass that the Ulster character turned himself with a remarkably childlike motion in a sideways direction and slipped with exaggerated subtlety through the gap into the station hall.

So he once again lowered his suitcase to his side, at the same time performing an exasperated-looking gesture and with his left foot scraping the gravel that lay about abundantly, apparently for the purpose of preventing slipperiness. Next he lobbed his now free right hand toward the handle and opened the door, but after this was forced to retreat a few steps to retrieve his carrying accessory, during which time the door had managed to close once again.

Now he bent down to lift his suitcase from the ground with his left hand, but unfortunately this operation was also made more complicated when a rushed and obviously irritated youth collided with his crouching form, and when the young man had taken his fill of hurling slanders so lowbrow and unfriendly that we are led to leave them unreported at this juncture, this obstreperous soul took the reins in his hands, flinging the door open and marching into the station building as vigorously,

erectly, and oppressively as a warning sign's exclamation mark, and after the youth, our character also slipped into the interior at last.

The air in the station hall eddied about dry, warm and languorous. From the doors diverged an assemblage of wet, gravelly streaks left by pedestrians, which cut across each other, formed arcs and pond-like unions and then diverged again in the interior. The ceiling looming high above returned the tinny, gravelly steps, the muted speech of the few pedestrians and a persistent knocking carried from somewhere far off back to the edge of the floor as a ubiquitous, cumulative, muted clamor, which sounded as if the building had been full of the miniature nightlife carried on by tiny actors. In the closed newspaper-tobacco-snack kiosks the rows of shelves shone with a weak orange-tinted light, and behind the darkened glass of the Minute Bar in the passageway leading to the main hall, men slurped beer bent over in devout and solemn attitudes as if they were selecting the next Pope. From around the corner, a cleaner in blue overalls mated to his polishing machine materialized as if under the direction of some advanced cybernetic controller and hummed across the scene with extreme deliberation, in the manner of an airplane transecting the sky somewhere in the distance.

When some hurried traveler careening in from the station platform then bumped our character in the shoulder as he remained standing at the door, he appeared to somehow wake up, and it may not be entirely outside the realm of possibility to assume that the awakening was then clothed in that boundary

condition that so often torments not only life but narratives as well: action. After taking a number of apparently energetic yet essentially hesitant steps, after stopping, after turning about once, and after scratching his head from all of the possible options for proceeding, he chose the left (and in this case, “left” is defined specifically in terms of our character’s point of view, although it is impossible to be entirely sure that he was still able to evaluate his position on the right-left axis after his spinning and stepping about). In any case, he was now trudging forward along the wide passageway along which all of the knickknacks behind the glass in the kiosks sulked in their neat nocturnal ranks ,and at the end of which stood a new set of doors, which at this end of the building collected so few passers-by that they appeared somehow eternally shut and sealed, and this discovery again apparently thrust him to the cusp of a new quandary, at which he once again halted and by all appearances set down to properly pondering the serviceability and utility of his chosen direction of progress.

Then he suddenly pressed on. Twenty meters were quickly covered, and ten or so meters before the doors the ceiling of the hallway became lower at the point of the second-floor restaurant. The windows of the on-license allowed a view into the interior, and behind the glass shone point-like yellowish lights, under which the few indifferent-looking customers let their gazes loll about the station hall like towlines burdened with algae. For a moment he slowed his steps and attempted for one reason or another to peer into the windows of the restaurant, but when a unit

comprised of a young female sitting behind two glasses saw fit for some unspecified reason to begin pointing at him, he quickened the pace of his steps with slightly frantic motions and quickly sped to a zero and thereafter negative angle relative to the picture window, bypassed the lower door of the restaurant from which a muffled hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses, dense tobacco smoke, and the musty smell of wet over clothes poured into the station hall like water-soaked cotton candy, and then he was at the doors.

Exiting the doorway now occurred without any greater difficulties, unless one counts as a difficulty a hardly perceptible hesitation before the row of doors, which was of course tailor-made for raising additional questions not only due to their possible lockedness but also in their multiplicity of decision options. After pushing the door open, he stepped out onto the granite landing between massively built columns and stopped. The railway station square floated in a fog tinged a sickly yellow by the street lights, which looked so wet that if you were to spray any more water into it out of a spray bottle, all of the water suspended in the air would probably fall to the earth at once. Amidst the fog, the busses in the square extruded their viscous light into the environment, and a few slow figures clove the illuminated, fleecy water vapor, from beneath which the dark of terra firma looked like a thick, burdensome train being pulled behind each walker.

The wet stone steps shone darkly. Estimated visually, the distance down to the sidewalk was some dozen steps. Halfway down the stairs on a narrow landing

and lower down around the bus shelters, men stood in ones and twos and threes as such men are wont to loiter near all stations at all times and in all places. From somewhere farther off came a storm of laughter muted by the fog, which sounded as if someone were guffawing with a mouth full of cotton balls, and after a while the laughter was mixed with a swinging, staccato rattling that seemed to emanate from a wheeled suitcase lurching across the cobblestones of the square behind a dark splotch.

He moved to the first step and then quickly to the second. And in the interest of moving forward, let us now simply say in summary, that quite soon he had descended the entire staircase and was standing on the sidewalk at the level of the square.

Although the difference in elevation between the sidewalk and the top of the staircase was not, all in all, very many meters, the square and its environs looked quite different from this angle. The busses radiating their light into the fog were agglomerated into boney, threateningly large organisms and the buildings around the square looked as if they were bending down to see the pedestrians more closely with their advert-red glowing eyes. Behind his back, the granite self-esteem of the railway station perhaps reigned more than it was seen and heard, and above all the landscape was watched over by the clock tower shining with pale blue light from its top, a tower whose phallic nature was of such a dumbfoundingly obvious sort that it couldn't really be considered indecent.

In any case, some sort of conversion of scale had now occurred, and so now as he stood there on the sidewalk, the few people tramping past in the fog appeared gigantic in all their shadowiness, and although we cannot be entirely sure whether he was at home in this particular city or not, it would not perhaps be reckless to venture that all of these, as it were, glowering phenomena finally led to a range of somewhat less than homey feelings. So he then quickly, as if to confirm this thought construct, fell under the power of some uncontrollable shudder, let loose a puffing, malarial vocalization and then set off in a hurry to the left with his suitcase dancing in the air.

And as we well know, such dominating fog in a city easily tastes on the tongue like some cold and wet metal or stone grit-like invasion somewhat as if a work glove plucked from a mud hole were being shoved into your mouth, and so we may perhaps think without any greater twinge of conscience that our character was also tasting some sensation of this type as he walked forward with the soles of his shoes hissing on the shining asphalt and his suitcase drumming rhythmically against his thigh. Ahead loomed the cabstand and behind the pole the evenly-distributed lights of the vehicles for hire in a long line like yellow watercolor tablets flung into water, and to the left of the cars, on the other side of the sidewalk, rose a boulder-like building that apparently still belonged to the railway station, which at the point of the end of the line of taxis made a sudden ninety-degree turn and then thrust out a new wing to the right into the fog. At about the third floor elevation a

fluorescent-colored opening suddenly appeared in the side of the building, which went out and disappeared again as quickly as it had appeared.

He was quickly at the first car. It was a Mercedes-Benz about twenty years old that spread around itself an even buzzing and belched from its tailpipe a thin trail of exhaust that disappeared immediately into the fog. He stopped about two meters from the car on the sidewalk, lowering his suitcase to the ground and again digging in his pockets, and although at this point it would be easy to suggest the interpretation that the action in question was simply a normal attempt at searching for money, we are unfortunately left in a proverbial lurch with these sorts of suppositions, for he suddenly interrupted his rummaging as if he had entirely forgotten what he had been doing and was then left standing in place with his arms hanging at his sides looking downwards.

The first to flinch was the taxi driver, who now leaned over to open the passenger side front door of his workplace and yelped “well,” at which our character lifted his gaze and focused it on the interior of the car, which was swathed in beige plastic and fake leather – an interior decorating solution which is, in passing, for one reason or another wont to cause flashes of images of a naked, sweating mass of people packed into the vehicle. Nevertheless, our character merely stared dumbly at the car and at the blocky cabdriver whose head with its bald pate and imposing brow looked as if it were placed wrong-way round between the shoulders, and events remained in this standstill for the following nine seconds,

approximately, after which the driver finally muttered something barely audible and then closed the door.

The terror had presumably had time to creep into his body and mind even before he actually awoke to the ruckus, because he was in the clutches of such total, manifest panic when he finally threw himself off the bed onto his back on the floor.

And as much of a relief as it would be to think that he was, for example, having another nightmare, the situation had presumably been quite the opposite during this period of sleep safeguarded by togetherness, and in this sense it was, of course, especially cruel that he was awoken by such a cacophony, the punches and kicks battering the door, the chunks of ice catapulted at the windows, and the different sizes of stones and all sorts of oaths, curses, and threats, “fucking thief,” “traitor,” “wife stealer,” and “I’m gonna kill you,” just to select a few examples of Vänätäinen’s repertoire of expressions, which were most certainly and undeniably true.

He presumably did not even have time to remember events prior to sinking into sleep, not to mention having the presence of mind to wonder where Anni had disappeared to from the hut without a trace. Despite this, it was clear that Anni’s husband was now rampaging outside the door in the throes of what was obviously a blind rage of the first order, and although our poor character certainly, as we may presume, was impelled to take some action regarding the matter in this moment of crisis which to the rest of us is surely quite beyond comprehension, at first he was able to do no more than curl up and whimper softly on the floor.

But when the tumult only went on and on, he apparently found it impossible to stay put. However, his chosen method for starting out was unfortunately not entirely to his advantage at that particular moment, for when he now began to crawl across the floor in the midst of this entirely too macabre drumbeat of imprecatory and slaughterhouse terminology, the floorboards began in turn to make dragging and whining noises which were infernally loud in his ears. And when he then finally managed to curl up in the shadow of an enormous hose reel in the opposite corner and was once again left with lower jaw trembling, hugging his knees, and eyes wide with a presumably quite justifiable fear of death, he heard a new exclamation from the door which was comprised of the words, “Yeah, I know you’re in there you fucking coward; if there’s enough man in you to bang my wife, then there oughta be enough in you to come out of there too.” In this unpleasant situation, with the aid of the framework provided by these words, there is no longer any sense in us beginning to split hairs, particularly when, after the words, from the door rang a blow obviously aided by some sort of improvised cudgel, which made the door groan in a distinctively buckling tone and our character in turn utter a long, primitive utterance of fear comprised mainly of h’s and u’s.

Then suddenly everything was quiet. And when no more clatter came, contrary to rather well founded expectations—which of course may have been even more chilling—he finally appeared, as he lifted his gaze towards the ceiling, to turn his attention to the noise, which like the rest of us he supposed to be unbroken

silence, the rain which hammered the hut from every direction except the floor and amidst the persistent drumming of which also began to be discernable an extraordinary dripping, squelching, gurgling, rushing, and a sort of subject-less splashing, which in turn likely originated from the continuous dropping from the roof of lumps of snow loosened by the rain.

But if these sorts of passing observations were in any fashion even possible at this moment in our character's almost certainly racing mind, then he was hardly capable of any deeper analysis as he awaited the events which would follow, curled nearly into a ball. And because the hour was once again undoubtedly so late that the period of daylight was now passed, and because he was thus not able to see anything more than the harsh glow of the floodlights, he was left with no option but to await the aforementioned events mainly relying on his sense of hearing, and so his ears, undoubtedly more sensitive due to the lack of sight, also heard the lurking, brooding presence of Vänätyinen somewhere beyond the door, and although a mere presence is of course, as such, relatively difficult to hear, the random shifting of feet, throat clearing, and coughs told quite without dispute that the man's presence had only shifted form and tactic.

But then, nevertheless, after many, tortuous minutes made perilous by decisions to forgo breathing, two muffled thuds could finally be heard and thereafter a long series of squelching, receding footsteps.

And our character waited.

He waited, breathed, held his breath, listened, waited.

He waited until any hint of the footsteps disappeared somewhere into the all-encompassing pounding, and waited even then. He waited ten minutes, another ten minutes, and then still a third ten minutes in the dark corner. Then he rose.

The only thing visible through the window was the explosions of enormous raindrops being flung against the Plexiglas by the gusting wind. Our character stood, leaning on the hose reel with both hands and staying still just long enough that the shaking became apparent in his legs, but then he pushed away from the tangle of fire hose, walking in simultaneously striding and sneaking arcs the short distance from one end of the room to the other, that is from the hose reel to the bunk, where he began groping about the bed, shaking the blanket and digging under the pillow for something, and then did indeed find, between the bed frame and the wall, one loose piece of clothing, which, to be quite specific, belonged to Anni and by no means to him – but which knowledge did not however prevent him from raising the clothing accessory with two hands before his face, looking at the pattern, and finally moving it slowly beneath his nose and breathing in, and, as if the preceding were not enough, pressing the fabric to his cheek, long and fervently, in connection with which action he managed for a moment to appear both singularly happy and unfathomably sorrowful.

After this in and of itself beautiful glimpse, his being unfortunately returned once again to that unique yet as such entirely understandable tension caused by fear

and the requirements connected thereto, and so he then, for example, rather than getting dressed, returned to the bunk under the covers, not throwing himself down of course, but rather lying down more carefully and gently. However, in conjunction with this action he also glanced at the window again and then began conveying himself to the door, in this case with sufficiently vigorous movements that this time we have no need to attest even the slightest wavering, which of course, in this undeniably uncomfortable and apparently pressing situation, was, above all, to our character's advantage.

Thus he was swiftly at the door, opening it, stepping out, and closing it behind himself. And although he did still pause on the doorstep for a moment, by all appearances one and only one idea now ran through his mind: escape.

Outside the hut it quickly became obvious, based on the prevailing silence, that it was once again at least late evening. There was not a person, hare, rat, vehicle, or anything else to be seen moving anywhere, for during the time it took to remove himself from the building the wind had died down, at least temporarily. There may be cause to add to the preceding that there certainly was movement present in the landscape, although none brought about by any individual actors, for the rain had been of the massive sort this time, a deluge falling from the sky almost as a single mass, a frigid and yet, in comparison with the previous night's frost, quite warm shower, which, in addition to soaking everything, of which from our perspective our character is of course the most important, as it had apparently continued for quite

some time, had managed to melt, water down, soak, and muddy approximately the entire area, shrink the snow drifts around the field, and deposit a layer of water on top of the ice, loosen the gravel, slush, water, and sheets of ice on the path bordering the field into a challenge of a sort with which we shall unfortunately become better acquainted shortly.

To wit, our character could of course not now merely stand there getting wet due to the possibility of that raving lunatic drunk driver still lurking somewhere. Instead, he now took two steps down the stairs to the ground or, rather, to the layer of ice covering the ground, on top of which approximately three centimeters of water now rippled, and then set off walking to the left, toward the train station, in his painfully impracticable under-footwear, which most likely let all the water through in the first few steps. And furthermore, despite the danger of repetition, although he now could have looked as such like any old person striding down the street in unpleasant conditions, it must be said that his gait did of course reveal the extreme distress and haste to which the rampaging described previously had naturally given rise, and thus he was quite quickly at the corner of the hut and turned swiftly to the left, very nearly slipping on the icy surface and falling headlong into the rather large puddle which had already collected around the clogged sewer grate.

On the left glowed the pale, apricot-colored heat lamps of the greenhouses somewhere behind all the low vegetation, and on the right were the cold street lamps placed here and there and looking more like soggy, colorless cotton candy in

the fog. Straight ahead once again loomed what was apparently the tennis court's dressing rooms and storage shed, a building approximately the size of his hut, which in the torrent pouring vertically from the sky looked more like a Lego piece that had undergone some cataclysm of scale. Somewhere far off behind the building in question, seen through the still cataract-like curtain of water, a group of tall buildings jutted into the sky, on the sides of which a few lit windows struggled for breath in the driving rain.

However, our character scarcely had time to direct his attention to these details, for now, in the heat of his helter-skelter progress, he was already being forced to avoid the stout black maples and lindens in his way and the smaller trees which reached out their bony, wet branches here and there and created long, black, deep shadows when they got in the way of the park light fixtures. And from just such a shadow, some thirty kilometers to his left side, the sizeable form of Vänätyinen now stepped into view.

For a moment our character was completely frozen in place, at which time his right foot, which had just been taking another new, difficult step in the mushy slush, was left projecting in the air for a few seconds. But then panic obviously gained the upper hand once again, and so he then, after standing for that short moment in place, sallied forth in what for all intents and purposes was, but in actuality offered more of a rough approximation of, a straight line, galloping towards the barrack-like structure visible ahead, with his thin and by this point now thoroughly soaked matt

of hair flying in the air and slapping against his head, and with not only his panting, but also all manner of sloshing, shoe flapping, swishing, and slurping and other running noises echoing around him.

He glanced behind him. Vänätyinen, who had apparently been lurking somewhere behind a tree trunk the whole time, was thumping forward in a lamentably similar direction as he himself, and had, besides that, already shortened the original distance by a third and was now approaching the park path, which he had just been walking along. In a dreadful way it was now also noteworthy that the man, despite his generally harried condition and warrantably thorough drunkenness, and although the pursuer did slip on the wet ice sheet and fell for a moment to his knees as he passed over the pathway, the man sprang upright with the speed and energy of an ice hockey player and was again at our poor character's heels.

For his part, he had now run in his panic straight towards the tennis court hut, the wet, rain and spray-paint streaked wall of which now rose up before him impenetrable despite its wooden state, somber and immovable. For a scarcely noticeable moment his body froze again in the air mid-stride, after which he then apparently attempted to direct his movement to the right in order to round the building on the path and tennis court side, but nevertheless also happened to look to the right and to the rear out of the corner of his eye where Vänätyinen was still approaching with demonic speed, at which time he was left with no other choice

than to turn to the left where unfortunately, rather quickly, after only a few steps, it became clear that his choice dictated by panic was soon to be proven an error of the sort to send shivers down one's spine: to wit, here the barrack-like building's wall ended at the old, rusty, blistering chain link fence of the botanical gardens, in the latticework of which hung offal-like vines, beaten back by the winter, in thick coils and barbed wire with the look of tetanus.

But because his pursuer was already thumping within earshot, he could not now turn back but rather continued stubbornly towards the barrier as can only be done in a matter of life and death. So he next ran into the corner of the building where, despite the tremendous downpour from the snow and earth, rose a stench that made clear that the spot was favored among those who practice outdoor urination, but our character certainly did not have time to draw these sorts of conclusions as rushed as he was, but rather continued on in the frenzy of a terror-stricken game animal and ran into the chain link fence, appearing for a moment to be quite astonished at this encounter, which nevertheless managed, during this wet, cold, and ominously rattling contact, to produce the temporarily relieving observation that under the force of the impact, the chain link fence bowed and distended a good way into the botanical garden side, which also revealed there was between the fence and the tennis court building a space nearly wide enough for a thin person to pass.

He made a sort of yelping sound, wiped his wet hair from before his eyes and then began cramming himself sideways between the fence and wall. However, there was so little space that for all intents and purposes he was forced to drag himself bodily through the gap by hauling his torso with bare hands across the freezing fencing with the vines growing in it tearing at his hands, chest, and face. And the same laceration was furthered by the rusty nails that protruded from the boards on the wall side, which tore off long, screeching, and, despite all their blueness, skin-like strips from the back of his overalls.

P. 382

And an attentive reader, a dear comrade, a faithful travelling companion, perhaps a person on whom we may still rely and with whom we may dare even to cry a little, surely remembers how our tale began with the words "it began like this." And it ends like this: in the fog, zero-degree air, exhaust fumes, particulates, wanderers walking hunched over here and there, people walking, people moving in wheelchairs, dogs, pigeons, seagulls, crows, squirrels, rabbits and foxes hunting rabbits, all sorts of vehicles and the enormous clattering, vrooming, growling, and braking issuing from them, our character took two steps forward from the gate, was nearly run down by a tricot-bedecked bicycle messenger appearing at breakneck speed from the left, succeeded however in dodging, straightened himself as if preparing for some competition, oh dear, collapsed again into a heap, lowered his suitcase to the ground, was caught between two people again, this time hurried

pedestrians speeding at nearly the velocity of the cyclist, but survived these as well, puffed up his chest—let us take note—puffed up his chest, and drew in a good breath of air and the other previous-described constituent elements, oh dear, swept his now thoroughly overgrown and still wet hair from his face, which, as it yielded, revealed a face that was now nearly skull-like from all the strain and suffering, and of course lack of food, in which the eyes skulked at once burning and icy in their deep, dark pits, oh dear, took another step, looked backwards and to the side, noticed the suitcase standing on the ground, took a step backwards, bent his knees slightly, plucked up his burden in his left hand, stood erect, took two more brisk steps forward, glanced to the right in the direction in which traffic in the lanes on this side was flowing, strode forward one step, heard from the left the simultaneously threatening and panicked sounding of a horn, turned his head and was crushed under a bus –

At least that's how it felt.