

The Salpa Line [Salpalinja]

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The Swimsuit

Papa came to meet the train. He sat next to me in the bus and held me by the hand. He twiddled his thumb in my hand and said that my hand was small and soft. Of course it was small—I was just twelve—but it wasn't soft. I had driven horses and ridden with reins in my hands. According to my father, my grip was as hard as a gymnast's.

I pulled my hand away, because I was embarrassed. Papa rocked his head, and drops of water fell from his nose onto his mustached upper lip. He sniffed and his eyes watered. He didn't say anything else, and I didn't bother either since I was tired and on the verge of falling asleep just as we reached our destination.

The house was small and white. A pipe rose from the well in the yard with a curved iron handle.

Our beds were in the corner room right straight off the entryway. The room was dim—well, it was evening, but it was dark otherwise as well and smelled like a clothing storage shed. On the window sill were geraniums just like we had. Mother kicked the shoes off her feet and opened the suitcase. She took out her nightshirt and my pajamas.

"Let's rest a bit," she said.

It was nice to lie down on the cot. It was a close thing that I didn't fall asleep, but first we had to go to tea. Mother said to Papa that I was hungry, but I was just tired. We ate soup with brown broth and lumps—I didn't like it. After the soup, Papa offered hot water; we never drank hot water at our house. Or no, it was water that had spirits and sugar mixed in. Father never let me drink spirits, not even a taste, because even one time can ruin your life. I was surprised when Mother said that I could drink it as medicine like she did. I couldn't hold it in anymore and just started to cry, wishing I could be back at home right that very instant. At the same time I was ashamed that I was crying like a little child. Mother even said that I was still a little girl. She made me tea with milk. Papa got some juice from the cellar, but it was sour.

I had fallen asleep sitting up.

"Inge needs a swimming suit," Mother said in the morning in the kitchen.

Papa thought it was OK to swim naked there. He took me down to the head of the road that would take me to the ladies' beach. Along the edge of the road grew flowers that I had never seen before. It was strange to walk there—I didn't understand why, but

maybe it was because the road was so high that I could imagine myself walking in the air and flying. Or because I was walking alone there in a new place or because the air was white and made my nose tingle.

I went to the cottage on the shore, as I had been instructed, and said that I had come to play with Terttu. I asked what grade Terttu was in. First grade in the upper school. I was in third. Terttu was bigger than I was, even though she was younger. The woman at the cottage was old, probably Terttu's grandma.

I tasted the water to make sure that the beach was the sea. A river flowed in there that you could get over by wading. There were sticklebacks weaving about in the river that you could catch with your hands. The waves were gentle and cool, and the sand was smooth. With a safety pin I fixed the front hem of my shirt to the back part, almost making a swimsuit. The shirt was just long enough. Luckily I had the safety pin on my pants waist in case the elastic gave out.

I had never played on the seashore before and hadn't played at all for a long time, except for hide-and-seek and hopscotch at school, but I didn't play in the summer because Mother and Matti would have laughed. Following Terttu's example, I built sand castles and ramparts. At first it felt childish, but then I got used to it and looked on with pleasure as the waves crawled up and consumed everything I had made.

The sun warmed us and the breeze cooled us and my skin felt funny. Terttu didn't interest me; nor did any of the others—I just thought it was nice to be in the wind and the murmuring of the waves.

Terttu's grandma rang a bell. Terttu said that it meant mealtime.

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When I had eaten, I got this feeling that I should leave soon to do something, but when we returned to the beach, I forgot that and just thought of the waves and wind and would have swum and dug in the sand for who knows how long, but then I got thirsty. I said to Terttu that I would go ask her grandma for some water. Terttu came with me. The old lady pointed at the wall clock. It was four-thirty; I left, but I promised to come again tomorrow if I could. On my way back I saw many strange flowers and took some of them up by their roots. Sister had collected plants, and father had said that I would collect plants too later in coeducational school.

Papa gave me a big book of maps that had all of the world's countries and oceans. I put the flowers to flatten in Africa and South America, where flowers from Finland would surely never travel. Mother told me to go to the sauna and wash the sand and salt off of my hands and face and braid my hair because it had started to tangle. So I went, even though I was hungry, because I could see that there were plates on the kitchen table.

In the morning we ate porridge, and I ate the egg that I hadn't been able to finish the night before. Mother asked if I would like to take a sandwich with me. Terttu's grandma will give me something, I said, even though I didn't know for sure, but I would take some water or milk. Mother told me to keep my pajama jacket on to block the sun so I wouldn't burn my skin really badly. We were going to have the summer festival on Saturday as well, and my outfit was short-sleeved. She came to walk me as far as the store and bought two bottles of soda. I was supposed to give the other one to Terttu.

We played sand castles again. I got to just be all day and didn't have to do any work. It was hot and the sun burned, but I kept my pajama jacket on over my shirt swimsuit.

"You are a sight," Terttu said.

Mother had said in the morning that she would buy me a swimsuit in Hamina. She said she was going there during the day. The old lady gave me bread and buttermilk, and on the beach I gave the other bottle of soda to Terttu. She showed how to open its turn-top. Bubbles rose up in thin strings. It tingled. The lemon soda was so good that I had never drunk anything so good.

I threw myself down on my back at the edge of the water. With my feet in the water I was on the verge of falling asleep, but a ship blew its horn somewhere in the distance. The clouds slid over me and the swells swayed, pushing into the sand, pulling into the water, and little by little I sank into the hole the water was digging under me. I repeated that word *swwell* at each wave. There was a roar in my ears, the splashing filled my head, and the wind blew on my cheeks; I could feel it on every part of my skin. I spread my legs and imagined myself as a water lily leaf floating and rocking in the water. The water stroked the soles of my feet and my legs and sloshed on my belly. My pajama jacket and shirt got wet, but it didn't matter; otherwise I could have fried like a pancake.

A big wave, a swell for sure, threw me up on to dry sand. It prickled on my neck. I raised my head. My shirt was sandy and glued to my stomach and between my legs. On the safety pin was—what was it—a horsehair worm all tangled up; I had seen them in the waves. They were disgusting, but I grabbed it and threw it.

It wasn't a hairworm after all. I pulled my knees up, grabbed a clump of grass, and pulled myself up to sit. My hand stung; the grass had left a cut.

Dreadful how many there were already. I knew that this would happen, like it happened to Sister too. But she was eighteen. My belly hurt and I looked again and it was true, even though I was only just twelve and quite small.

Terttu clamored about in the water grabbing at fish. There was no one else on the beach. The sun blazed as it ought; the sea splashed; the wind blew, and the sand got in my eyes. A stickleback flopped about next to me with its mouth wide.

I understood why mother had talked about a swimsuit. She had seen something and guessed. She would tell father. At home I would talk about fish and the mouth of the river, which was so shallow that you could get over it by wading to the other shore. Even though the river was wider than the channel of our inlet. I could also tell about the reeds and the salty water, and Father would listen to me like he always does.

Terttu's grandma gave me a package, which read in big letters, "Anton." Terttu said that the old lady couldn't hear or speak; she just smiled and was serious and rang the bell if she had something to say. When I walked away from the shore, I imagined that I would never say anything again. Now and then I started to look for new plants, but all I could see were my knees, which were too far away from each other. Then it all came back to me, and I wondered how I would make it through all of this.

Now everything would change.

All of a sudden I was at the corner of Papa's house. I remained there, because I could see that Papa was sitting at the edge of the well, and Mother was in the swing with bare feet, one leg over the other. They were staring at each other and didn't notice me.

"So I'm supposed to live here?" Mother asked.

I would have wanted to hear everything they were saying, but they were talking at the same time, and I couldn't make anything out except when Mother said that because Inge was born too.

But then Mother saw me and ordered me to the sauna until they had finished their conversation. There was warm water in the pot. I was ticklish all over; I washed my hands, face and feet many times because it felt like I just had sand everywhere.

Their voices carried into the dressing room, but the words didn't, and sometimes they were quiet. I sat down on the threshold of the sauna and wished I were home, but we still had many days left here. I wouldn't want to live here either. Mother didn't mean that; she wouldn't leave me here, and Father wouldn't agree to something like that. Here there wasn't a dog or a cat, no barn or stable; there wasn't the same noise in the yard like there was at home all the time. But still I started to be afraid that Mother would leave alone, and I would be left here.

There was a growing forest behind the house. That's what Father had said, a growing forest, because the trees were small.

Here the blueberries were sweeter than at home, and Mother was good to me, smiling often, which always made her so beautiful.

When they had been silent for a long time, I took the package to Papa, but I didn't say anything. I went to Mother, but even Mother didn't ask anything or smile. I said that I was very hungry. Mother said so to Papa. Papa didn't seem to hear, even though Mother was almost snapping, and Mother said it again. Then Papa went into the kitchen. Poor child, Mother said to me. Usually when someone pitied me it made me cry, but now Mother said it dryly, and oh how I was ashamed.

Mother said that she had brought me a swimsuit. On my cot there was a paper roll and within it a blue swimsuit. The suit was made of tight, thin fabric, like a thick sock and certainly would not slip. The swimsuit that I had knitted out of cotton string hung, ugly and wet. The big girls were horrible looking when they got out of the water. The two-piece that Sister had knitted for Mother was also horrible, but Mother liked it just like she liked everything Sister did.

I went to thank Mother and asked her if I could use it tomorrow.

Yes, yes, Mother said. She explained to Papa how here people say “ah” and “yuh”, but at home it was “I” and “you.” Papa got tired and left the dishes to soak; I could have washed the dishes too, but I didn’t know if that was OK with Mother. Mother talked about the judge, and I realized that was why she had gone to Hamina. Who had done something wrong? There were arguments at home every day, but those weren’t any business for a judge.

Then Mother started talking about shame. I turned red; the beach came to my mind. I sat down on the bench and picked up a magazine. I turned its pages and pretended to read, but I was listening. Mother even asked me whether she was good or bad. How would I know, and I wouldn’t be able to say it anyway if I did, so I just said that the others were ugly.

Papa had gone to sleep, and Mother said she was leaving for a walk.

When I woke up on Thursday, Mother’s bed was still neat; the swimsuit wrapping paper was on the pillow. I was immediately alert; I took my clothes under my arm and ran to the outhouse. I washed my face and hands on the steps of the sauna with cold water which I got from the can on the door post, dressed and braided my hair. Mother had surely spent the night with some other adults. She thought it was fun to go visiting, but Father didn’t like it. I hurried, but I wouldn’t say anything to Papa about Mother until after his Pero so he wouldn’t be alarmed.

I went into the kitchen and said good morning. A dog barked somewhere. I went to the window; I was thinking only of Mother and was pleased that the dog was barking so I could look out the window and Papa wouldn’t notice anything. I didn’t see the dog, but I heard doors banging and guessed that it was Mother moving about. Papa wondered out loud whose dog it was out there and that got me talking about our Sissi.

“She’s a Finnish Spitz and a bitch, but here pups are floppy-eared.”

I also told about our horse, which had a white splotch on his forehead and about the other animals even though Papa had surely already heard about them from Mother many times. Papa said that there were horses and cows at school as well and that the

schoolchildren were taught how to care for them, milking and all.

Mother was moving around in the entryway again, presumably combing her hair in front of the big mirror.

“You are my only forefather,” I said to Papa. “No, my grandfather.”

This made Papa laugh and then I laughed too, even though I was a little startled that I had said ‘you’; should I have said Papa? No, that was only the way of speaking to servants and animals, Mother had said. I asked why Papa never visited us, but our conversation was cut short when Mother entered. She said good morning very politely and Papa asked if Mother could drink Pero or if it should be coffee. Mother said she would prefer coffee, but Pero would do just as well now since it was morning. Mother smiled a little at me, said that everything was good and asked if I would go to the beach today. I would go; I would go, and I would take my new swimsuit.

Papa walked me to the corner of the store, giving me forty marks and returning home. The shopkeeper asked if I wanted some mead. I would have liked some, but one bottle would have cost thirty and I wanted two of them. But luckily I could get two lemon sodas.

Terttu was sitting on the cottage steps with a towel on her knees. Hello, I said, and she said that I came. I gave her one of the bottles. We went to the beach; she undressed. I took my underpants off and put on my swimsuit under my skirt. Terttu was already bare and jumped into the water. I took off my dress and shirt and threw them on the sand. I pulled the swimsuit up. It extended to my collar and the straps started just below my chin. Mother had bought it too large. No matter how I adjusted it, the upper part just slid down in wrinkles, and there they were, bare as can be, sticking out like two halves of an apple. I was mad and irritated; I went quickly into the water and pulled the swimsuit toward my throat, got back out and cried, pulling the wet suit off and putting on my normal clothes; I was hot.

If only I had noticed it yesterday it wouldn’t have mattered much—I could have just cut it off with scissors, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

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I wasn’t really interested in splashing or wading anymore and certainly not in making sand castles. I looked at the rocks and reeds and old duck nests on the shore which the water had thrown up onto dry land. Right behind the alders was moss and blueberry hummocks. I put blueberries in my mouth. There were a lot of blueberries, ripe. If I had a jug I would have gathered them for Papa and Mother. I went forward a few steps. Terttu yelled for me. She had probably been startled that I was missing. Did she think that I had drowned in the water? Or should I have kept watch that she didn’t drown? I went to where she could see me and invited her into the woods too. She put on

her dress.

I thought it was strange that she wasn't amazed at the blueberries, even though it was her own forest. It looked to me like she didn't even see them, but was thinking of something else instead.

"We're not allowed to go there," she said after a short pause.

I thought that her grandma was afraid of her getting lost and only gave her permission to go to the beach with someone else. Unless I came, Terttu would have to be in the cottage all day. I got to go into the forest or wherever, swimming and fishing alone, if only I helped out before meal time and was home before eight in the evening.

"Let's go up there on the hill," I said.

Terttu stood lower down on slope and looked at the sea with her lips creased. It made me want to laugh a little.

"I'm just going to eat blueberries here close; you go to the beach," I said.

When Terttu had gone, I climbed up the hillside. It was craggy with great stone teeth, and when I went closer, I saw large stones in a row. It was a rather peculiar looking collection of rocks and reminded me of the ice age. Had the edge of the ice stopped here and deposited the big stones in a row? I had heard something like that from Father when we were on the eskers. In any case, this would be good to tell Father. I went on. In front of the rocks was a deep pit, and it wasn't a pit, but rather a ditch, and not even a ditch but rather a split in the bedrock, which continued up the hill. I followed it and in the end I couldn't even imagine what it was, because at times it was bedrock and stones, and at others it turned to earth. In these spots in places there was a regular old log wall against the earth. Maybe those spots had been someone's cellar.

People in ancient times had probably lived this way because back then they hadn't known how to build houses.

Terttu yelled, and I turned back. Next to her grandma was waving with her kerchief.

"You can't go there, I mean it," Terttu yelled.

I went back to them. All I could see behind the old lady's glasses was streaks.

"I won't go there anymore," I said.

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On Friday Mother came to the beach too. As we passed the store I asked for soda.

"What kind will it be?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Whatever," Mother said.

The shopkeeper gave us Vichy. It was nice to walk with Mother because she was in a good mood. Mother stayed at the granny's cottage, but Terttu and I went straight to the beach. I put on the swimsuit, but it hadn't shrunk at all.

Mother's swimsuit was the one made by Sister. Mother put on the bottom part and stretched her arms, and then, without putting on the top part, spread out her towel on the beach and lay down on her back. I was so revolted. Her boobs dangled to each side. Mother was beautiful, if she put on a girdle and a dress, but without a girdle—and of course naked—she looked horrible. I couldn't get my eyes off of her and was afraid that Terttu would be embarrassed too. Mother must have noticed me watching intently, because she told me to go ahead and go play with Terttu. She was going to read a little.

After swimming, I took the swimsuit off and put on my clothing.

I played in the sand and waded in the river. The bottom was firm and good for walking; at one spot the water was only up to my ankles. I tried to enjoy it. At the edge of the reeds the bottom was slippery and colored my shins black. My hems got wet and dirty too. Now and then I looked to see if Mother was still lying there. I felt like going and saying that her skin would burn, but of course she understood that, old as she was. She didn't have a book or a magazine; she was just reading the same paper that she had been holding with two hands so the wind wouldn't take it. Once when I looked she looked back and shouted that she was going to the cottage. She put on her dress. She was gone for a long time and when she returned she undressed again half-naked. Then she told me to go to the cottage: the old lady was there and waiting for me. After that we would drink the soda. Mother stayed there on the towel without covering herself. What if other people were to come to the beach?

As I went to the cottage I thought about how I would look like that when I grew up.

When we returned, Mother gave me a bottle of soda and said that I should tell Terttu to come get her own. I promised to take it to her, because I didn't want Terttu to see Mother up close. We opened the bottles, Terttu first. She spit her first mouthful out. When I tasted, I knew the reason. It wasn't good at all; it wasn't the same at all; I had seen that the bottle was different, but I didn't imagine that soda could be so bad. Even Mother said yuck and looked at me accusingly. Of course I should have taken care of this because I was the one who suggested the drink.

I waded in the water again and tried to skip too, but now it just wasn't fun anymore. Thankfully Mother got bored too. She said let's go. It was still day, but I was already tired and my feet hurt and my back ached. I told that to Mother so she would understand why I was walking more lazily than she.

"You can have some powder. You can get bladder problems if you fool around in the water too much."

In the evening I took the powder and fell asleep. In the night my back bothered me again. I rubbed my lower back, and my hand came away smeared with something, and I realized that it was a boil. I had had them often during the winter. In the morning I would

put a handkerchief over it like in school so that my clothing wouldn't get dirty. In the morning my whole back was sore. As I ran to the outhouse my pajama pants got wet. Boils and bladder problems, I thought, utterly ashamed; once again I was like any little child. When I got there I realized something and went back immediately. There was a splotch on the sheet as well.

I went to the door of the kitchen and said through the gap:

"Mother, I have something to tell you."

Mother came and looked at me with the corners of her mouth taugt.

"Aa-ha. For me it wasn't until I was sixteen. I was a good girl for a long time."

Mother asked me to wait for her to get something from the sauna. She brought a rag of the sort I had seen at home in the laundry. It was made of the sauna curtains. Mother watched as I bound it around my waist. It made me want to cry—the knots bulged through my dress, and was it staying in the right place? What place was it anyway?

"I'm not going to the party."

"You can be just as you were, but you can't go swimming."

I wouldn't have gone to the beach today anyway because of the summer festival.

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Until yesterday I had been waiting eagerly for the summer festival, but now everything was gloomy. I was trying to guess what life would be like with this every month. I had liked my pink summer outfit with the frills on the shoulders and waist. Uncle Arne had said that I was like a butterfly in it, but the dress had shrunk since last summer. My knees showed under the hem; I didn't know how I would sit; everyone guessed what I had, and the waist band knot and the pants' elastic were jutting out on my belly. People looked at me, old men and women. I saw from their faces that they were wondering why I was so strange.

Mother had on a black silk dress with pink dots. Mother was beautiful again, and she had an air about her that she was beautiful. With her head held high she didn't notice that her collar had come undone. I whispered it to her. Mother fixed her collar, but it didn't stay because the silk was slick.

On the green, people were wandering about and talking in loud voices and almost yelling at each other, with one not having time to finish before the next began. People were talking more quietly near us; it was a pleasant buzzing. When I was small I often fell asleep when it was warm, and I was sitting behind mother on the bed. It was warm now too, but in all this noise and sitting on a wood bench I couldn't fall asleep, and of course I was a big girl now.

The colonnade had been decorated with birch branches—it was just like

Midsummer—and big flowers had been put in milk jugs. There were ten rows of plank benches in front of the colonnade; they made the same kind at all of our village summer festivals unless it was raining.

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Mother said that Karelians' parties are always like that, whether they are at home or here in Karelia. I hadn't known that we were in Karelia and that there was still a Karelia in Finland—that was supposed to be given to Russia after the war.

It was uncomfortable to sit on the wooden bench, and I was bored. I left with Papa in the middle of the program, but I couldn't sleep until Mother came home. What if she were to stay somewhere for the night again? When we were to leave in the morning.

But Mother did come, going into the kitchen first. I turned onto my stomach so she wouldn't notice that I was awake. I had almost fallen asleep before she finally came to bed. Thankfully she turned me onto my back. And spoke.

"Goddamn fucking hell," she said.

My throat tightened. Pain rose to the roof of my mouth, and my eyes teared up. Mother was angry that it was happening to me already, such a young child. My face twisted up, and I cried silently; I had learned how to do that.

"Damn it to hell," she said, but after that she began to snore.

In the morning we woke up early and were just eating our porridge when the taxi pulled up in front of the steps. Mother said goodbye to Papa in the yard.

"It's good that those papers got worked out," she said.

"Everything should be in order now," Papa replied.

Again they gazed at each other, even though the taxi driver had already started his car. I would rather have curtsied to Papa and held my hands behind my back, because I didn't know if I should extend my fingers as Mother did.

"I like you," Papa said, looking at me. "Write to me, Inge girl; you are so feisty."

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Mother was so good. And then we went to a restaurant. I was amazed when Mother ordered real mashed potatoes and sausages and for dessert she drank coffee and I drank mead. It was easily the best food of the whole trip.

"Papa gave me some money," Mother said. "This is how Father is living it up in Tampere too."

It was still three hours to Tampere.

For the last two hours we sat in a bus. In the end we walked, first in single file, and

then side-by-side so the neighbors wouldn't laugh, but we didn't speak a word, not having the energy of course. Mother carried the suitcase and handbag; I carried the sack. We met father in the car on Red Barn Hill; he stopped, opened the window and laughed.

"We're going to a wedding," he said and drove on.

Matti and Sister were in the rear seat and also laughed.

Mother walked quickly. I know that she would have liked to go to the party too. It was strange that Father hadn't taken her along; she would have fit in the car. Now father was mean. Everything was making me tired and sad; it was hot, I was hungry and thirsty, and I wanted to go to sleep. Mother wrenched at the kitchen door, but it was locked. She took the key from the nail around the corner and went inside. That was where the journey ended.