

Shrouds

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Cancer: from the Greek *karkinos*, 'crab'. The distended blood vessels of the tissue surrounding a cancerous tumor resemble the legs of a crab.

Grief hallucination: a delusional experience in which a deceased person appears to a grieving loved-one.

"The motion of the light of the sun has been given to me. I abhor that which is abhorrent. I do not eat excrement; I do not drink urine; I do not walk head-downward.

(...)

Atum, lend me your sweet breath, which abides in your nostrils."

(ancient Egyptian funerary incantation)

WHO'S
WHO

1.

Seven and a half hours after Timo Jutila, captain of the Finnish national hockey team, raised the victor's trophy toward the ceiling of the Globe Arena, Olavi Finne was taken to the interrogation room of the police lockup.

The room was brightly lit. High up on one wall was an open ventilation window. Outside the nighttime city hummed.

Olavi Finne had been allowed to wash the blood off his hands, eat a tuna fish sandwich, and shave. Only the last of these had he requested himself. The guard had stopped him from shaving his eyebrows.

The night shift investigating detective and the officer witnessing the interrogation were gray with fatigue. Both had watched the final match and so hadn't slept at all before their shift. When Olavi Finne sat down in front of the policeman conducting the interrogation, his face jerked, either from a stifled yawn or disgust.

The interrogator introduced himself and the witnessing officer in a mutter, but as he asked his questions he articulated clearly, emphasizing names, times, and places.

"Is it true that you were acting as your relative Piry Finne's babysitter? That you arrived at the request of the boy's mother at Fasaaninpolku number two at three o'clock in the afternoon, and that after four o'clock you were left alone with the boy when the parents, Veera and Arttu Finne, left for a nearby restaurant to watch the hockey match?"

Olavi Finne acknowledged this was accurate.

"And is it correct that while Veera and Arttu Finne were away, you killed Piry Finne?"

The interrogator lifted a paper cup to his lips, but pulled it back immediately. Steam condensed momentarily on the lenses of his glasses.

"Yes."

The policeman lifted his fingers one by one from around the paper cup, but did not lower it to the table. He looked Olavi Finne in the eyes to make sure that everything was going right and everything was being understood, so they could get out of there.

“In other words, you admit to killing Pury Finne while his parents were away?”

“Yes.”

“And to mutilating the body subsequent to the killing?”

Olavi Finne remained silent. The policeman turned one of the photographs on the table around and pushed it slowly in front of him.

“Did you inflict these wounds after you had suffocated Pury Finne? When he was already dead?”

Olavi Finne looked at the picture.

“Death is such a complicated thing,” he said.

The policeman lowered his coffee cup. The movement was silent, slowing just before the base of the cup touched the surface of the table. The witnessing officer’s clothing rustled as he shifted from one foot to the other behind Olavi Finne. He was standing even though there was an empty chair on the other side of the table.

“So you don’t know?”

Olavi Finne was sorry that he didn’t know how to answer. “But you remember carrying out the act?”

“In general terms.”

“Could you tell us then, in general terms, what you did?”

And Olavi Finne told them.

At some point the buzzing of a cell phone switched to silent started coming from one of the interrogator’s pockets. It did not cause an interruption. When Olavi Finne had finished, the interrogator spoke in a rough voice.

“It was not a cat,” he said.

He leaned over the table so far that his chin almost touched it. His shadow was visible on the varnish, a hazy, featureless reflection.

“Do you understand? We went to your house on Aapontie and found the dead cats in the cellar. But this, what we found on Fasaaninpolku. This was not a cat.”

The interrogator stared until Olavi Finne nodded. He straightened his back and tugged his shirt flat.

“So you admit to the entire act. That’s enough for now. We’ll continue this interview tomorrow. Let the record show...”

“I have a clarification to make,” Olavi Finne said.

The interrogator’s motion halted. He let his whole weight return to the chair and took his cell phone out of his pocket, glancing at it and then putting it back.

“Two things,” Olavi Finne began.

“Yes?”

“You said that I was left alone with the boy.”

“Exactly,” the interrogator said, nodding. “You were left alone with Pyry Finne when the parents left.”

“That is not true.”

“What do you mean? Was someone else in the apartment?”

“Yes,” Olavi Finne replied.

The policeman scratched his nose absentmindedly.

“Do tell.”

And tell Olavi Finne did.

The policeman listened, but gave no indication of hearing. He leaned back, because Olavi Finne had leaned closer. The witnessing officer sighed through his nose. Through the blinds dark blue lines of the early spring morning sky were visible. The murmur of a distant victory song came through the open window.

“Did anyone else see this...woman?” the interrogator asked when Olavi Finne had finished.

“Yes.”

“Aha. Who?”

“Pyry.”

The policeman did not breathe for a moment. Then he shook his head and lowered his hand to the table, almost smacking it. He tried to make it clear that there was no point in trying to confuse things by talking about imaginary visitors. There was nothing to be gained by trying to turn for corroboration to a fourteen-year-old boy who was lying in the morgue just cold and hacked up enough that he wasn't up to backing up a senile old man's sightings of some fantasy woman.

The witnessing officer pointed something out in a quiet voice.

The other policeman nodded, lifting his hands from the table and lowering his chin to his chest. He stayed in this position for a moment and then continued more calmly. “It would be best for you to stick to the truth. You'll get your psych evaluation based on this evidence alone; you don't have to go fishing for it.”

Olavi Finne seemed to understand the interrogator's confusion. “Look,” he said, “I didn't know that Pyry was really a cat either. That he was with me there in the forest.”

“In the forest?” the policeman asked.

Olavi Finne raised his hand to his left eyebrow and made a plucking motion.

“I only realized when he revealed those eyes. That he had eyes like that.”

The policeman waited patiently.

“But you don’t know anything about that,” Olavi Finne finally said. “You didn’t exist yet then.”

“Didn’t exist?” the policeman asked. “When?”

“Back then, there in the forest,” Olavi Finne answered.

The policeman sighed, looking at the witnessing officer.

“This is starting to sound more like a job for the psychologists,” he said. “This interview is finished for the time being. We’ll continue tomorrow.”

He turned toward a computer monitor and began to type in a leisurely manner.

Singing echoed through the window and then died away, turning to rumors and wind.

The interrogation was suspended at 3:25 AM.

Olavi Finne was taken to a cell for the rest of the night. According to the guard responsible for the security cameras, he lay on his back with his eyes open nearly the entire time, except for two short conversations.

First, at approximately five o’clock, the suspect demanded to be taken back for interrogation immediately. The reason he gave was that later he would no longer be able to speak. The request was denied. The second time he asked the guard to deliver the trophy the oily-haired men had been carrying on the television. The request was denied.

The interrogation recommenced at 10:30 the following morning. Olavi Finne was escorted into the room, where the same policeman as earlier in the morning was waiting for him. The policeman’s face was older from lack of sleep.

The witnessing officer was new, and this time both men sat on the other side of the table. The blinds were open, but the ventilation window was closed. The room was dominated by a bright silence.

The interrogator moved the computer mouse with jerking motions, squinting at the screen.

“You mentioned a woman who remained in Fasaaninpolku number two with you and Pyyri Finne,” he said without moving his eyes from the monitor.

Olavi Finne was as silent as a statue.

“The boy’s mother confirmed that Pyyri Finne had said something about a woman before.”

The interrogator glanced at the suspect, but saw no reaction.

“According to the mother, the boy had asked who’s the ugly lady that always came when you two were left alone.”

The witnessing officer was chewing gum. His jaws made rolling, symmetric motions.

“Now we need an answer to that question,” the interrogator said, clasping his hands together on the table. “Who is this woman. Or is she anyone?”

The policemen looked at Olavi Finne, heads cocked in different directions, expressions empty. The witnessing officer’s jaw continued its motion. The other lifted his crossed fingers, one at a time, in an even rhythm. Particles of dust floated in the electric hum of the room.

The woman was there, right behind the policemen. Olavi Finne could have pointed, could have asked them to look for themselves, if only they had those kinds of eyes. The woman was there just like the table and the men and the dust particles pushed by imperceptible currents of air drifting through the shafts of light like glittering fish under water.

How is it that death does not take you; you remain although the sun ages, and I fall to ruin.

The woman could have extended one of her bird-thin hands, let the interrogator’s tangled hair tickle her palm.

But it was too late. The man who would have been able to tell them about the woman was already mute.

Did I do everything right? Olavi Finne asked, as those who lack the power of speech ask.

The woman did not reply. She just looked.

The interrogation ended at 10:45 when the witnessing officer spat in his coffee cup and set it before Olavi Finne.

THE
BIRD
CAGE

2.

Mikael Siinto leaned on the stone window sill looking out a window of the Högholm hospital. The lights of the fenced exercise yard flickered into life like two nocturnal animals awakened by the dusk.

Behind the chain link fence surrounding the yard was a sparse forest, as if a child had cut out a bunch of black cardboard trees and flung them in the middle of a landscape that receded into darkness. Between the trunks shone a shiny red spot, perhaps a distant warning light. When he turned his head slowly from one side to the other, the spot of light disappeared and reappeared again. Disappeared, reappeared. It and the yard lights, which were still flickering into life, seemed to be playing an erratic Morse code game.

A paranoiac might have seen hidden messages in it. A paranoiac or a dead-tired nurse.

“Could you go count the utensils?”

Mikael jumped. Piia was standing next to him, her hair looking kind of funny. The sleeves of her white coat were drooping and in her right hand was a half-sodden roll of toilet paper.

“There’s no way I can do it since I have to take Jarmo to the bathroom,” Piia said.

“Yeah, of course.”

Piia thanked him and left with the toilet paper roll in her hand toward the number one wing.

Mikael turned and walked across the dayroom to the ward dining area. The empty tables shone in the light of the outside lamps visible through the arched windows at the end of the room. It was an even, cool light.

The patient kitchen door sprang open.

“Hurry, now,” Aulis said, waving with light blue dishwashing gloves that extended almost to his elbow. “Piia just goes away we have to get everything cleaned up here before the time...”

“Calm down,” Mikael said. God, he was tired.

Aulis’ area of responsibility was the kitchen. He was good at the job, but he took it too seriously.

“We’re not exactly slaves to the clock here.”

Aulis snorted and looked skittishly at the dining area, as if it might have dirtied itself while he wasn’t looking. Aulis was

the favorite patient of the support staff in the ward. There was no need to even wet a mop after he was done

“Why don’t you go check wing two’s restrooms,” Mikael suggested. “I’ll count the utensils. Then we can lock up the kitchen.”

Aulis shook his head and pointed at the clock; he was on the verge of tears.

“But it’s already half an hour...”

“Go already, or I’ll drag you by the hair,” a voice said behind Mikael.

Rautakoski was standing there looking severe, pointing straight-armed at wing two. Aulis muttered in protest and looked at Mikael. Looking for moral support. He didn’t ask for anything but to stick to the schedule. Otherwise everything would fall apart.

“Maybe you should go on now,” Mikael said calmly.

Rautakoski wasn’t in a peace pipe mood. During the morning report he had related how the cellar of his house was calf-deep in shit-colored water at that very moment, and that the smell matched the hue. Scuffles in the dayroom ended without exception in defeat and isolation for the patient, which Aulis knew well enough, even though he was half a head taller than either of the nurses. The last time he had been dragged away so quickly that one of his slippers was left in the starting block.

“Everything gets left half-done, damn it...” Aulis muttered tearfully and then set off in the direction indicated like a little child sent to the corner.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to shoot that one in the head with a pump shotgun?” Rautakoski said barely managing to keep his voice down. “Send him another ten yards with those fucking rubber gloves on.”

“Sometimes,” Mikael chuckled.

It would have been tasteless somehow to thank him for his help, so Mikael stepped from the dimness of the dining area into the fluorescent light of the patient kitchen and opened the dishwasher.

Mikael picked hot knives and forks out, filling both hands and then dropping them into the open silverware drawer. He tried to focus on counting their echoless clinks, but his mind wandered.

Flashing lights. A pixel of fatigue. They disrupted the simple magic of the numbers. He started over counting from the beginning.

After a few minutes Mikael dropped the knives and forks in disarray in the bottom of the silverware drawer and leaned on the sink.

There were supposed to be twenty-five of each kind of utensil. They were supposed to be counted twice and the numbers were supposed to match. If they didn't match, then the trash sacks and every room in ward D would be turned upside down, progressing if necessary to body searches. In the case of certain patients, that would require at least four men. No one on the morning shift would leave for home before the missing utensil appeared back in the kitchen. Mikael started over once again, now more methodically, more patiently.

He had gotten the knives counted and had made it to fork sixteen when Aulis interrupted him.

"There's blood."

Oh fucking fuck, Mikael's lips mouthed silently.

This is what happened when Aulis' down-to-the-minute schedule got messed with. Piia could have prioritized, ordering Jarmo to hold it for fifteen minutes, crossing his legs if he had to. Aulis was easy to care for when the schedule held.

Mikael held the forks in his hand, repeating sixteen in his mind like a mantra.

"Where?" he asked, checking Aulis' hands and apron with a quick glance. Not a spot of blood.

Sixteen, sixteen.

"My ass," Aulis answered. Drops of water dripped from the forefinger of the left rubber glove onto the floor.

Mikael repeated the answer back to him, to which Aulis nodded like a good Boy Scout. He was about to repeat it himself again. Maybe a sort of vicious circle conversation would make him give up and sleep with it through the night.

"Have you got hemorrhoids?" Mikael asked. "You can go show it to the doctor tomorrow. He's coming to the ward at twelve."

"No. I've never had them. It's coming from somewhere..."

Aulis waved his hand toward his chest trying to find the right word. Water dripped lazily from his glove.

"...deeper."

Mikael sighed, realizing his mantra was futile, since he didn't know whether sixteen had already dropped into the drawer or were still in his hand. He let the forks fall.

"Should we take a look then?" Mikael asked.

Aulis was his own patient after all, and he didn't feel like asking Rautakoski in any case. Someone else could count the utensils.

Aulis didn't react at all. He looked as if he were listening to telepathic messages. And sometimes he had. The messages usually had to do with the causes of Aulis' dermatitis.

"We can go in your room and take a quick look. Let's see if it's an emergency or if we can wait..."

“What do you mean?” Aulis interrupted.

Mikael looked at the man’s face, expecting to see traces of the bewilderment he heard in his voice. Aulis’ expression was the same as always. His cheeks and jaw hung slack, as if the facial muscles had given up and stretched under the drug-induced acne covered skin.

“Nothing. I was just asking if should we take a look at it,” Mikael answered.

They looked at each other under the fluorescent light. It made them look like two shaved monkeys. One in a white coat, the other in a turquoise leisure suit.

“Take a look?” Aulis repeated.

A muscle in his left cheek twitched.

“Yes,” Mikael said, pushing the silverware drawer closed. He did it slowly. He was afraid a bang would set off some stupid incident. The kitchen panic button was next to the door, behind Aulis. For a moment Mikael thought about asking Aulis to press it. Things like that had worked before.

“Whatever you want,” Mikael said. “The doctor can also...”

Aulis jerked into motion somehow furtively, imperceptibly. The light flashed brighter on his face as he strode under the fluorescent lights. It drew attention to the irregularities of his skin. Mikael’s field of vision, blurred by exhaustion, sharpened with a lag, making the world look strange. Then it was too late.

Aulis attacked him like a person whose world has already collapsed, without inhibition and with nothing to lose. His hands were around Mikael’s neck before he had time to step back.

They crashed to the floor, taking with them a pile of plastic plates from the edge of the sink. They clattered around on the floor like tops, one falling right next to Mikael’s head and breaking.

“Take a look, eh.”

Thumbs pressed against Mikael’s Adam’s apple. There was no anger in Aulis’ face, only a childish, hurt expression. His cheeks quivered from the effort. Mikael was not present in the moment, because his mind was drifting to Morse code lights and forks. He became conscious enough to fear for his life only when he tried to pull the hands loose. There were like stone appendages, boulders fixed in place.

Silent panic. A slow feeling of gliding in a vacuum. Like floating toward the sun in a space suit. During office hours.

“They just wanted to look too...”

Aulis’ muttering was now farther off. Mikael had drunk a glass of orange juice in the morning; he remembered it in vivid colors. He had brushed his teeth right afterward, even

though he shouldn't after orange juice. It hurts the enamel. He drove to the hospital in morning traffic. On the radio they were talking about sonar. He had been afraid he would be late for the morning shift report. The night shift would be cantankerous if they didn't get relieved from nodding off in the office because of a latecomer. Mikael had changed into his white coat in the basement dressing room and while he was loping up the stairs thought about how when he was eighteen he should have laid that green-eyed girl even though it would have been cheating—the next year his girlfriend at the time didn't mean shit to him anymore. The nurses had been sitting in the office slumped in their chairs like marionettes.

Take a goddamn look...

For a moment Mikael felt a bewildering uncertainty about whether he was being strangled or whether he was doing the strangling. The feeling was joined by a picture of a floundering bird, the green-eyed girl, and an expanding sun. The man who was lying on the linoleum floor of the ward kitchen, the man he was strangling, even though he couldn't breathe himself.

Mikael wasn't even conscious of groping on the floor with his left hand until the edge of the broken plastic plate sliced the palm of his hand. He grasped it like the straw that would prevent him from floating away. Pain in his fingertips brought him awake. Sharp objects weren't supposed to be lying around the ward—his awareness was in entirely the wrong place, like the balloon that floated up to the ceiling of the church that one time when he was a child. He had watched it through the entire service. Mikael squeezed the plastic, wanting the pain to increase.

Then he struck. The first blow was a directionless flail that only cut air. The second stopped in bone and rebounded free. Mikael struck again, so many times that he was able to take a couple of short breaths, as if he had emerged on the surface and sunk again. He struck more purposefully, until the stone limbs began to jerk, to become skin. The pressure disappeared.

Aulis' stinking breath hung in the air. It felt heavenly in his lungs. The green-eyed girl kissed him. It was such a warm summer that the air had been continually like a delicate smoke. In space the sun halted. Began to recede.

Mikael raised his head and through the fog saw Aulis, who was dragging himself in sitting position toward the back wall of the kitchen as if he had lost the feeling in his legs. He was rubbing his face with his other hand. There wasn't any way to wipe it off, even a child knew that.

Mikael rose from the floor and took three quick steps to the side. He looked at the monkey curled up in the corner

whose silhouette trembled like in a small earthquake. Out in the ward Piia was laughing brightly. A shift ending and the routines almost finished—what wasn't there to laugh about?

The piece of the plate was firmly in his hand. It was keeping him afloat. The drops of blood dotting the floor trembled, changing shape as he watched. Mikael tried to steady himself. He thought of Rorschach tests. The worst thing wasn't to see childhood ghosts or a loved one falling ill. The worst thing was to see only an inkblot, like seeing a person as pockmarked skin and random bulges, as the rickety furniture of the closed ward that might fall over on you if exhaustion dulled your alertness.

Mikael didn't exactly walk to the monkey curled in the corner. It was more like he drifted, as if the floor had tipped in that direction. His hand rose of its own accord.

The strangest thing was that the monkey didn't make any sound when the plate cut his scalp. Then the hand covering its face. It just curled up smaller at every stroke. The third blow hit its face directly.

The profusion of blood made the rage subside. Mikael dropped the half plate and took a fumbling step backward.

He could feel bits of teeth in his mouth. The air was still pixel shit, red dots, tatters of sun. Mikael fell so hard he felt it in his tail bone and then slumped on his back. The swinging door opened.

General commotion and confusion. Someone he knew bent over him and said something nonsensical. Mikael said that everything was OK now. Anything so the nonsense would stop.

Afterward Mikael didn't remember any conscious decision to use the plate shard as a weapon. He was going on instinct. He repeated the story to the head nurse and after that to the chief physician and after that to himself, lying so professionally that he astonished even himself. Nothing about any damn monkeys or suns. The office light hurt his eyes.

The pressure on his neck still hadn't let up. He could still feel the memory of the stone appendages in his Adam's apple and above his collar bone, making him swallow and finger it reflexively.

The chief physician, Jokela, had examined him and found no permanent injuries. He had escaped with just a little shock. Luckily had kept a cool head and acted as he should. The instinct for self-preservation was a sign of a healthy person.

When Mikael asked about Aulis' injuries, no one answered. Rautakoski turned and left the office. Jokela told him not to worry about that now.

Mikael looked at the congealed blood on the joint of his thumb. How was there still any left even though he had scrubbed with soap and disinfectant twice already? Luckily Aulis didn't have hepatitis like a third of the patients in the ward. "There were a lot of lucky things," Jokela said.

The head physician instructed Mikael to come to his office to chat as soon as possible. "How about right now," Mikael answered. "I'm ready." He felt like his head was trembling the whole time, but no one had noticed anything. Jokela said that Mikael could write up a report about the incident and then come, say, in an hour, if that would work. "That works." The door banged shut, and Mikael realized he had been left alone as if being quarantined, to avoid infection.

He looked out the office window into the ward.

One of the patients was standing outside the window staring at Mikael. The tip of his nose almost touched the glass. Koistinen, the one in charge of meals. Aulis' regular chatting buddy in the smoking room and on walks in the exercise yard.

Mikael did not return his gaze. He just would have liked to ask why no one would tell him about Aulis' injuries.

3.

“It was a case of mortal danger. That’s perfectly clear,” the head nurse, Parkkonen, said, looking at Jokela to ensure consensus.

Jokela was in his last month as chief physician before retiring. He glanced at his female colleague and straightened his posture. He had been sitting in his chair oddly sideways, as if hoping to be able to participate only partially.

“Yes,” he began and then looked at something on his desk, perhaps Mikael’s report. Mikael didn’t remember much of anything about what he had written.

“One patient claims that you and Rautakoski had been laughing at Aulis a little earlier,” Jokela said, avoiding eye contact. “That Rautakoski said something about shooting him in the head, and you laughed.”

Mikael imagined Rautakoski at six in the morning in the basement of his house up to his calves in shit water. The wife storming around upstairs and the kids needing to be taken to school. Even shotgun blasts needed to be seen in context.

“Yeah, you know talk around the ward,” Mikael said. “I didn’t know anyone was within earshot. I’m sure Rautakoski didn’t either.”

Loyalty toward a workmate came automatically, like from a dictation machine.

Parkkonen’s face was frozen in a cramp-like expression of regret. Jokela buried himself in his papers.

“Well, you need to be careful with that kind of talk,” he finally managed to say. The tone conveyed that this part of the matter had been settled. Mikael had heard how Jokela himself talked about the patients in the ward sometimes, when he was in a really light-hearted mood.

“The patient suffered a nasty wound to his face,” Jokela began. “It will leave a scar. The injury to his eye will heal; there’s nothing...”

Mikael waited impatiently for him to continue, but didn’t open his mouth.

“Nothing. But as you know, cases like this always have to be reviewed. Shame there weren’t any eyewitnesses. In cases like this we have to be precise, when we’re dealing with people who have committed crimes and difficult patients. But I think this is a pretty clear-cut case now.”

Jokela sighed, letting his eyes wander around the room.

“A transfer to another ward isn’t really a punishment,” he said then, lowering his voice. “You know that yourself, of course.”

His gaze was at once hard and pleading. It said: let’s do this now so things look better if anyone digs into this later. I don’t want outsiders sniffing around corners here. I want my farewell party to have a feeling of nostalgic emancipation.

“You’re going to take two days off now, unless you don’t feel like you need more, and then come back to work. Then you’ll go to ward A. They’re down by one nurse there.”

Everyone had heard about Lauri Kuutti’s suicide, but at the official level nothing had been said about it other than indirectly, by focusing on averting burnout. The fact that A ward was the calmest in the hospital, counting in terms of alarms, argued against professional anxiety in Kuutti’s case. It was called the “love boat” because it was the only mixed-gender ward in the hospital. They had had to sound alarms to separate patients screwing in the dayroom. A good place to put overwrought nurses on ice.

“It’s the easiest and most practical solution for everyone,” Jokela said.

Parkkonen nodded and put on a smile that she might have practiced at some public administration motivation seminar.

“You’ve been having a pretty rough time anyway,” Parkkonen said.

“My personal life can’t be allowed to influence decisions,” Mikael replied.

“Oh, it doesn’t,” Parkkonen said hastily. “I’m just saying this generally, as a person.”

She inclined her head to look like a person. Parkkonen was known to have climbed her way up to chief nurse over the bones of her colleagues.

“And the work over in A is more pleasant,” Jokela chimed in. “The head nurse, Juhani Autio, is a laid back guy, and you can actually come up with sensible things to do with the patients, at the same salary.”

Mikael nodded mechanically. Everything sounded so good, like a veritable gift. At some other time, for other reasons.

“It may well be,” Mikael said, restraining his voice at every word, “but in the eyes of the staff this looks like I went over the top on a patient because of that personal stuff.”

“No, it...”

“Fuck yeah, it does,” Mikael hissed.

He tried to smile to soften it, but apparently he didn’t succeed. Parkkonen’s face slipped into power saving mode. Jokela raised his eyebrows. No one hissed at him.

“Let’s do whatever you want,” Mikael continued conciliatorily, “but let’s also acknowledge the facts.”

Jokela nodded, signaling that his tone had returned to acceptable limits.

“We’ll be making the rounds of all the wards talking about this,” he said. “We’ll make it clear what this was. It was a life-threatening situation.”

It was clear that this was the best final pronouncement that was available. It would behoove Mikael to accept it if he wanted to get out of this room. Still, in the back of his head drummed the hope that someone would have finally asked: *why did you keep hitting him once the patient was on the ground?* It had turned from a fear to a hope only now, when it was as clear as day that no one was even going to bother to be suspicious. To wonder why there had been so many cuts.

“Was that everything?” Mikael asked.

“Yes,” Jokela said, clapping his hands together. The eagerness of the gesture revealed that he had feared this was going to get much more uncomfortable. “Now go home and stretch out.”

Stretch out. Lying down on a horizontal surface. People stretched out in x-ray machines and cemeteries.

Mikael would have wanted to ask to see his report, to know what he had written, but his instincts told him to leave. He rose from the chair and pushed his hands hastily into the pockets of his smock

“You got a little bruise,” Parkkonen said, pointing at the left side of her own neck.

“It’s nothing,” Mikael replied, walking to the door. He hadn’t seen any marks.

As he left the administration building, Mikael saw the occupational therapy group returning to the ward. The group leader would have stood out from the rest even without his green coat. He was the only one who didn’t show the rehabilitating effects of medication, slumped shoulders and hands hanging down to the knees.

One of the patients fell behind looking toward Mikael. The occupational therapist didn’t notice, probably already thinking about punching his time card. Mikael recognized the patient and acknowledge him with a mechanical wave.

He raised a slack hand, but not in greeting. His palm rose to his neck and made a slashing motion.

Mikael lowered his hand and walked to the parking lot. In the car he looked at his neck in the mirror. A black and blue streak ran toward his collar bone from the left side of his neck. It would be easy to hide with a collar. Saana wouldn’t need to see.

The key didn't seem to want to find the ignition, as if he were sitting in another car.

The suffocating feeling hit him at the traffic lights on Kauppapuistikko.

Mikael pulled into a bad angle park and turned off the engine. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. His thoughts swarmed like an angry ant hill. The left side of his neck burned.

As he lifted his eyes from the steering wheel, he saw a garish advertisement on the side of a bus stop that said: *Breathe*.

What a coincidence, Mikael thought, looking at the word letter by letter, breathing in and out at each one. He should have gotten out of the car and grabbed the first passer-by by the shoulders and told him that these connections are around us all the time. That the time will come when it's too late to see them.

His breathing began to return to normal; he didn't need the glowing letters' help anymore.

Mikael looked at the picture on the advertisement. He admired the smooth-faced woman's frozen smile and large eyes, the irises of which were almost black, like old pitch. He thought about the photo session that had led to that perfect result and the amusing mishaps that happened during it, and about how the woman returned home, looked in the mirror at her perfect face and perfect breasts and ribs tightened in self-assurance and called her proud farmer parents somewhere in the countryside of France or the Mid-West, planned her life that, at least for now, was going to go on forever.

The buzzing of ideas subsided. The routines found each other. He had to go home. Mikael straightened his back and started the car.

As he drove past the bus stop, in the light of the advertisement he saw a teenager, a girl of perhaps sixteen, whose breath steamed. She had on a brimmed woolen hat from under which brown hair flowed in two symmetric waves. Around her neck was a burgundy muffler, on her shoulder an Inca-patterned bag. Too young to worry over basics, over breathing. It evaporated in the air unnoticed as her eyes wandered reading about online chat scandals and secret Idols fantasies. Saana was like that once too, Mikael thought. Lost, but still immortal.

4.

“I want some birds.”

Judging by Saana’s sleepy tone, the idea had just occurred to her.

They were lazing on the sofa. Mikael stroked Saana’s hairline. It was starting to be visible again. Delicate hairs they didn’t dare hope out loud would stay, even though it was obvious the treatments were working.

Saana herself wasn’t willing to give the credit to anything as violent as cytotoxins. Her shark cartilage powder and extract of mistletoe were in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom in a row like a little altar. Her red and black striped headscarf rested on a pillow in a defiant heap. Saana had always hated scarves—apparently only old ladies and Mikael Ingberg wore them.

“Here?” Mikael asked drowsily. “Birds in a cage?”

“Yeah, some lovebirds or zebra finches. Don’t ask anymore.”

Mikael didn’t ask anything for a while.

“Birds?”

“It already passed. They crap all over. Iina says that sometimes you have to clean all the way to the ceiling. How do they crap up there?”

“Love birds.”

“Forget it.”

They leaned on each other in silence. Mikael thought about flashing lights and the sun he had almost plunged into. He hadn’t said anything about the incident to Saana, although he had considered it for a moment. Perhaps it would have given him the right to be angry, to complain about how much he had to bear.

“Should we watch something?” Mikael asked.

Saana nodded.

They watched in silence as an interior designer chose drapes for a family with children from Sipoo and their log house which had been moved from Kauhajoki. An expensive and appalling task, the kind that even sapped the viewer’s strength. On the dresser in the room of the oldest son in the family was a blue hockey helmet.

“Do you remember when Finland took the gold?” Saana asked.

“Of course.”

Mikael would have liked to look to see if Saana was smiling, but didn't dare. She didn't like having a big deal made about her smiles. On the night of the gold medal world championship Saana had stripped with three of her school friends on a table at El Gringo. It didn't get out of hand, and the whole city had been giddy and full of excesses anyway. Still, Mikael had been jealous.

The interior designer laughed when his idea didn't pass muster with the mother from Sipoo. The laugh was embarrassed, but not hopeless. He knew that new opportunities would come along, and that important people held him in high esteem.

"That night there was probably somebody in the ER too, and everyone else was just partying," Saana said slowly.

The interior designer got serious and explained why he had done what he did.

"You puked in front of the stairs at our place on Koulukatu that night," Mikael said, realizing instantly that he shouldn't have said anything about throwing up.

When the program ended, they brushed their teeth together. Mikael look at the bags under Saana's eyes and the livid depressions on both sides of the base of her nose, bending over to spit out his toothpaste when he didn't want to look anymore.

In the night Saana was so sick and cried so much that Mikael would have liked to die in her place, to put a gun to his head like a general at the moment of defeat—something fateful, a feeling of finality, anything!

At Saana's request he left her alone in the bathroom. He looked out the window at the trees in the yard as they swayed through his own reflection. Saana's vomiting echoed from the bathroom. The world was so meaningless that the face of the reflection twisted in agony, but not tears came.

Before the illness they had been travel junkies. Lonely Planet was still a good thing then, flying didn't carry any burden of guilt, and spending the night in dingy hostels just part of the experience.

During school they had saved, taken out student loans, borrowed money from friends, pawned the computer—whatever it took. They had to get to all those places they didn't have money to go to, all the places whose pictures had stuck in their memories from their junior high school geography textbook.

Mikael had admired Saana's ruthlessness, her refusal to allow mundane considerations to affect the decision to leave. Saana dared to push the world's limits, not fearing mudslides or agreeing to take malaria medication or reading travel

warnings. With her, Mikael had felt like they were at once too insignificant and yet still too special for any real danger to have them in its sights.

Even then Mikael had sometimes thought that there was something obsessive about it all. As long as they were moving, they could dream about home, about a fixed location. When you arrived there, the walls would always be the same. Knowing in crossing its threshold that home would always be with you.

These had felt like serious, world-sized concerns then. Then the CT image had shown the lesion and said: this is the darkness into which you now travel.