

Stignafulia

(“Mahtisana” from *Lapsia*, 1895)

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Translated by Owen F. Witesman

Father and Mother hadn't exchanged a single word since midday. The children, Maija and Iikka, had also been silent. They sat by themselves, Iikka on the chair at the end of the sofa, where the moon shown in from the window, Maija next to the window looking out onto the street where children moved about on skis and sleds. They hadn't dared speak even in a whisper to ask permission to go out. This whole Sunday evening had been so quiet that when Mother spoke, encouraging the children to go out, everyone almost jumped.

They left without saying a word, Maija almost tiptoeing. Even in the yard she spoke in a whisper while conferring with Iikka about which hill they should go to. They didn't really want to go anywhere. But when they came to the street and children's joyful shouts rang from every direction, their mood picked up. Maija sat Iikka on the sled and took off pulling at a run. It was like their bad mood shattered into bits, getting trampled under their feet. In a few blocks there was a great pack of boys on a street corner. They decided to detour to see what was going on.

It was a race! The Toppi boys had laid it out: you ran around the block, and the prize was a free evening on the Toppi boys' hill. Wille Teliin had been winning so far, all three times they had run. He had three free nights on Toppi Hill already. But he didn't care about that, only about glory! The third time, he had beaten Kalle Toppi, who had tried his luck as a matter of honor. Now there was no one who dared challenge Wille.

Wille bragged and strutted about. He recounted his victories to Maija, pitying the runners who had lost and still more those who hadn't even dared to try. He congratulated himself. He was a *boy*!

But that was too low a title; it was so normal, altogether insignificant. He would make up a new title himself.

“Behold the *stignafulia*!”

Stignafulia? The boys were taken aback. No one knew what language it was or what it meant. But it sounded so magnificent. No one really wanted to willingly grant Wille the glory and honor that he himself demanded and claimed; rather, they tried to diminish it in any way possible. But what could anyone set against that kind of word, a word which had never been heard before and which sounded so grand! Wille saw that everyone was dumbfounded, and

all the more proudly he wound through the pack of boys. Head up and chest thrust out he repeated, “Stignafulia!”

He said it again with a tone like it was the very highest thing you could think of, something that couldn’t be expressed by any other word. That was how it felt to the others.

But Maija didn’t listen to Wille’s boasting, hardly even noticed at all. She was thinking that if she could run the race, she would win and get to sled on Toppi Hill! Toppi Hill was higher than the others, and it had been her constant wish and desire that someday she would get to sled on it. She and Iikka had asked Mother for the money once – five cents, which was the price for two nights – but Mother hadn’t given it to them. And when Maija had heard that the Toppi boys had always let Eetu Kurola sled for free because Eetu had sledded standing up, Maija had practiced sledding standing up on other hills. She had just never dared ask the Toppi boys to try it. She was timid about asking now, too, if she could run—she was shy because she was a girl. She thought she could stand up to Wille running, because last summer she had run with him once. Wille had happened upon the girls on a country road and maliciously dumped out some of their berry baskets, so she took off chasing him. They had run almost a kilometer, but in the end she caught Wille.

Confound it, how she wanted to try! Just think if she could win and get to sled on Toppi Hill!

Out of Maija's mouth like a thief came the words.

"Can I try too?"

"No mares!" Wille responded immediately.

But Kalle Toppi said yes, and the other boys were in favor. Everyone burned with the hope that Wille would be beaten, even though no one really thought to place their trust in Maija.

Maija threw off her over clothes, checked her shoelaces to see they were tied and boldly took her place side-by-side with Wille. Kalle Toppi counted off: one, two, three!

The boys burst out laughing. Maija's running looked so absurd next to Wille. But when Maija kept up all the way to the first corner, their derision turned to joy. They anxiously awaited the runners while they were out of sight. They realized that Maija was a boy! Even if she didn't win. And with that thought they tried, as it were to, tarnish Wille's honor, so that he wouldn't be able to brag that he was the stignafulia.

The runners came back into sight. First came Wille, who rounded the corner nimbly, but at the same instant came Maija like a shot from a rifle. She made up what she had lost in the turn so that they arrived at the same time.

Some started to shout that Wille hadn't won! And that was good, because Wille couldn't be the *stignafulia* now after all! Wille argued that he was a block and a half ahead. But that roused stiff opposition in the pack, so Wille backedpedaled a bit and assured them that he was precisely four inches ahead of Maija. The pack didn't give an inch, and when a few started to suggest that Maija was ahead, Wille conceded that they came in at the same time.

But it was a hard blow to his reputation and honor. There wasn't room for bragging even with normal words, much less to claim the greatest, most dignified honor—that of *stignafulia*. He immediately started blaming his shoes—that because they were new they were stiff to run in. Someone observed that Wille had gotten them back in the fall.

“In the fall?” said Wille half questioningly, half mocking the boy.

“In the fall!” assured another.

“Don't you remember? You were wearing those shoes for the first time when you fell into the Tirilä well. You cried because you were afraid of what they

would say at home, because your new shoes got wet, and we went to the Pyhtinen's to dry them.”

Wille couldn't deny it, so instead he explained that he hadn't worn the boots since then except on Christmas Eve and now. No one believed that, and when they started to investigate as a group, they discovered that the shoes weren't new and stiff at all, but on the contrary were so flexible that his toes peeked out from one of them.

To confuse the whole issue of the shoes, since the boys had found such a good opportunity to mock him, Wille started to brag in a loud voice that if they would only run barefoot, then he would beat Maija. He wouldn't even have to try; it would be like Maija was running in the other direction.

But in response to that, Maija was already barefoot, and after shoving her shoes and socks into Kalle Toppi's hands, she stood challenging Wille to try. Wille started to back off. As his excuse, he claimed it was too cold to run barefoot. The others' taunting wasn't enough to get him into motion, but then he suddenly got the idea that while they were out of sight on the side street he could knock Maija down. He agreed to the race and began talking himself up. In a frantic rush, he took off his foot gear, which he offered to each person to hold, like Maija's socks and shoes were being held. Only no one was interested

in that honor, and so he had to put his shoes on a snow bank. But Wille didn't care about that! His victory would be glorious and would give him the right—to everyone else's chagrin and irritation—to that new, gallant, and most noble title of all: *stignafulia*.

As if it had already fallen to him, he uttered it even as he lined up next to Maija. And with that word, he shook the boys' best hopes in Maija's victory. It went into the bones and marrow, a new word like that!

While they were still in view, Maija had already slipped ahead. What joy was born in the group of boys! Some of the least patient even started mentioning *stignafulia* in Maija's honor. And when the runners came to the finish, Maija considerably ahead, the streets rang with the shouts of the pack of boys.

“*Stignafulia! stignafulia!...*”

Wille's ego stung. Such a good word, and from his own mouth, now being used in someone else's honor!

He started explaining animatedly to the boys that *stignafulia* wasn't any language, neither Russian nor American! And attempting to laugh scornfully, he said that it didn't mean anything. But his explanations and assurances were futile. It didn't need to be any language, for now it meant something, a great deal in fact! Nor could Wille convince even himself; instead, the word grated in

his ears and gnawed at his heart while he put his shoes on silently on the snow bank, all the while the boys chanting stignafulia.

Kalle Toppi shod Maija, who was sitting on the sled, with gentle hands and an adoring manner. When Kalle furthermore promised that she and Iikka could sled for two nights, Maija got up the courage to ask if they could sled a third night, too, if she did it once standing up.

This question aroused admiration and consternation in the group of boys. No one dared sled down Toppi Hill standing up except Eetu Kurola and the Toppi boys themselves. Complete trust in Maija in all things had already awoken in some, and they were already proclaiming that Maija would succeed, but others had doubts. Everyone wanted to see the attempt.

So the whole pack followed Maija, who was seated in the sled with Iikka, with as many boys pulling as could fit on the sled's pull rope after some competition and a little jostling.

With great commotion, she was brought to the Toppi farmyard. And then a hush fell as she climbed the hill. Without hesitation she launched down the hill, standing steady, but on the lower runout she fell and slid a long way on her stomach. Wille Teliin roared with laughter, making the whole yard echo, but all the others were quiet. Maija had dared to try, which was already honorable to

them, and in their hearts they had wanted her to succeed. When Maija ran up the hill again and made another attempt, the spectators stood with every limb taut as if to hold her up, and each feared Wille getting another chance to laugh. Then with joy, with frenzied enthusiasm they shouted, “Stignafulia! stignafulia!...”

Almost ashamed, Maija wound through the crowd, where there were girls now too. She shyly flopped down inert on the sled, which Iikka was holding onto. But she *was* happy. And she became happier when Kalle Toppi gave Maija and Iikka permission to sled whenever they wanted.

Iikka’s mouth had been hanging open the whole time, on the street and here. And now it stretched even more agape, and his eyes grew wide like wheels at such a promise. Everything had been so fantastic. The whole evening after, getting to sled on that dizzying hill, was like a fairy tale. He was filled to overflowing with delight as he sat in the sled on the way home thinking about everything, especially that he could sled on Toppi Hill again tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and still after that, whenever he wanted. That was something worth telling at home! They didn’t need money, Maija had arranged that. Maija wasn’t the real Maija to him anymore. Now she was a very special Maija. Maija wasn’t even a boy. She was even better: a real stignafulia. And no

one else was a stignafulia! What would father and mother say when they got to hear that Maija is *the one!*

But Maija was getting down. Her mood sank as they approached home. Everything felt so quiet at home. And next to that all the joyful ruckus and noise that was still ringing in her ears felt wrong. She became uneasy. After coming to their yard, when she saw a light from the window, it lit up her mood, but in her mind she saw Father and Mother, silent and stern, and that immediately depressed her again. She put the sled in the shed very quietly, climbed the steps almost on tiptoe, restraining Iikka, who stumbled noisily. When they came inside, Father was lounging on the sofa, and Mother was sitting in the rocking chair under the ceiling lamp with some book in hand. Mother looked them over, stood up, looked again, shook her head and whistled.

“This is Iikka, I suppose,” said Mother at last, “but you?” she indicated Maija.

Maija stood silent and tried to look herself over as if to see what would keep her from being Maija.

She was covered all over with snow, socks bunched up, shoes open at the laces, scarf over the back of her head, with hair terribly disheveled because it had gotten wet as she sweated and then frosted over with ice. On one cheek there was a long scratch and her skirt was ripped on the side.

“Who are you?”

Iikka tried to say something, but Maija quickly answered that she was Maija.

“Aha! So it’s Maija, is it? Then you’re going to get what you’ve earned.”

Maija didn’t really have time to understand before mother was in front of her again with a switch in hand.

“Mommy!” exclaimed Iikka, shocking Mother so thoroughly that she couldn’t help but pay attention. Father too, who had been laughing into his beard at Maija’s appearance, lapsed into a curious anticipation of what Iikka had to say.

Pointing with his hands to where the unfortunate-looking frozen mitten stood, Iikka proclaimed in a voice as if to say mommy, mommy, don’t hurt your hand, “Stignafulia!”

“What?” asked Mother, brow furrowed, in an astonished voice.

More clearly, but at the same time amazed that Mother hadn’t understood at once, Iikka said with assurance, “A real stignafulia!”

Mother turned her back, and her shoulders shook. After trying to pretend to be serious, she turned round and said, “You’re right, a real stignafulia! And you, Iikka, another good one!...”

Father, whose eyes were watering from trying to hold back his amusement, burst out laughing. Mother went towards Father, and pretending to threaten him with her switch said, “And you a stignafulia too?”

“And you the stignafulia of stignafulias!” said Father as he drew Mother along with all her switch to sit beside him.

Maija forgot herself and looked grinning at Father and Mother. She felt so good that it was like she was about to cry and laugh all at the same time. But Iikka looked agape at Maija, stupefied, as if everything had gone beyond all comprehension. At last he said very seriously to Father and Mother:

“They can’t all be stignafulias!”