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DEATH OF THE BEAR

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Essi Kummu

DEATH OF THE BEAR

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The bear was the forest itself,
and when the bear moved,
the whole forest moved along with it.

ROBERT E. BIEDER: *BEAR*

Let us kill an animal; but let us do it with sorrow and pity, and not abusing and tormenting it, as many nowadays are used to do, while some run red-hot spits through the bodies of swine, that by the tincture of the quenched iron the blood may be to that degree mortified, that it may sweeten and soften the flesh in its circulation; others jump and stamp upon the udders of sows that are ready to pig/ that so they may trample into one mass (O Piacular Jupiter!) in the very pangs of delivery, blood, milk, and the corruption of the crushed and mangled young ones, and so eat the most inflamed part of the animal; others sew up the eyes of cranes and swans, and so shut them up in darkness to be fattened, and then souse up their flesh with certain monstrous mixtures and pickles.

PLUTARCH: *ON THE EATING OF FLESH*

I

The Last Summer Afternoon

First Mamma died.

It happened in September, in the afternoon. The sun was shining so impossibly beautifully. It was warm. The grass was dark green like on the last afternoons when there is still a little bit of summer left, and one of Stella's children asked Fanny Matinjussi if this was the most pleasant day ever.

Which made Fanny laugh.

Fanny smiled.

She stopped, knelt down to the child's level, and brushed her cheek with her fingertips. She was moved by the child's open, earnest expression and said, "Yes, dear, this could very well be the most pleasant day of your life."

Outside Alfred was cooking on the griddle.

Farther off could be heard the sounds of children playing. The day only grew warmer everywhere, a rippling heat, in the hems of Fanny's thin skirt, in her knees, and in her arms. Fanny rose, feeling an overwhelming joy at being alive. The sun shone in through every window.

Then Fanny looked at the child and said, her heart full, "And it could very well be that this day is the same for me too."

Summer was beginning to be irretrievably past. It had been Mamma's last summer, and today it was still so warm that everyone ventured out one last time in ruffles and skirts, going out to do summer things.

Alex was working again somewhere in the colder regions of the world. Mamma was sitting alone in her room.

She was clutching her blanket with both hands.

She was cold.

A voice came from outside, a yell, "Mamma, come out!"

Then some loud laughter.

A moment later, from the door, "Mamma. I have come to fetch you now."

A moment passed. Outside, the voices of children, the usually summer ruckus. Someone pouring water into a bucket. The children screaming and laughing.

Inside the house was a room. Mamma was in there. The radio was off.

There were only bad programs on in the afternoon. Mamma was looking at her own toes.

A summery waft of smells, a woman's sweat and perfume, the damp, wet grass.

"Well. I came."

The woman grunted. Fanny had been Mamma's daughter, but now she was her mother.

Alex, Fanny's son, was away somewhere. He was always away, but he was still always here, palpably, intensely present. It was one of this family's things that those who were absent shouted loudest of all. It had always been that way, and so it was now. When Fanny attempted to lift her, Mamma whimpered and then got angry, making noises and struggling.

She intentionally made her hands and lips quiver.

Her soft, bent fingers, her wrists twisted stiff. There was a lot of anger in Mamma, which didn't seem to leave her no matter what happened.

It wasn't a pleasant thing to see.

It was something Fanny, her daughter, did not want to see, and so whenever she addressed her mother, she would look past her, acting as if she didn't hear the tantrums, the impotent bellowing and spitting, the anxiety turned hideous and repulsive.

Mamma had become loathsome. To see her own mother in this condition now, how bad Mamma's room in the house smelled even though it was aired out every day and even though Fanny, with passionate and barely-contained zeal, armed with perfumed oils and soaps, scrubbed her naked mother clean of her weakness in the bath, leaving Mamma's thin, papery skin broken, worn through in places. Fanny was very strict about cleanliness. This had not always been the case. There had also been times when things piled up around her in

rings of filth and Fanny smoked inside with her legs spread wide, next to the kitchen table with her hair done carelessly, if at all.

Mamma was dry from the cleaning and purifying. Mamma's job in the family was to fight and listen to radio programs and wait for her own death.

"It has been a lovely day. The weather is lovely; everything is still just like summer. The sun is shining. I've been enjoying it so much; warmth is so rare. Let's all enjoy it together now."

Fanny always chattered to break the ice in situations she wasn't comfortable with yet.

She had become her own mother's mother. This is a lonely task.

Fanny chattered because she was alone, and lace bonnets don't help much with that. Mamma whimpered like a drunk, her bent hands twitching.

"Let's move you to the chair, Mamma."

Fanny moved Mamma, but Mamma struggled and resisted and grabbed her by the hair, as well as she still could, mewling and grimacing with a mouth with no teeth, only holes.

What a sight. Mamma was only a carcass of a woman.

But Fanny did not look at Mamma's face anymore and pretended not to notice the fists, which lacked strength anyway. Mamma beat her daughter on the back with both hands, bawling incoherently. Mamma's shoulders shook in her black or dark blue turtleneck sweater—no bright colors. Mamma considered them indecent. She shook, pinching when she couldn't do anything else.

That still worked.

Fanny jumped up, but held back her cry.

Up to this point she had managed to keep up the charade.

She felt like saying any number of things or else slam her fist into the womb of that thin figure, putting her weight into it, if that would release everything that had ever gone unexpressed.

There had to be a lot that wasn't Mamma's fault at all, not Mamma's fault but rather that of

everything that had been *before her*, the whole life she had lived. Her life.

At least, despite it all, Fanny was still in her own mother's embrace. Her stomach and breast and back weighed stiffly during all those moments, her mouth pinched closed even though she would rather be shouting, her face twisted with anger. Oh, how she wished she could also be as loathsome sometimes as her own mother was right now, like an animal. She wanted to really let go, to be a terror.

But, as always, Fanny kept control of herself. She breathed deeply, hands at her side. She controlled herself. She pretended.

She made the decision to pinch her mouth closed. She pinched her mouth closed.

Afterwards she bent down and hissed in Mamma's ear.

"Damn you. I'm going to take you outside if it damn well kills me."

And it went like it always did at this point: the mother grabbed hold of her daughter with nails and teeth, and then they were at each other again. As they wrestled, they looked the same for a moment. Mother and daughter. Two bear cubs.

Mamma didn't speak, but she kicked Fanny in the shin. Mamma had paws. Everything about Mamma was blunt. "You're just like a little brat." Fanny stood up, hissing at Mamma between her teeth. "Damn you to hell."

That was how Fanny loved now. She said damn, drawing strength from it to lift and to fight. Fanny was sweaty.

She stood up when she got tired. She lifted a hand to her forehead, looking her age. Mamma was panting. She grabbed the rocking chair with two hands, even though she knew it was a pointless gesture.

Mamma sat on the floor with her legs spread and held onto the rocking chair.

Fanny went to the door and called for Alfred.

Together they lifted Mamma and carted her in her chair into the yard. Fanny put a summer hat on Mamma's head and sat down next to Alfred. She smiled.

The wrestling had clearly livened Fanny up. Her gestures took on a lightness. She smiled. "Make them nice and thin. I like thin ones."

She felt a little like laughing. She smoothed her hair where Mamma had just pulled at it. Then Fanny started laughing, not knowing herself at what. She swung her feet and put her hands in her lap. This was such a lovely day. She glanced at Alfred.

Stella was sitting in the swing listening to the sound the light breeze was making above in the trees. The children ran by in a line. Mamma looked at her toes. They were rounded. Now everyone was together, and everything was as it should be. Clouds rippled in the sky. "Alfred. Make thin ones."

Alfred was a part of this family and that was why he was in this yard with these people. Mamma wet herself. It ran down the metal frame of the chair, but no one noticed. The sun shone in Mamma's eyes. And the hat. She couldn't see from under it. Fanny laughed. It went on for a long time. Children were running around. Whoever's pups they were. Mamma was so old that she didn't have the energy to learn new names.

Mamma had decided that she didn't need to have the energy for anything anymore.

Fanny laughed a little more. The hat, from under which Mamma couldn't see. Nicely warmed, wet pants. Stella's children jumping around under the trees and merrily chanting *här dansar Herr Gurka bade vals och mazurka*.

Grön är Herr Gurka grön är hans bror, bada har strumpor, ingen har skor. The sun shone.

Everything was good.

Even Mamma was there.

They had to enjoy it as long as there was still time. Soon there wouldn't be. Fanny raised her glass, Swedish cider and Fanta and finger food.

Mamma can have some too. There were crepes. Shall I put some whipped cream on too, Mamma?

Fanny looked at the sky and took a swig from her glass, sighing, letting her shoulders relax.

Mamma looked at the glass on the table. Alfred greased the griddle for the next crepe. It was for Stella. When the crepes had been eaten, Mamma did not resist the idea of being carted back inside. Mamma did not point at the cot next to the radio as she did every day at this time, even though the Finnish language news and later the evening devotional would be coming on. Mamma pointed at the bed.

"Aha," Alfred said. "You must be tired from the party." And Mamma never resisted Alfred when he lifted her.

Alfred did notice Mamma's wet trousers, but decided not to say anything about it. He straightened out Mamma on the bed, which squeaked under Mamma's nonexistent weight, and then for some reason he set Mamma's hands on her breast, and Mamma crossed her fingers herself.

Mamma sighed. Her hard breastbone settled peacefully.

Alfred, contrary to his usual practice, kissed Mamma on the forehead. The kiss was light and cool, and then Alfred was gone. Tranquil yellow light shone in through the window onto Mamma's made bed.

Mamma rested there, porous. Mamma's thin, straggly hair. *Babushka*, Alex would have whispered, if he had been there then. And it would echo in the

room for a moment. *Babushka, shall I cook you one more and spread apple jam all over it?* Alex looked at her imploringly, a small, shy boy, and at this request Mamma died. She nodded.

Yes. She smiled and stood up. *Of course. One more, Alex.* And when she left, she was not alone. She was with Alex. Warmth caressed her firstborn Fanny's thighs and feet as she dozed with a full belly on the swing, her body warm and languid. Alfred was scraping the griddle pan clean of grease and blackened remnants of the crepes. Stella and the children had already gone home.

Mamma was found in the morning, in the same position.

Hands folded over her breast. A gentle smile on her face, with no more sign of pain. All of the hardship and vexation was gone.

Her face was now peaceful and bright, filled with light. There was purity in it. Nothing was wrong for Mamma anymore.

This is now a home in which someone has died. That was Fanny's thought.

There Mamma rested, peaceful and beautiful with her fingers crossed.

No one would sit next to the radio anymore and whine about the noise if it wasn't playing Finnish programs. No one would fight or piss in her pants. No one would sit with her hands clenched in fists just on principle or throw her fists in the air, knocking everything down, acting like a total brat. Everyone would act appropriately. There would be time. The dishes would be washed right after eating, the fringe of the rugs straight, the clock.

The clock was ticking.

Mamma was lying in her room, only the felled, trimmed trunk of a person anymore. Alfred was lying in another room next to Mamma's. The door between the rooms was an accordion.

"Shall I come sleep with you tonight?"

Fanny looked at the two rooms from the door.

And only then did Fanny notice that Alfred had an enormous, bulging belly. Alfred lay with his hands on his stomach. Until now Fanny had thought that Alfred was a safe, cuddly man in a nice sort of way, but now she looked at him and found herself disgusted by his belly and the way his legs stuck out straight on the bed and his "Did ya hear?"

And everything that was Alfred.

"What?"

"Will you be OK, or should I stay?" What could she say to that?

Fanny moved her hand to her hair, not feeling her hand or the hair it was touching. But she could feel her breath. First, with difficulty; it had become so difficult, her chest rising with all the strength of her body.

Now she had become a daughter again.

And Mamma was... Mamma was becoming a mother again. Just like she was, in the beginning. Slowly. In. Out.

Fanny drew her first breath as a daughter, growing younger with every breath. In. Mother is dead. Mother is a dead mother.

"I suppose Alex will come," Fanny said.

"But will he?"

"Of course he will."

"Will he?"

"I don't know. Dammit."

"I'll stay."

He lay there so straight and stiff, so indecently.

Fanny felt the hand she now placed on her own breast, testing to make sure her chest was really there. Indeed. She felt her chest with her palm. It was a good thing.

"I want to..."

"What do you want?"

"Don't interrupt."

"I'm just trying to help. I'll go get Stella. Is that OK? That I go get Stella?"

Alfred was a good person, certainly. They had lived next to each other, but had only really gotten to know each other at dances. Alfred had approached her. They were so impossibly young, appallingly young. "You aren't a temptress—you just take what you want." She laughed and stepped on Alfred's shoes a few times, and they laughed again. They swung around and around. It had been so warm that night.

More than thirty years had passed since then, but they didn't fry crepes anymore. No more lace hats. There was a war on. No more dancing.

Alfred got up from the bunk, and it creaked. He came over to her. He came over, smelling like Alfred. Smelling like a horse.

"Fanny."

"What?"

"I love you."

"What does that mean?"

Alfred kissed her lightly at the base of her ear. He took her hand, squeezing it tight.

"Your shoulders are tense."

"I'm sure they are."

"Shall I make some food?"

"No."

Alfred stood there, stomach bulging, hands in his pockets.

"Well, what should I do then?"

"Well, what should I do then?" Fanny said, mocking him.

"So you're going to be like that, are you?"

Fanny stood in the center of the room, not knowing where to put her hands or where to put Alfred.

"Like what?"

"Like that."

"Like what?"

"Like that."

Fanny sat down. Mother was dead.

Fanny clenched her fists. Bing bang bong.

"Go to hell."

"So that's what you want?"

"Yes."

"You're angry."

"Well, I am in hell."

"A person has died," Alfred said. "You shouldn't swear." But Fanny just leaned on the table, preferring to look out the window rather than at Alfred.

I love my mother. Mother is a dead babushka.

Then Alfred was outside. Fanny leaned on the table, looking out the window. Evening had already turned to night. Looking at Alfred standing there in the yard being bad. It was windy, and Alfred came back inside, bringing the outside air with him. She could smell it there, in the room, for a moment. It helped a little.

Alfred paced back and forth, surely sensing that he was in the way the whole time.

Finally Fanny stood up and punched at the air. It was a familiar gesture to both of them, something learned from Mamma. "Go to hell already."

And that was all Fanny could say. Someone rose up inside her, finding room.

"Go away go away go!"

That was how this person grieved.

Alfred opened the door and there were his rubber boots, black, and he put them on and then opened the door and then Alfred's ugly, stupid, pig back, the door closing, and Fanny, standing at the door with her fists tense, shouting with all her might after him, shouting, raging, letting everything out into the night, the words running together and finally spitting at her chest, "Go to hell! Go to hell! Go to hell go to hell go to hell!"

Fanny let everything come out. Blood rushed to her head. Alfred rushed away as Fanny spit the words, everything. She would spit at him if she could. She was out of her head with rage. There had never been a woman like this, first like the sun, like a summer's day. Warm and soft like summer, melting and spreading into every crack and crevice. And then like this.

Fanny was unnatural. Messed up in the head.

What is she, acting like that, Alfred thought as he walked across the yard with long strides, still hearing full-throated shouts coming from inside the house, as if a pig were being slaughtered. Unnatural, he thought with a shudder. Whew.

But Alfred did not see Fanny's contorted face anymore.

How is it that you can't grieve?

Even in your own home?

You can't scream.

You have to act like it's nothing and let the time pass, and then you remember your childhood and everything else, the moments in the swing with your cousins when you were still small and your mother calling you to eat, how young your mother was, so light and delicate in her summer skirt, and suddenly Fanny remembered the smells and everything. Mother was lying in her room, dead. Mamma was so peaceful, and then suddenly she was young, somehow innocent, which brought to mind thoughts of when her body would start to fall apart, start to stink. Could she spend one more night at home with Mother, or how many nights, how long? And Fanny saw it again, the light summer skirt, mother's legs. "Time to eat! Hop to it!"

As if it were all happening right now. As if it were right here next to her; no, it was *she* who was *there*, with Mother's breath on her neck. The hair on her neck stood on end. Chills.

Someone must be blowing on Fanny's neck.

No, it had to be a mistake.

There was no one in the room besides her. But she felt it. She was still looking at pictures, browsing forward and backward through time. How Mother's body would be placed in the coffin, the black coffin with the lid closed. There she was, unmoving, peaceful and cold. They would both be alone.

And the radio wouldn't play outside on summer evenings.

And there wouldn't be anything. There might be the next summer and the next. Fanny thought through it all in advance. Well, now. The surface of the river, peaceful as always. It was summer, but there was no Alfred, sagging pants wandering around, like a horse, smelling like a horse.

So Alfred couldn't stand it after all, her face and her voice became hideous, couldn't stand that she *felt*. That she start to feel *Oh, oh, there isn't anything anymore. No Alex, her only son, as light as a butterfly. Where is my butterfly, my little one, my angel, Alex, my son?*

And what is this emptiness? And all the moments that were, all at once? And nothing else?

When Alex was small, Babushka cooked him small, thick cakes in a pan.

They were small and round and all covered with butter.

Alex went to Babushka to be looked after in the mornings when Fanny started work at the post office. He skipped across the yard. Babushka lived in a big log building with lots of rooms. There would have been room for them to live there too, but Fanny didn't want to. Fanny and Alex lived in the sauna building, but were still part of the household, part of the family. "This is temporary," Fanny told Alex one night. They would be moving soon, and everything would change. They would have a good life. Alex waited every day for everything to change. Fanny didn't want to live here. It was such a small place, so narrow-minded, with religious zealots around every corner, Laestadians. Hair braided and fields in rows as straight as an arrow.

The sharp-edged profile of the spruces and pines: that was where the village ended. And the forest began.

There weren't many Finnish-speaking residents in the village, but there were some, who were generally considered uneducated and uncouth. Alex didn't really know any of them.

He spoke poorly in both Finnish and Swedish. Everyone looked askance at him in the store, and from this he quickly learned that he was bad if he spoke. He spoke wrong. That wasn't good. He learned to be quiet and not to speak at all.

Next year school would start. Fanny had said that they had until then, and then they would absolutely have to leave. But in the schools they taught Finnish as a second language. Babushka thought that everything would work out because that was what "was meant to be."

Alex told Fanny this one evening. Alex was lying in his bed in the cold, damp sauna room, his

blood slowed to a crawl. The palms of his hands and the soles of his feet were as white as a sheet, but Fanny just shook her head, standing at the door to his room, angry at life for having put them here and angry that she didn't have anyone she could be angry at for it.

That she "just had to endure." Alone.

Even though Babushka didn't have anyone either.

Babushka had been without a husband nearly her entire life. "Perhaps it was meant to be," Babushka had said over her shoulder one evening as she was cooking sausages again. She was a believing person and didn't understand that someone could have her own needs, separate from God's.

"Perhaps," she had said at the time, "the women of this family just don't care for men! Not one little bit!"

And then she laughed, the stomach under her womb swinging. When Babushka had Fanny, her first, it was a German soldier, who left as quickly as he had come. He knew how to play the accordion, but he left anyway. He was very dark, and they didn't understand a word the other spoke.

Alex's grandfather, Fanny's father, was probably already dead. If he didn't die in the war. Or at least so she had been told.

Later, Stella was born, Fanny's younger sister. Perhaps fate didn't want Mamma Dear to get to entwine herself in a man's body each evening, because Stella's father was supposed to be a sure thing. He was an old, ugly man, the cantor at the parsonage, Gösta Fred.

Gösta was, as the name promised, a man of peace. He had a leisurely way about him and ate cough drops and smelled old and bad.

He was the parsonage cantor, but he was already retired. He had lived his whole life as a bachelor. But when Stella was born, Gösta died. The same year. He had only lived in the house for a few months.

"That's superstition," Fanny said that night when Alex screwed up the courage to speak to his mother from his bed, tired and bright with cold.

“And it is evil, more evil than death. Remember that, Alex.”

But Alex didn't remember. Above Babushka's bunk was an embroidered panel with the words: “Every day is a gift of grace.”

Alex had known how to read since he was four years old, along with knowing how to keep silent. Now he sat, his mouth full of Babushka's cakes, and from that vantage point, the sauna building was far enough away. His little boy's stomach was full. Every day the same ritual repeated. The days were easy and long, and he didn't want to leave. Not from the village, because Babushka was there, not to his home in the sauna, because Fanny was there.

Alex washed the cakes down with cold milk. They were all butter and white flour, and he loved them, even when they stopped tasting like anything, when he had already eaten his fill, as the years passed.

“Do you want any more, Butterfly?”

He nodded.

He was afraid and nodded. He didn't want any more. His belly was already so full that it hurt, but he pretended and ate. He got a rough tousle, and his hair stood up every which way. Later he lay alone in his bed.

Herren sina trogna väröar uti Sions helga gärdar.

His hands went to the opening of his pants.

Över dem han sigförbarmar, bär dem uppå fadersarmar.

He grew excited.

He recited these words of grace in a whisper in his room, *Ingen nöd och ingen lycka*, he rubbed, *skall utur hans hand dem rycka*, fast, no, fast, no, fast, no no!

He came on his mother's floral bedclothes and then fell asleep. He had grown from a boy into a pimple-faced, gangly houseplant with a small, thin--yet hungry--cock, and all this just by eating Babushka's pancakes.

They never left. School started. When Alex returned from school, he would put so much apple jam on his cakes that it would slough off, and make coffee even though he was just eight. He mixed in milk, and Babushka didn't want to tell him not to.

At Babushka's house, the windows had Russian lace curtains, and the sun would filter through them.

Babushka set a coffee cup and saucer next to Alex and then sat down, smelling like an old person and greasy food, and when Alex ate, they looked out the window like partners in crime.

Babushka placed a piece of sugar between her lips and slurped her coffee from a plate. She was a stout woman. The outlines of her shoulders were sharp and angular. After drinking her coffee and eating her cakes, she wiped her mouth with her bare hand and, like every time, her mouth remained covered with grease.

Then Babushka stood up and tousled Alex's hair again.

Alex lowered his head, almost in a gesture of pardon. It was this family's sacrament. Now the cakes had been eaten and the hair tousled.

Babushka grunted. Alex had permission to leave the table.

Babushka cleared the dishes and said that she was planning to fry sausages for lunch, even though she fried sausages for lunch every day.

"Well, Butterfly. Go off and play so you'll be able to eat again. Did school go well?"

He nodded.

"Did you try talking during the breaks?"

He nodded.

It was a lie. Then Babushka drove him out. If Alex stayed underfoot near where Babushka was working, she would very easily become frustrated with the pots and dishes around the stove, shouting and throwing the dishes into the water. Every day Babushka would spend hours and hours around the stove and her little table, cooking and cleaning and polishing. On her head she had a scarf that had lost all its color through long wear, from under which one could catch glimpses of her thin, messy hair, pushed into hiding haphazardly.

By evening, before Alex came home across the yard to the sauna, Babushka's fingers were wrinkled from scrubbing and cleaning. She tousled Alex's hair. Alex's scalp stung, but soon there he was

again, standing with his arms at his side, blood rushing in his head.

Alex didn't want to go to the sauna. He wanted to stay with Babushka.

"Well. You need a haircut. Say hello to Fanny. Say that everything is still going well. Say that the roof will be fixed on the weekend, and that everything always works out. We just have to endure."

When Alex returned home, Fanny was still sitting in the same place next to the kitchen table. The kitchen was thick with tobacco smoke.

Fanny was looking out the window. She didn't turn when the door opened.

"How is she?"

Alex walked into the kitchen, and it came over him immediately. The feeling that he couldn't speak. The feeling that he had done something wrong even though he couldn't figure out what.

"We just have to endure. Every day is a gift of grace. Everything always works out."

Fanny sucked on her cigarette.

The moment was long.

"Did you drink coffee again?"

"No."

"Good."

Fanny stubbed out her cigarette and dug a new one from her pocket absent-mindedly. This was the summer when Fanny chain smoked, a habit that ended as quickly as it had begun. The talk in the village had started immediately.

"Since it upsets up your stomach."

That his mother was who-knew-what. That she wasn't how she should be.

Fanny lit another.

"Did she say that the folks from Ilmajoki would be coming soon?"

"On the weekend."

"It's been dripping all day. I've been shifting buckets around in here constantly. We'll have to wake up in the night to switch them too. Have to hope that more rain doesn't come tomorrow. It's so much work. Did she say anything else?"

"No."

Alex was a girlish boy who stood and waited. Then Fanny stubbed out her cigarette.

She folded her arms under her breasts.

She sighed. It was an action that made Alex want to jump in surprise. Fanny still did not deign to look at her son as she said, "Well. How long do you intend to keep standing there?"

Alex apologized, turning on his heels and going to wash up and then take all of his clothes off and stretch out in bed.

His thing, straggly boy's legs.

His arms and sharp elbows. His pretty jaw. He straightened himself in the bed again, looking for a comfortable position. After he found one, he clasped his hands over his breast.

Dear Holy God. Bless Fanny, bless Babushka, bless Alfred and Stella, bless Kerttu and her dog, and bless the people from Ilmajoki that they will come so the roof can get fixed since it leaks so badly or that at least it doesn't rain tomorrow, and let the neighbor's dogs not go crazy or bless that they won't bite me again because I'm so afraid of them. Bless everyone who is in need and protect everyone and bless us amen.

He released his hands from crossing them so tightly.

He resumed searched for a restful position. He couldn't find one. He was hungry. His stomach echoed hollowly, empty, but he didn't want to get up again and show himself in the kitchen. He would rather go back to where he had been. He straightened himself again. It looked a little like a compulsive ritual, how he clasped his hands again, squeezing them together and, eyes glued to the ceiling, began to repeat the same litany from the beginning. Glory to god always and forever (he touches himself, but is still so young that he doesn't understand what it is, his little organ sticking out, shaking, and then soiling the floral sheets and bedclothes. But it relieves him and comforts him, going with the words of God. It doesn't have a name) Amen.

His room was upstairs, and the wind knocked birch branches against the window.

He released his hands and heard the door open.

Fanny went out, probably going to see Babushka. There was a metal bucket at the foot of the bed. Water dripped into it in a steady rhythm. The day had been gray. The evenings were getting darker. There were some clouds in the sky.

Empty fields, immense and rippling. Then he was alone in the house and fell asleep.

In the morning, Alex felt very strange.

He felt like he had to get up and look at where he was.

He got up.

He was in a hotel room.

In the night he had remembered everything.

He was in Greenland, on a photography trip, but just now in the dream he *remembered*.

And it had been so real. He had been a child again. He had been with Babushka at her house, which meant that dreams like that would be coming constantly.

Confusing him. Bewildering him.

There should be someone to tell, but there wasn't. There should be.

Now he was a grown man. But he didn't feel it in his limbs or in his chest. The dream felt real. Babushka's pancakes were how they should be, and all the smells. Was it a time he wouldn't ever get over, living it over and over all the time, living *there*?

He had to get over it, to find something else to dream about than greasy pancakes eaten as a child, something more important, he thought, scolding himself again and getting up. He dressed quickly in the clothes he had folded the previous evening on the back of the chair. They were black.

A black polo shirt, black trousers, black socks, a belt that clinked in the room. Alex was touring. More than two hundred travel days each year and the rest at home. Or, it wasn't a home, not really. It was an apartment somewhere, or then maybe a rented space in a hotel, or whatever. Alex did not have a permanent residence. Nor anyone permanent. Nor permanent beliefs or thoughts. They changed according to the company. "I have one big truth and then a lot of other, smaller ones," he had said the week before in the local café to a Danish tourist who didn't seem to understand English. But what did that matter? At least he knew how to speak differently from the native Inuit here

with their thick faces and thighs, their whale carcasses. To be with people like this, washed up on this shore, by accident in a way. He didn't want to be here.

But that night they got drunk and sang loudly and slapped each other on the back, being men. It was a very good night, music and all that.

Alex was always in motion. It gave him a feeling of relief. He walked. He walked out of the lobby of the hotel without eating breakfast. He nodded to the young Inuit girl at the desk. The girl was as lovely as a squirrel.

It was a good way to start a morning. He remembered where he was. *This was Greenland.*

Two years ago, when the divorce happened, he went to therapy sporadically and learned that for situations like this (he had always had them; they came constantly; he was always forgetting who he was and where he was waking up) it helped for him to name things and events to himself that were obvious. At first it felt stupid, but it worked.

He started again. *My name is Alex Immanuel Matinjussi. I am 35 years old, and I am walking in Narsarsuaq, Greenland.*

Yes. That helped. Something was already loosening up inside him, the pancakes and their smell farther away, gone.

What a relief. She was a French actress. They had been friends. It had been one production among many, and they had ended up married. In the beginning it was supposed to be a joke. In the end it wasn't. It turned out she wanted a life with him. Even though they were friends, even though they were married, she had so many needs. Pauline Paulette, that had been her name. God only knew how she was doing. Perhaps she had latched on to some director. Her small, brown head, her small, brown eyes and their piercing gaze, her dainty feet. Why was it that Alex always thought that every woman who looked like a little dog was for him, but that he could never stand being with them, because they were always the same. They were always that way, even indoors, just the two of them. Then it got so ugly in the end.

He also lost an important friend in his wife. He only knew how to speak French tolerably, but he understood French body language well, the upper body when it moved with the speech. It was like music. He had to remember to take his personal life seriously. Alex was outside, walking in the cold repeating basic facts to himself.

I am a professional photographer. I am a little confused right now, but it will pass soon because it always does. It was only a dream. Well, now. It was a dream.

The events of the night, Babushka's nurturing, her presence, was still strong, still palpable in Alex, seeming to somehow weaken him.

They made him doubt everything and remember his childhood, even though this *shouldn't* weaken anyone. And then Pauline. Why?

Perhaps this was one of those mornings he could tell Pauline about his dream. If they had still been friends. But Pauline had turned her back on him. Pauline was no longer willing to speak to him once it was done, the papers and everything. The game had only lasted a few months, the marriage and all that, and Pauline should have known what he was. In the beginning she claimed she did, but then grew angry and silent. Perhaps he had hoped he would know how to be in a marriage. Perhaps he wanted to see the same thing as Pauline.

That horrible look. That evil expression women get, the same one he had thought he could get married to avoid.

It was cold. This was a cold island. Alex was so thin that his whole body shook. He was as gangly as a plant, even though he was a man, and his small girl's hands fumbled trying to warm his thin man's body and stomach, his chest.

I am 35 years old. No children. There are still three hours until work starts. Good. I am cold, but I always am, and it always passes. No worries.

He walked. Now he remembered that he hadn't eaten for a long time, who knew when last. And he was filled by something. There was a feeling in his breast, restless and tight.

Two more weeks of Greenland and then back to Finland. Home. To Babushka.

It was dark. Walking continued to help, putting one foot in front of the other.

He did not feel longing. He did not want for anything in particular. He never really felt longing. And then, suddenly, a horrible feeling.

As if he knew something, but what?

As if something were wrong. He walked. The houses were in a nice line as they should be. The road was narrow. The morning was lit by yellow lights, by lampposts. He walked between them with his hands in his pockets, like a black shadow against the village scene.

Last week he had gotten a fever, almost 40 degrees. He had been standing unshod in a hole chopped in the ice taking pictures. His feet wouldn't thaw, even though he soaked them for hours in the tub afterwards.

Alex had lain alone in his hotel room sweating for four days, hallucinating. He hadn't been outside for long and then came the house. For some reason, Alex stopped in front of it. He stood with his hands in his pockets. He walked into the yard of the house without giving it a second thought, without asking himself permission, and what happened drew him in.

It had snowed a little overnight. There was fresh snow in the yard.

Someone had stomped letters into the snow.

Footsteps in the snow, depressions, and they formed a word: *Ålskling*.

The snow was thin, but the word was clear.

They were the tracks of a man's shoes.

The letters were under a window. The house was made of wood. It was ivory colored, and a candle burned in the window like a lamp, and behind the lamp it was dark, and at the top of the window was fastened a dried wreath. He wasn't thinking of anything in particular. He started feeling awkward, his insides all knotted up.

There was a good feeling inside this house.

And it was someone's home. One that smelled good inside. What was the name of the Danish

tourist, the one he had sung with and drunk with and laughed with and shouted with?

He tried, but he couldn't remember. It had been a fun evening. The landscape was quiet. There was snow everywhere. And even though everything was here, a row of houses there next to him and the whole idyllic scene, Alex felt an emptiness that only grew. *Älskling*. That was Swedish! He was so far from home. He must be reading wrong.

He didn't understand. He looked up. He felt the familiar, compulsive litany within him, the same one he had repeated as he prayed fervently as a child, his arms in an attitude of supplication. In it there was no safety, only distress, mostly, a cry to whatever was above, a ritual learned on the floor of the parsonage at evening fellowship with his co-religionists when there wasn't anything else to lean on than the giggling little boys at the fellowship with their short-clipped nails and bowl haircuts. Their hair shone in the evening light like helmets. The Bible was much more beautiful in Swedish. He had two dress shirts, one for fellowship and one for Sunday when they went to church and nodded to everyone, even though they spoke Finnish at home, never Swedish, so he didn't understand anything the neighbors said, just words here and there.

When he was small, all the Swedish he knew was ugly words and formalities. *Tryggare kan ingen vara än Guds lilla barnaskara*. And his whole eight-year-old's burden of sin and loneliness. *Herren sina trogna värdar uti Sions helga gårdar; över dem han sigförbarmar, bär dem uppä fadersar-mar. Ingen nöd och ingen lycka skall utur hans hand dem rycka. Han, vår vän för andra vänner, sina barns bekymmer känner.*

Lord. Thy will be done. Not mine.

"Let all ways be thine."