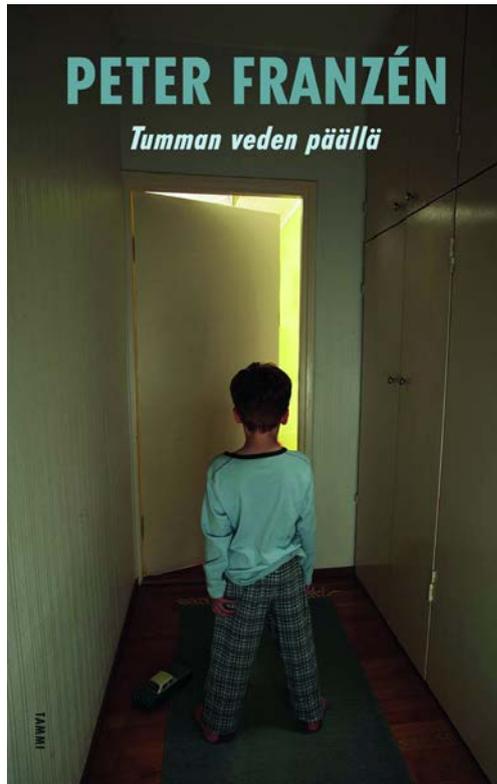


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## OVER DARK WATERS

By Peter Franzén

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### SANTA'S TAIL

My palms are sweating. I've already eaten way too many gingerbread cookies dunked in milk. It must have been at least two litres. I usually use a big blue enamel mug with thin black edges on the rim and the handle. It's white inside.

We had our Christmas sauna and after dinner the candles were left burning on the kitchen table. Otherwise the table is almost empty. The mood is expectant. We decorated the tree before going to sauna, and it turned out great. Grammy and Pappa have really old decorations, but they sparkle all the same. Pappa and I found a thick, good-looking spruce. Its forest smell mixes with the sweet scents of food and clean people and clean Sunday clothes.

I'm wearing a white dress shirt, a green plaid pullover, and a bow-tie the same colour. Green plush pants and green socks.

"That's how it wanna go," Mum says as she parts my hair a little off centre. I stare into the mirror. At least with my hair wet I look a little like an adult.

"I'm gonna go see if there's any sign of Santa's sleigh yet. Or see if I can hear it, since it's already so late. I hope he ain't had himself an accident," says uncle Martti and then vanishes into the cellar. The front door bangs. I rush to the kitchen window.

"The lights in the yard ain't on! Santa won't be able to see to park if there ain't no lights!" I yell. Just then I hear a clatter from the cellar stairs, and my heart bobs up to my bow tie. Everyone gathers in the hall, which feels cramped because there are so many of us.

The handle turns and the door swings open. Santa found our house! The adults shout their hellos to Santa, and I can pick out at least Mum's laughing and Mariko's surprised yelps

as he pushes through the narrow door into the hall. Santa shakes hands with the adults and growls like a bear.

I wonder why so many families get a Santa with red clothes and a red hat. Our Santa always wears a poofy fur hat turned inside out, and he does the same thing to his thick wolf pelt, which reaches down past his knees. He has on leather boots or sometimes wellies. He always has black-rimmed glasses, a red-tipped nose, and a white beard twisted into points. Last Christmas after Santa left, there were some white hairs left on the floor. Mum said that Santa was so old, and it was so cold outside, that his beard had shed a little. This year Santa looks wild: he has a broad belt that looks like it was torn from the plastic mat in the kitchen. A big axe hangs from his belt, and to top it all off a long, pink tail is flopping from just above his bum!

Just a second ago it was tense and silent. Now the din is deafening. Everyone is trying to say what he thinks about how Santa Claus looks. My sister and cousin look terrified, but they aren't crying, at least not yet. Santa raises his hand with its great furry mitten and says in a raspy voice:

“Are there any nice children here?”

We all pipe down as Santa looks at each of us in turn. Sometimes he shakes his head at one or hesitates as he reaches another, but he offers approving nods to others. He strokes Mariko's hand and growls somehow warmly. Mariko puts her other hand in front of her mouth, giggling into her palm. The other adults are grinning or snickering. Then Santa turns to me in all his wild glory. He stares at me, hesitating, and then nods slightly. He says nothing.

“I had an awfully demanding trip this year. Your house were the last on me long list. First I went over a broad river, and then a narrow river. But the water in the narrow river

flows completely differently than in the broad river, so even in the cold there were a spot in the narrow one with very thin ice, and the sleigh went crashing through. Luckily there weren't no presents weighing down yon sleigh except those coming to you, but still I had to jump in the stream so my poor reindeer wouldn't drown. But it were so cold that a wee layer of ice had formed almost right away, and when the reindeer got firm snow under their hooves, the sleigh jumped with such a start . . . “—Santa looks breathless and furious as he tells about his adventure—” . . . and just look at what happened to me! My tail done popped out of me breeches while I were struggling to get the sleigh out of the water. You see, it got froze to the edge of the ice, and when yon sleigh jumped forwards there it stuck there! All the fur and skin! And that's where they are now, feeding the fish.”

Santa shows his hairless tail to everyone.

“I don't mean to put it back in me breeches at all, since it might be better to let it freeze in the cold and lop it off with me axe as soon as I get home. Leave just a wee stump so we won't have to worry about another accident like that next Christmas.” Santa draws his great, worn axe from his linoleum belt. Gasps of horror come from the crowd. Dad is chuckling and Pappa is shaking his head and smiling in disbelief.

“How's Santa suddenly grown himself a tail? It weren't there last Christmas, were it?” Mum asks.

“Oh, yes, yes . . . It's been there on me backside all along, but nobody's seen it except for me and Mrs. Claus. For hundreds of years. See, I'm so old that there ain't been no room for more growth rings on me spine for years and years, so me spine has had to grow lengthwise. Down me pants, thankfully. I'd be mighty glad if you didn't share this with no one else. They'd just think you was daft anyway. And remember, the elves are peeking through the windows all year long.” Santa Claus looks at each of us one more time with his

piercing gaze, and then he starts looking dizzy. The adults immediately offer him a chair and shove a glass of juice into his mitten. A pair of large cloth bags full of presents are hauled in from the hall. Santa sits awkwardly in his chair. It looks like his bottom hurts. The axe falls to the floor with a thud.

Santa starts giving out presents, and everyone lets out a happy sigh of surprise when they hear their name. I'm holding my breath, waiting to hear Pappa's name even more than my own. I've given Pappa the same kind of present for a few years now, wrapping it myself with some help from Mum. Pappa notices that I keep staring at him and Santa's bag, and smiles quietly to himself as the others fuss with their presents. No one is opening their gifts yet, but there's still a lot of noise. Most of the presents have been handed out now, but there is still no sign of Pappa's. What's going on? I've already gotten a lot of presents, hard and soft packages. Every time Santa's said my name I've gone to get the present, even though I was a little nervous at first. After a few gifts, Santa has started to seem strangely familiar.

"Here's a gift for Pappa," Santa says.

After receiving his present, Pappa bows politely to Santa Claus.

"Well thank you very much," Pappa says, glancing at me with a cheerful grin. I know what's in Pappa's present, but I still feel excited. Pappa gets the package open and a happy expression appears on his face. He lifts it up: a brand new mousetrap. This is at least the third trap, or 'killer' as Pappa calls them, that I've gotten him for Christmas. He is always just as happy.

Now that everyone has gotten their presents opened, we sit down to play in the living room while my uncles take out the chess set. I'm sitting near the Christmas tree in my new green ice bandy helmet, opening my last package. It turns out to be an enormous sweet bun. It's baked in the shape of a man, all beautiful brown on top and lighter on the sides. He has

raisins for his eyes, mouth, and buttons. He's grinning happily and I feel like taking a bite out of him right away.

"Pete, don't eat it yet! We always have this contest for who can stay the longest without eating their sweet bun man – or woman. Put it up with the other buns in the Christmas tree, and see if you win," uncle Markus says.

"Why? What's the prize?" I ask.

"Well, you don't win anything; you just get to feel like a winner."

I look the sweet bun man in the eye and bite a big chunk off his right hand. I fill my mouth with soft, sweet bread and grin at my uncles, cheeks bulging.

"You lose," Uncle Markus says.

"I reckon it were Pete who won. He'd rather eat his sweet bun fresh than rock-hard a week later dipped in coffee," says Pappa, pushing his own sweet bun man into the mouse trap I gave him. It closes over the man's head with a sharp snap, making the raisin eyes pop out of its face and fly under the bookcase and between the sofa cushions. It takes the adults a second to burst out laughing. Grammy comes to the kitchen door, peering in confusion into the living room. Pappa is sitting near Grammy and carefully raises a finger to his lips. Everyone sees except Grammy, who smiles in blissful ignorance because everyone is having a good time.

"So how about going to the Christmas service tomorrow morning?" Mum asks. All the adults nod eagerly and raise their hands.

Mariko walks around the living room picking up torn pieces of wrapping paper. She says "Please?" every time she bends down to pick one up. I can see under her short skirt. Her underwear is red.

## AURORA ROCKETS

At home everything is in chaos. Streamers and balloons are rolling around on the floor, and Mum and Dad's friends are sitting all over the house. They let me drink ginormous amounts of Perry soda and I keep having to go to the bathroom. It's almost time for the rockets. Dad also has a surprise, which I can't stop thinking about. Maybe he'll finally let me go sit around the fireplace in the living room with the adults!

Teukka, Dad's friend from work, takes Mum's co-worker by the hand, and now they're whirling across the room, dancing to Abba. I don't like Abba, but they seem to like it a lot—and each other too. Mum raises her eyebrows at Dad, who smiles and nods at Mum. They glance at me. I turn my gaze back to the dancing couple. Teukka's hand is stroking Mum's co-worker's back, and sometimes her bum as well. Mum's co-worker has a pretty big bum.

I can't wait for the surprise. Then Mum comes and chases everyone outside with a lot of fuss. She puts on my fur hat and winter coat. We go to the backyard where Dad has buried a row of bottles in the snow. They have rockets in them. Everyone yells, "Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year, Pete. I love you, Son!" Mum says, squeezing me hard. Dad lights a match and launches the first rocket, which flies high up into the sky. It explodes into an awesome bright flower, blooming in the middle of the rippling ribbons and flames of the Northern Lights, and then fades into little stars among the other stars. The next rocket hisses up into the sky and explodes with even more colours. The last rocket takes off for the sky, lighting it up with blue and white stars, the colours of the Finnish flag.

Suddenly, Dad has a shotgun in his hand. He comes towards me, winks, and motions me closer. I glance at Mum and she nods and I fairly fly over the snow to Dad. We wade out

into the middle of the deep snow, and Dad orders me to stand right next to him. Snot is running down my face. I wipe it on my sleeve. Dad wraps one arm around me and holds the shotgun in the other. He tips us backwards and we fall into the snow with a solid whump. Snowflakes puff up onto my face, cooling my hot cheeks. The edges of the snow stand out clearly against the sky.

“OK Pete, here comes the surprise. Put your hands over the earflaps of your hat and hold them there until I tell you to let go.” I do so.

“Ready?!” Dad yells.

“Ready!” I bellow, my voice muffled to nothing in my ears by the snow and Dad and the sky and my hat.

From the corner of my eye, I can see how Dad braces the shotgun in his shoulder more firmly against the snow. He squeezes me with his other hand as a signal. Right then he pulls the trigger and the gun goes off and a single red light flies up into the sky and I follow it until Dad pulls the trigger again and all the snow we’re lying on shakes and out of the barrel comes a beautiful, bright green light, which arcs after the red light like a felt-tip marker drawn across the sky. The red light has started drifting slowly down, and the green one soon follows after. The red light goes out in the air and then the green one fades. It’s quiet for a moment; it feels like everything around us—the people, the animals, the trees, everything—is waiting for one more blast or light. I can still hear a few faint pops somewhere far away. Even the Northern Lights seem to be drawing back into the dark sky, waving their fading tails to us in goodbye. Peaceful.

## THE RED OPEL

It's always a great feeling riding in Jaska's car. He's our sitter Leena's husband. It's a real Russian car, a Moskvitch like my friend Pekka's pedal car. We all call it a "Moshie." It's squarish, but still rounded in a strange sort of way. It's a little like Grammy and Pappa's car: old-fashioned. The seats are soft and covered with red fake leather. They get really cold during the winter, even when the temperature in the rest of the car is okay. Leena's husband, Jaska, is a nice guy and smokes all the time. He rolls his cigarettes by hand, even when he's driving, like now, on the way to the harbour to look at the icebreakers. Jaska's hands are on top of the Moshie's big steering wheel as he rolls the shreds of tobacco into the white paper. Jaska always swears when he's rolling cigarettes, and today he's swearing even more than usual, because he keeps dropping tobacco on the dashboard behind the wheel. Tapsa and I think this is hilarious, but we don't dare do more than giggle into our leather mittens. Jaska usually drives us somewhere in the middle of the week so Leena can clean in peace and go to the store. Jaska hasn't gone to work for a long time, because he's been sick.

We drive through the frozen city. This is as far north as the ships can go on the water and it feels like it's colder here than at our place on the riverside. We come up to the only traffic lights in town and two cars are waiting on the other side of the red light. The first is a posh Mercedes with thick blue smoke pouring out of its exhaust pipe that hangs in the air around it. Behind the Mercedes a red Opel with fancy black racing stripes that run over the roof is waiting its turn. The light turns green, and Jaska's Moshie jerks into motion. This sends the scraps from Jaska's roll-up, which was ready except for licking, into his lap, and fierce swearing fills the Russian car. This time Tapsa and I bray with laughter.

“Bloody bastard arse bugger! Fucking Siberian cocksucker traffic lights! How do you like that, you fucking gizmo!” Jaska’s outbursts usually only last for a second, but in that time he still seems to manage to say everything he needs to and calm himself down. To top it off, Jaska throws his incredibly shaggy fur hat onto the front seat next to himself. His sideburns and the hair at the back of his head are wet with sweat.

The Mercedes passes us, headed in the opposite direction. A fat man with a beard is sitting behind the wheel. He glances at Jaska’s car, and I can see him smirk. The Opel driving behind the Mercedes looks really sweet, like a rally car. Even though the Moshie is pretty loud, I can still hear the sound of the red Opel’s powerful engine. The cars move slowly through the intersection because everything is so frozen. Then I see the driver of the red Opel. He looks me right in the eye, and I feel my jaw drop open. As the cars drift past each other, he gives me a nod, staring me in the eyes as long as possible. Jaska’s Moshie plunges into the blue exhaust cloud left by the Mercedes.

“You see that, Tapsa? That Opel . . . that’s my Dad’s car,” I say.

“How’s that? You ain’t got no car like that. You’re lying.” An unpleasant look flashes in Tapsa’s eyes and makes me angry. I can feel my stomach twisting and suddenly my face is burning and I want to punch Tapsa, but of course I don’t do it.

I turn to look out the rear window and see the Opel disappearing behind an apartment building.

The rasp of a match being struck in the car interrupts my anger, and I turn forward in time to see that Jaska has managed to roll a new cigarette in record time. He sucks on his cigarette with hollow cheeks, releasing the smoke from his nose after what feels like an eternity and sighing happily.

“Oh man. Oh yeah. That’s more like it.” Our car drives along the biggest street in town and we pass a tall white building.

“Look there, lads. That’s City Hall. Did you know the Germans tried to blow the whole bloody thing sky-high during the war, but it’s built so solid they only got one corner blasted to smithereens? Damn right. Buggers burned all of Rovaniemi and did all sorts of other mischief before they got run off to Sweden. Fuck’em.” Jaska takes a short break to suck a deep drag from his cigarette.

“And we’re gonna march down this street, come spring, on May Day and celebrate the working class. I figure I’ll go again myself this year. You sort of feel connected to something in the middle of all that . . . .” Jaska’s speech ends when he’s overcome by a huge fit of coughing and it’s hard for him to keep the car straight. He coughs and hawks, and I start to get worried. It seems like he’s about to throw up. But the fit passes, and Jaska just keeps coughing quietly, like through a thick quilt. Then he swallows a few times, until he finally pulls in a deep, wheezing breath of the Moshie’s smoky, fake leather air. He opens the sail-shaped little window on his side of the car, letting in the harsh cold air.

“Yeah, you sort of feel connected on May Day. Did you know, Pete, that this is the reddest city in Finland? Did you know?” I glance at Tapsa, who gives an indifferent shrug. I look at Jaska through the rear-view mirror and I just shrug too.

We’re getting close to the harbour with its one long pier. On it stands a large crane that the sea air and the cold have formed an icy shell over. It looks like it’s moving all the time, or burning with ice. There’s a big icebreaker at the pier. It’s black and powerful looking. Jaska, Tapsa, and I walk right to the edge of the pier, almost close enough to touch the brawny side of the ship. The ice around the ship is broken, and the thick ice floes are piled on top of each other and interlocked, like they were trying to get out of the way of the

ship, ran into each other, and got stuck because they were so stupid. The sun is out as a thin strip, just barely above the horizon. A fine, glowing, red strip. I still feel lousy about Tapsa saying I was lying. I'm sure it was Kake sitting in the red Opel.

I wish he was my Dad.

## MONDAY MORNING

“Mum, roll my sleeves so they're the same length! I want them the same length!” I yell and tear the rolled-up sleeves of my plaid shirt down. I try to get them to just the right spot, right at the wrist: not an inch over or under. I have to roll my sleeves up, because the shirt is a little too big. Mum is busy zipping up my sister's winter overalls and doesn't seem to be hearing what I'm saying.

“Roll them the same length, you hear me?” I shout. Mum turns, and I only see now that she's crying. Tears are streaming from her eyes and I have this feeling like a snowdrift sliding down from my throat all the way to my willy.

“What's the matter, Mum? Why you crying?” I say at last. Mum doesn't answer, or let out any sound for that matter. Her chin is shaking a little. Mum turns her face away from me, and then I hear her say, “Oh, darling, there's nothing wrong with Mummy. Mum will fix your sleeves soon.” Her voice is thick, and so low I can barely hear her.

“There's nothing wrong with Mum,” my sister says just like an adult, and then she raises one hand to push her new, snow white fake fur hat off her eyes. It has a round white ball of fur on top. Mum stops to look at her for a second, gently stroking her cheek with her thumb.

“That’s right, nothing’s wrong,” and she turns to me and first rolls my sleeves all the way down and then each in turn back up again, rolling them both the same number of turns so they’re the same length. Mum is beautiful, but looks really tired and sad; she doesn’t even glance at me. I feel lousy and don’t know what to say. Her long lashes are damp and they look even thicker because the tears are making them stick together. Just as Mum finishes with my sleeves, I look down at her hands. The hand with the ring is badly swollen and you can barely see the ring on the finger. The finger and really her whole hand are all different colours: yellow, red, black, blue, even a little green.

“Does it sting?” I ask.

“No, darling. It’s alright. Now pull that neck warmer on and zip up your overalls.”

I take the neck warmer from Mum and try to slip into it as fast as possible because I hate its smell. It smells like Vitalis, a greenish jelly you always put on your cheeks and nose when you go out in the cold, to keep your nose from going numb and dropping off your face if it freezes. Mum shoves the bottom of the neck warmer inside my overalls, and draws up the zipper. My hair gets electrified and single strands stick to my forehead, and I can feel others swaying back and forth as they stand straight up on top of my head. It feels uncomfortable, but I bet the swelling on Mum’s hand doesn’t feel any nicer. Why won’t Mum tell what happened to her hand? Mum notices that I’m still staring at the hand, and, grasping me by the chin with her healthy hand, lifts my face up and forces me to look her in the eyes.

“Mum is alright. Believe me. Look, tonight when you come back from the sitter’s, you can go and see Kake if you want. You remember? The one who bought you the pedal car,” Mum says.

“Yes, I remember, Mum. I saw Kake at the stop light. I knew it were Kake, but Tapsa didn’t believe me and said I was lying, but I knew.”

“Well, that’s good. You want to go for a ride with him later today?” Mum asks.

“Yeah, sure, if he can’t come to our house,” I say carefully.

Mum looks me in the eye, sniffs loudly, and smiles.

“Good. It’s probably better if you go for a ride with him. You might go someplace fun. You never know . . . .” Mum’s words trail off as Dad opens their bedroom door and leans against the doorframe in just a pair of long johns.

“Yeah, you just might. You just never know. Did you really think you’d let your son go alone with that creep? Sounds like another one of your bloody stupid ideas,” Dad says as he walks towards Mum.

“Don’t!” Mum yells, whirling my little sister behind her legs and raising her free hand to shield her face. Dad comes right up to her and stares her coldly in the eye. Dad’s lips are pressed into a thin line and his mouth opens just enough so I can see his teeth and the gap between them. The gap looks bigger than before.

“Just like that. In a tough spot all you can do is bitch and moan. Now how am I supposed to have a fucking conversation with you?” Then Dad lets out a loud hissing sound. Dad looks at me and I try to hide behind Mum’s legs, but he cranes his neck and I can’t get away from his piercing gaze.

“I’m begging you. Stop now. You should have left for work already,” Mum says.

“I reckon I got a bad spot of fever coming on. What do you think, Pete?”

I don’t know if I’m supposed to answer or not, but I nod once.

“I’m taking the kids to the sitter now and then I’m going to work. You try and get to work today too.”

“Shut your face,” Dad says and goes to the coat rack to dig through his pockets. He tears out papers, money, and coins. Then he finds a pack of cigarettes, pushes a cigarette

between his lips, and stares down his nose at us. He shakes his head once and snorts, making his thick belly bounce a little. Dad opens the bathroom door, and before the door closes he looks at me and shakes his head. I hear him sit down on the toilet seat and light his cigarette.

Mum scoops my sister in her thick overalls and takes me by the hand. In a few seconds we're out in the yard and Mum is opening the car door. Suddenly from the house there's the sound of swearing and shouting, which seems to carry a long way in such cold air. Dad seems to be crying, but doesn't sound sad. My sister and I stand there, frozen in place facing the sound. I look at my sister and once again she pushes her fur hat up from over her eyes, sniffs in her snot, and turns to the car when Mum calls her. I go to sit in the back next to my sister's car seat.

"Dad's having a hard time at work. It'll work out," Mum says. She sits down in the seat, starts the car, gets out again, closes the door, and starts to scrape the windows. My sister and I sit together in the back, not saying anything to each other. We stare hard at the frozen, snow-covered window. I'm afraid that Dad will come out and not let us leave or maybe want to talk about something with Mum, but her scraper just clears a larger and larger hole on the front window. Suddenly Mum starts to clown around in front of the car, jumping up and down waving her arms all over the place, blowing kisses at us. We laugh and my face feels warm again. My sister is laughing so hard that her mouth is so far open I can see her small white teeth.

## CONSPIRACY

When Mum comes to pick me and my little sister up from the sitter's it's already dark. It was a good day. It seemed like Mum's smile and clowning around was everywhere I looked. Now Mum is driving with one hand, because the other is in a big splint. Mum doesn't change gears much along the way, because she says it's hard to find the right notch with her splinted hand. Every time she does change gears the car slows down, and when she finally gets it into the right gear, the engine gives a low growl and the car jerks forwards for a second.

"Kangaroo gas," Mum says, drawing smiles to our faces.

"Gussy the Kangaroo," my little sister says with a throaty French 'r' and then giggles.

"Pete, Kake's going to come pick you up right after we get home . . ." Mum doesn't say anything for a second. I think that she doesn't have anything more to say, or that she's concentrating on driving, but then she continues. "Listen, there's something I need to tell you. Do you know why you and me got a different last name than Dad and your little sister? Do you?"

I stay quiet for a second, my head buzzing with all kinds of thoughts, but I can't get any of them into words.

"Do you, sweetheart?" Mum asks.

"Because Dad is . . . really only Sissy's dad?" I finally say.

"That's right. I know we've talked about this sometime before. You got another dad. Kake is your dad. So you sort of got two dads, right?" Mum says as she pulls the car up in front of our house.

"Let's not talk about this anymore if Dad's inside, alright?"

“K . . . ,” I reply. I feel strange: sort of like usual, except somehow more full. As if my belly was stuffed, but instead it’s my back—I can’t slouch; I have to sit up straight and breathe carefully using just my chest. My stomach feels weird, like when I stole those pennies from Mika, the boy next door. It’s too hot and I’m sure Mum feels the same way. But it’s easier to bear because Mum won’t tell anyone either.

My little sister sighs and says:

“Wish I had two dads too,” and stares dreamily out the window.

## KAKE

Dad isn’t home. I put on some better clothes and Mum let me start wearing my new black, shiny winter pants for tonight. They’re a little like jeans, except black and slick.

“You need to look a little sharper if you’re going to visit someone or eating in a restaurant. Kake will be here soon. You behave yourself,” Mum says as she threads a black and white cowboy belt into my pants. The belt is decorated with a long lasso which winds around the belt with twists and turns, looping around revolvers, cowboy hats, and spurs. The belt buckle is shiny and shaped like a horseshoe, with fancy horses on it, rearing up on their hind legs with their manes flaring behind them like flames.

“Mum . . . did you buy this just for me?” I ask, confused but overjoyed.

“There’re gun holsters that go with it too, but you don’t need those today. Smart, ain’t it?” Mum smiles and hugs me. The hand with the splint presses against my back as she squeezes me hard and then rubs her nose against mine.

Mum always knows what I'll like. A lot of times she'll give me horses and Indians and cowboys made of metal, all of them different.

A car slows down and stops in front of our house, but the driver doesn't kill the engine. The low rumble is so powerful it rattles the big windows in the living room, and I recognize it as the same sound from the traffic lights. Kake's car.

"He's here. Kake is here," I say, almost whispering, and rush to pull my snow boots on. Mum just tosses a poncho over her shoulders and throws on some shoes. As we walk past the mirror she glances at herself and fixes her hair a little. She grabs me by the hand, and the next moment we're outside on the steps in the cold air. Our house happens to be between two street lamps, so Kake's car looks extra wild because only its outlines are visible. On the front of the car are a bunch of lights and the back is sloped. The heavy rumble of the engine idling echoes off the walls of our neighbours' houses and makes me think their windows must be rattling too. Mum and I walk around the car and Kake opens the car door for me, still sitting in the driver's seat. Warm air from inside the car washes over me, smelling of gasoline, fur-lined seats, and cigarettes.

"Wotcha, Pete. Can you get in there?" Kake calls out cheerfully.

"Wouldn't it be better if he sat in the back?" Mum says, fussing over me.

I'd much rather sit in front next to Kake, but I don't say anything. Kake pulls the lever, and the front seat tilts forward, revealing a hard-looking back bench without any sheepskin covers. On the seat is Kake's coat, which he moves to the side to make room for me.

"So . . . how's things? All right, yeah?" Kake asks Mum.

"Yeah. Things are going just fine. Both of the kids have been good and all that. Healthy," Mum answers.

“How about your mum and dad?”

“They’re fine too. Mum might need to have a gallstone removed, but that ain’t so dangerous nowadays. You bring Pete back alive. And have fun,” Mum says, hanging in the doorway for a second and shooting me a small smile and a nod. Mum draws the door back, just about to slam it shut.

“Don’t . . . ,” Kake tries to say, but not in time before Mum bangs the door shut.

“ . . . slam the door . . . ,” Kake continues, the rest of his words trailing off into a muffled mumble, lost under the rumble of the engine and the music from the radio. Mum opens the door again.

“You say something? I didn’t hear,” she says in a loud voice, almost shrill with worry.

Kake shakes his head and waves his hand at her.

“Nothing, I was just saying not to . . . ,” and then Mum slams the door shut again, popping the grill of a big speaker out of its socket in the door. It falls into the foot well, revealing different coloured wires and an ugly hole in the dark upholstery of the door. Kake looks like he’s about to say something more, but closes his mouth instead, scratches his moustache, and turns towards me in the back seat.

“I thought that was pretty funny. You think we got the same sense of humour, yeah?”

Kake grins and I smile back at him, holding my lips tight together, because I think we do. Kake puts the car in gear, but we wait long enough for Mum to scurry to the front door and get it open. She gives us a quick wave and slips inside, fleeing the cold air. Just as the car starts to move, she reappears in the living room window with my sister in her arms; Mum even gets her to wave at us. I wave back. The back seat is deep and the rear windows are so high that I have to crane my neck to see them. I keep my gaze fixed on our house and the window for as long as I can. Suddenly I feel incredibly wound up. I want to jump out the

door and run home as fast as I can. It feels like tears aren't far away, but this is still where I want to be, here and now. I wonder when Dad will get home, and whether he'll still be tired and angry.

"Must be a bit hard sitting back there. Now that no one's watching, you wanna come up here in front?" Kake asks, cutting through my frantic thoughts. I nod and then struggle into the passenger seat. Kake helps by lifting me by the elbow. The front seat feels even deeper than the back because I can't see over the dashboard. I stare for a long time at the car's instrument display, which glows with a dim light. I glance at Kake and see that he's wearing a swank, yellow jacket with two black stripes running from top to bottom. He even has racing stripes on his coat! Sweet.

Kake has a big nose like Pappa, but even bigger, and strong-looking hands. He has a brown moustache and sideburns, which meet on the sides. Kake turns to look at me. Embarrassed, I quickly lower my eyes to look at my hands.

"You don't need to be all nervous like that, yeah? Look, I ain't nervous about bein' with you. Right?" Kake's words break the odd moment, which has already lasted an uncomfortably long time. I can't come up with anything to say, even though I want to ask everything: How does it feel to drive this car? How fast does it go? Are you my real dad? What's that gauge? Do I have another grandpa? But I stay quiet and just smile slightly.

"Good," Kake says, and I look back up at him. Kake glances back.

"You ever been to a noshery? We could go eat something good, like pan fried reindeer. You like that?" I like fried reindeer a lot, but what's a noshery? Kake is using words I've never heard before, but I feel silly asking.

"Check it out," Kake says, pointing at a thick, black, metal frame that stretches across the ceiling. "It's a roll cage, like you have to have in all rally cars. I ain't gonna do any rally

racing in this car, but this ride is just as tight as anything in its category. I tried rally racing and been to the ice track, but I do more ridin' bikes and playin' hockey."

I don't understand very many of the words, much less the whole point, but Kake sounds exciting. No one around here talks like Kake. I feel excited, like smiling.

"Oh, right. That frame's there to keep the roof from caving in if the car flips over, so you won't get smashed up," Kake says. So I wouldn't get smashed up? Is Kake planning to roll the car into a ditch?

"I ain't been driving my pedal car much now 'cuz it's winter," comes out of my mouth.

Kake stares forwards and smiles so I can see his teeth. He's missing a few on one side. Kake chuckles, grabbing a pack of cigarettes from the dashboard and lighting a cigarette with a lighter. He takes a deep drag of smoke and winches his window open slightly.

"Now here was me wondering how long you was gonna stay mum on me," Kake says with a smile.

"Yeah," I reply.

We come to the railway underpass. We dive under the bridge and the unbelievably loud echo of the engine pours in through the cracked window. I think it's a great noise. We stop at an intersection and turn towards the bridge at the power plant. As Kake presses the gas pedal, the rear of the car swings to the side. It feels wild and my stomach rolls. Kake turns the wheel back and forth quickly and the car straightens out again. Driving along the bridge, I sit up in my seat to see how far up we are. In the summer you can sometimes see the crazy plumes when the valves of the power plant are open and the brown water rushes out from under the bridge, dropping like a monster leaping onto the darker water below. But now the water is

covered in ice and snow, the white crust just glittering slightly in the light from the power plant and the houses on the shore.

“Did you know that Pappa helped build this power plant? It’s the biggest hydro plant on the whole river. Pappa says that once during the summer when they were building and welding something down there below, the salmon were spawning, but they couldn’t get past upstream no more, so every bloke with a hammer or axe would pop the closest salmon in the head, stick it in some bag at the end of a day, and take it home.”

“Huh,” I answer.

“When we get to the city, we’ll go to the hotel where I’m bunking and nosh at their bistro,” Kake says.

“K,” I say and stare at the green air freshener tree swinging that’s swinging on a string tied to the round knob of the radio. I’ve seen those trees for sale at gas stations before. They make your head hurt if you sniff them. Kake twists the knob of the radio higher, moving and singing in time with the music.

“Let others make the big bucks, I don’t give a damn . . . “

Kake sings pretty well, and is in a happy mood. I’ve never heard the song before, but it sounds a lot better than the Elk song.

We reach the city, and Kake steers the car to the side of the road in front of a large apartment building. I peek through the window and notice a sign on the wall with sea-themed pictures. The wheel of a ship, breaking waves. Light is shining from the large windows on the ground floor, and I see people sitting inside. There are pictures of anchors and blue waves on the windows.

“This is the hotel where I’m bunking. Let’s head inside,” Kake says, nodding for me to follow and slapping the car door shut. We walk up a few broad steps to the door and Kake

stops, opens it, and with a hand at my back guides me into a big lobby where two women are sitting behind a high desk.

“Wotcha. Me and my mate came for some food. We’ll just take our coats to my doss,” Kake says, and one of the women gives him a key and smiles prettily. Then we go to a door off to the side. There’s a button on the wall next to it, and when Kake pushes it, it turns red. The door slides aside to reveal what looks like a small closet. Kake pushes me again inside. Then he turns me back to face the door and holds me by the shoulders when I’m about to walk back out of the closet.

“Steady on. Let’s stash these jackets first,” Kake says as the floor moves under my feet.

“Whoa!” I say, and Kake laughs again.

“You never been in an elevator?” Kake says. He’s trying to hold back his laughter. I feel stupid. I have seen elevators on the telly, but I’ve never been in one myself before. The elevator stops and the door slides open in front of me again. Kake walks briskly out into the hall, and I follow. We walk along the long hallway on soft rug and it almost feels like I can’t move forward because the rug has such long, stiff pile that it feels like it’s always pushing me backwards and to the sides.

Kake stops at a door to a room and pushes the key into the lock. He twists it around for a while, the heavy metal key fob clonking against the door. At last the door opens, revealing a small room with high windows and light drapes that are a little brown. There’s an armchair and two separate, neatly made beds. The bedspreads are dark brown. The room has wall-to-wall carpet.

I feel hot. Kake says that I can sit on the bed and take off my fur hat. He goes to the toilet and closes the door. I stand in the middle of the room with all my clothes on, feeling a

little sick. Nauseated. I can still smell the air freshener tree from the car. I walk to the window and look out. Below I can see Kake's Opel and the street lamps. I've never been in a building this tall. It's started to snow outside. The radiator under the window is sending out waves of heat. Fear and anger wash over me. I don't know why. Kake comes out of the toilet.

"You crying?" Kake asks. "Are you feeling sick?"

"I want to go home," I reply.

I can't think of anything else anymore. I would run home if I had to.

Kake sits down in the armchair across from me and looks at me with sad eyes. He looks like he's trying to find something to say, but I guess he can see how I'm feeling. He lights a cigarette and sucks on it with a thoughtful expression. He stands up, pulling on his jacket again, and walks to the door.

"Well, let's go then," Kake says in a quiet voice. I follow, a lump caught in my throat. I'd like to apologize, but instead I walk out the door and wait in the hall for Kake to get the door locked and guide me to the elevator with a hand at my back. We don't say anything in the elevator or on the way home. Kake plays the radio with the volume turned up loud and smokes one cigarette after another.

We turn onto our street, passing by Pekka and Anna's house. The lights are on.

"It's a shame we didn't even have time to eat. Hopefully we can get together some other time when I'm around these parts. And you could come visit me in Helsinki sometime," Kake suggests.

"Yeah. Helsinki," I whisper. Right then the Opel pulls up in front of our house, and Kake leans over to open my door. He comes really close to me and pinches my cheek a little between his thumb and forefinger. He stares me in the eye and I stare back.

“You my mate?” Kake asks, and I nod almost instantly. Kake opens the door and I can feel fresh air on my face. I jump out of the car, running to the yard and from there up the front stairs to ring the doorbell. My breathing slowly evens out, and I’m not nervous at all anymore. I glance back at Kake’s car. Kake has gotten out of the car and is almost at the front door in front of me.

“Look, you almost left your mittens,” Kake says. I take the mittens and come down one step. I wrap my arms around Kake’s legs. Kake doesn’t say anything, just holding me. I don’t even hear Mum open the door. Kake crouches down in front of me.

“I’m gonna give you a ring and we’ll try to see each other again,” Kake says and I nod. Kake stands up, goes back to his car, and slowly drives away.

“Did you have a fun time?” Mum asks.

“Yeah. We went to a hotel,” I reply.

Mum looks at me, stroking my cheek and drawing me against her. Mum’s hand is warm.

## OVER DARK WATERS

The snow is coming down hard. Winter always comes by surprise. Mum has started school, just like me. She works during the days and at night she goes to high school in the city. Mum left early today, so she wouldn't be late because of the snow. Grammy and Pappa are nice to always come in the evenings from the other side of river to keep us company and make us food. Me and my little sister always look forward to their visits. Grammy and Pappa don't usually come in their nice, old car, even though the trip is pretty long and sometimes, like today, it's snowing so hard you can barely see. Usually when the weather is bad they don't take the car out of the garage. Today they come by bicycle. The roads haven't frozen yet, so they can't use their kicksleds. The trip is longer too because they can't cut across the river. They had to go all the way around to the power plant bridge. Grammy and Pappa take off their outdoor clothes in the hall. Both of their noses are red from the blizzard. They have so many plastic bags of stuff with them that you wouldn't believe anyone could carry so much on a bike, especially in this weather. One of the bags is really tattered.

“Here we are again!” Pappa says cheerfully, raising his hand high in the air.

Grammy breezes past us into the kitchen, carrying a few plastic bags.

“You must be mighty hungry. I'll cook some macaroni and minced meat. That sound alright to you?” Grammy says, bustling about in the kitchen.

“Yeah!” my sister and I shout almost in unison.

“You play now with Pappa, so as I can get everything ready,” Grammy tells us.

We always have a fun time with Pappa. As soon as he's gotten his outdoor clothes off, we drag him to our room.

Pappa always has exciting stories and some sweet surprise in his pocket for us. Usually we get a liquorice bar wrapped in slick, white paper, with the picture of an African on it.

"You don't know what happened to me and Mother, which is to say your Grammy, at the power plant bridge," Pappa says, lowering his voice.

My sister scoops up the Liisa doll from her bed, clutching it to her chest for comfort. Sometimes she thinks Pappa's stories are scary. Pappa takes her hand in his own and lifts her onto his knee. I'm sitting on the bottom bunk seeing in my mind Grammy and Pappa making their journey over the long power plant bridge in the cruel blizzard.

"It were already dark when me and Grammy left home. The trip went just fine until we come out of the shelter of the forest to the bridge. We had to jump off our bikes, because the North wind were so strong that we felt like the right side of our faces were about to fall off. Me and Grammy wrapped long scarves around our heads so all you could see of our faces were our eyes, and even then we had to squint so them speedy snowflakes wouldn't fly past our lashes and into our eyes . . .," Pappa begins.

A sharper picture of the bridge in the storm appears before my eyes. Two human shapes plod along in the weak light of the streetlamps through snow that comes up to their knees. Snow billows in gusts, forming into great white animals that gallop towards Grammy and Pappa, instantly swallowing them in their jaws. The blizzard tears at their clothing, slowing them down. Sometimes huge torrents come straight at them, blowing aside at the last moment to hurtle wildly off the bridge to the water waiting below.

“ . . . and not a car in sight. Who would be daft enough to go and rubbish their car in weather like that? You can't see no further than one street lamp away, and at places less than that. I speed my steps, so as I can shelter Grammy from the wind. The snowflakes are flying so fast it feels like they're going right through my clothing and slicing into my flesh. My skin feels like it's freezing in motion. The big plastic bag on the rack of my bike is flapping in the wind. Now I'm sure I roped it there proper like, but it tears free, and in a second it's flying in the air all in shreds, as if the snowflakes had torn bits out of it like piranhas. I stop when I see the other bag on the rack is looking stretched too, and Grammy passes me again.”

“I'm going on. Not far now!’ Grammy yells into my ear on the bridge. The wind is so strong I can barely hear her words even from so close up. I just wave her on, trying to rescue that bag from the rack with my other hand. Grammy goes on, and right then the wind tears the bag out of my fingers. I reach out for it, managing to get a grip at the last moment. Now that weren't smart, as the blizzard and the wind catch me by my coattails and throw me over the railing,” Pappa says in an excited voice, still almost whispering.

My sister's eyes are as big as an owl's and she's squeezing the doll hard. I feel like there's a hole in the pit of my stomach when I think how high the power plant bridge is.

“At the rail, high over the dark water, I thought Pappa's time were up, but the rail come so close that I managed to grab it with one hand. I hold onto the rail, and believe it or not, I'm hanging straight sideways, just like the edge of that bed,” Pappa says, pointing at the bed where my sister and I are sitting in horror.

“How'd you hang on with just one hand!” I shout.

“Listen, I don't rightly know myself,” Pappa says, sighing and looking at us mysteriously.

“Then, all of a sudden, all the wind stops, and I flop against the bridge, hanging by the rail. In my other hand I’m still holding the bag the blizzard tried to steal. I look down, and there far down below my feet is the water, glimmering a wee bit in the light of the street lamp so as I can see it there, cold and waiting to take me. The snowflakes drift straight down past me all calm like. The air is perfectly still. I’m thinking that I can’t let go, that I got to get here to bring the contents of this mighty important bag safely to you two. The hand gripping the rail starts to give out. I yell for Grammy to help, but I figure she’s too far to hear me. I start to feel mighty uncomfortable, as my fingers slowly slip in the mitten holding onto the rail. I try to swing my legs to one side and the other, trying to find a foothold on the bridge. That don’t work neither.”

“Now my hand slips off the rail, and I see that mitten hanging onto the rail all on its own! Right at that moment something grabs the end of my sleeve. I look up, and think I see a dog gripping my sleeve in its teeth! The snow is in my eyes, so as I can’t see clearly yet, but it pulls me up so strongly that I manage to get a grip on the rail again, and get my other hand on the rail too. I drag myself up onto the bridge by my elbows, and from there to the cold, rough concrete. I pant there, all winded, and raise my eyes to a mighty big surprise. I’m looking straight into the eyes of a huge wolf. They’re yellow and they’re staring right at me, and through me. In the cold air, mighty big clouds puff from its mouth as it breathes, and I see a wee bit of foam at the corners of its mouth. The wolf is big and grey and on its back is at least five inches of thick, white snow. I glance in both directions on the bridge, but I don’t see anyone else. I manage to climb to my feet. I’m still on the other side of the rail, because you never know with wolves. But this weren’t no ordinary wolf: it did just save me!”

“So I gather my courage and climb carefully over the rail and stand facing the wolf. We just watch each other in silence for a while. Not a peep from anywhere. The wolf takes a

step towards me, craning its neck to sniff at the bag in my hand. I open the bag for the wolf, and he stuffs his head right inside, and without a by-your-leave takes one of the liquorice bars. He holds it all careful like in his teeth and looks at me again. I lift up my bike and start to walk it off the bridge. There's still no wind, just the snow coming down silent like. I make it to the end of the bridge, and turn back to look at the wolf. He just stands there in the light of the streetlamp, watching to make sure I get off the bridge alright. As soon as I step onto the other side, the wind and the snow start up something terrible again. The wolf stares at me for as long as I can see it, but then the snow is coming down like before, and the wolf disappears into the snow too. I make it under the other bridge, where Grammy's been waiting for me."

"Where you been?" she asks, but I don't even try to explain, seeing as I figure she won't believe me anyway. I just put the tattered bag inside my jacket and we continue our journey."

"And now here we are," Pappa says with a sigh of relief.

My sister and I are so taken in by this grand adventure that we can't tear our eyes off of Pappa. I wring my hands together, not knowing which part of the story I want to hear again first.

"Oh, right. I almost forgot," Pappa suddenly says, setting my sister down on the floor and going out into the hall.

My sister and I stare at each other in confusion.

"Have a look at this!" Pappa says, almost whispering. He has a torn plastic bag in his hand, the one I spotted when they first arrived.

"That's the bag the storm tore from your hand!" I cry out.

"The wolf took our liquorice from that bag!" Suvi whispers excitedly.

“Take a peek inside the bag,” Pappa suggests.

Bodies stiff with excitement, we peek into the bag; my jaw drops. I look at Pappa and he looks back with his glittering blue eyes. He nods, smiling faintly. There are two liquorice bars at the bottom of the bag.

“That wolf, he didn’t take it all. He left your liquorice in there. He took my bar, seeing as I owed him at least that much for him saving my life,” Pappa says.

I put my hand in the bag to take out my liquorice bar. My sister does the same, but neither of us can open the wrappers, because on our hands there are also thick, grey hairs that aren’t human hairs.

“Look, Pappa!” I whisper.

“That’s right,” Pappa says with a wink.