

***Football and Concert Halls: A Light Blue Love Story***

(Suggested US market title: *Concert Halls and Soccer Balls*)

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# 1

Dad's coffin lay on the chapel altar.

Mikael tried not to look at it. He looked at the junction of the wall and ceiling where a decorative molding of a running dog circled the room. Mikael did not know that the ornament was a running dog, but he wondered how the figure was made to look like it didn't end at any point. It continued forever, or would have continued forever if a person's head could turn endlessly in the same direction.

Mikael tried not to look at the coffin. He did not want to imagine how his father's body looked in the coffin.

Mom had visited the hospital morgue to identify the body, but hadn't said a word about what she had seen. She was crying now too. She had an old-fashioned black veil on covering her face. The veil was a thin mesh through which her face was visible; her lipstick looked too garish. She put her handkerchief under the veil and dabbed at her eyes. Her face was as white as the handkerchief.

Lotta was sitting on the other side of Mom, rigid and sobbing. The priest poured dirt carefully from a small shovel onto Dad. The shovel looked the same as Mikael's toy shovel had looked, only a different color. The shovel reminded him of Dad. Mikael felt another sob coming on, but clenched his lips.

"From dust thou art..." said the priest in a flat monotone.

This was Mikael's third funeral. First Fafa had died and then Grandmother, who you weren't allowed call Grandma. Mikael didn't remember anything about those funerals other than that the priest's voice had been just as quiet and monotonous as today, even though it wasn't the same priest. Fafa's funeral had been in Swedish.

"...and unto dust thou shalt return..." Mikael remembered how he had thrown a shovelful of sand into Dad's face at the beach, and how Dad had gotten angry

and gone into the water to wash the sand off his face.  
The priest poured a third shovelful.

“...until thou shalt arise up upon the third day.”

Two weeks of a bad dream. Now it was fifteen days since Dad had died. It had been on a Friday. Mom had come home from work in the middle of the afternoon, ashen, and turned off everything in the house that made any kind of noise. Lotta and Mikael had sensed from Mom that now was no time to protest or grumble. Mom had sat on the corner of the sofa reserved for Dad and not said anything for a long time. She had squeezed her mobile phone so hard in her hand that its cover had broken, and when she finally released her grip and started to cry, the phone's battery fell to the floor.

Now and then the organ played to mark the progression of the ceremony. The hymn echoed coldly even though the chapel was small, because there was only a handful of people. At the edge of the chapel loft was a round mirror, and in the mirror a young woman's face. The woman was observing the situation in the chapel using the mirror. She tried to move carefully and seldom did anyone even notice the mirror. Mikael had seen it as he wondered at the endlessness of the ornamental molding, but then the mirror was empty and he had just wondered why there was a mirror in a church.

Mikael sat erect, shoulder's straight, a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy. His back was so long and his shoulders so broad that sitting next to Mom he looked like a grown man from behind. Lotta was sitting on Mom's right side and sobbing so hard her shoulders jerked. Lotta still looked like a little girl. The music ended slowly. People's sniffing and coughing could be heard in the echoing chapel.

Mom staggered and almost fell as they stepped up to the altar, next to the casket. Mikael took hold of his mother's arm with a strong grip, and she instinctively

turned her face to Mikael in thanks. Her mouth was twisted. She had a large bouquet of flowers in one hand, and Lotta was holding her other. Mom, Mikael, and Lotta stood next to the head of the casket. Mom took hold of the broad blue and white silk ribbon and straightened it, but was unable to read the final farewell to Dad out loud. Mikael didn't know what he should do. He was already reaching for the ribbon to read it when Mom quickly laid the flowers on the casket without saying anything.

Mom bent over double, kneeling next to the casket, and laid her hand on the spot where she imagined Dad's heart to be. Lotta didn't know what she should do. When Mom had released her hand from Lotta's, Lotta had burst into tears. Mikael was trying to keep his family on its feet. He swallowed his own tears and bowed stiffly over his father's casket. His eyes were blurred, and afterwards he didn't remember anything about the funeral.

In the round mirror at the edge of the gallery, serious brown eyes watched the reflection of what was occurring below.

Mikael, Mom, and Lotta lingered another moment at the casket. Then they returned to their places. Famu, sitting on the second row, waited and only rose after Mom had sat down in her place. Famu marched rigidly to the casket and read something in Swedish from her the ribbon on wreath in a loud voice. Mikael understood what Famu read, but only heard Dad's name: Viking. Famu turned stiffly toward Mom and bowed a little too formally and went to her bench. Famu was a hard lady, but she was not hard about Dad's death. She had cried at home; now she wanted to preserve the facade. In the chapel vestibule she had also told Mikael to be clam, since this would be the best support to Mom in her grief. But Famu was a mother too, Dad's mother.

What was worse, to lose a son or a husband? Mikael wondered.

Love is always there for a child, even when you're fighting and scolding him, and a child learns to love his parents without understanding that it is love. Real love is different. Famu and Mom's loves were different.

Then was Grandfather's turn. Mikael thought that adults have been to so many funerals that they know how to control themselves.

Famu had cried herself dry at Fafa's funeral, and Grandfather didn't care much about Dad, considering him an arrogant Swede Finn and too loud in any company. Sometimes Grandfather and Dad had wrangled over politics too, and it often ended with Dad saying that he was both a worker and *svenska talande bättre folk*. "How could your grandfather have ever given his daughter to an elitist Finnish Swede communist!" Dad bellowed, laughing at his own joke so loudly that Grandfather took offense and shut his mouth. Usually they wouldn't speak to each other again until Christmas or Grandfather's birthday. December and Grandfather's birth month were half a year apart.

Now that would be over too. No more fights over politics. When he was smaller, Mikael had been shocked about the arguing, which wasn't fighting until it got out of hand; later he had followed it like a boxing match and taken pleasure in the hooks and straight lefts and rights. Sometimes Grandfather had hit below the belt, or so Dad thought, because they fought in Finnish, which wasn't his native language, and Grandfather used his linguistic superiority to his advantage. Mikael had been on Dad's side because he could sense from Grandfather that he didn't approve of Dad, or even like him.

When he was small, Mikael had asked Dad what 'communist' meant. Dad had said that it meant something like dinosaurs or "brackens as tall as fir trees," that didn't exist anymore. Mikael didn't understand. Much later he learned that *brackens* were giant ferns in Dad's language. Then when the bracken explanation for communism wasn't good enough for Mikael anymore, when he had learned in school what communism had

been, he asked again whether Dad really was a communist.

Dad had said that, A, there weren't any communists anywhere anymore, and B, that he had never been one anyway. Dad had promised to teach Mikael more about politics, but Mikael didn't know what was most important out of all of the things Dad said so passionately. Now it was too late to ask about that too.

Mikael brushed his short curly hair instinctively. He realized that he hadn't look at himself in a mirror even when he was brushing his teeth. Mom had even tied his tie, and he hadn't even checked the knot. Now he tightened it for good measure.

A few cousins and second cousins with their families continued the ritual, to which Mikael was deaf. Then it was the turn for the left side of the chapel, where the people sat who weren't Dad's relatives.

A burly gang of men stepped forward in their infrequently-worn funeral suits. Not all of them were even in black. The men marched like a column of soldiers to the left side of the casket, and the one who had the red and gold union pin on the lapel of his coat took the end of the garland ribbon in his hand, but then began to give a speech. First all of the men bowed in mother's direction. Mom looked at the men blankly. Mikael did not hear anything of the speech but disconnected phrases.

"...who was the most generous of all of us and never left anyone in a jam."

Mikael looked at the men; he tried to guess from their expressions whose life Dad had saved.

"For this immeasurably valuable trait he paid the ultimate price," continued the man who looked like the chief shop steward.

The men looked at Mom; the speaker raised the garland ribbon and read in an resounding voice.

"In memory of our colleague Viking Enberg, your brothers, Local 1."

Mikael didn't know that Dad's union branch number was one. He didn't know if it meant something, maybe superiority.

Dad's coworkers stood up straight, bowed in Mom's direction and went to their bench. None of them looked like he would be indebted to the deceased for the rest of his life. All of them looked like men are supposed to look at a funeral.

The face in the round mirror waited, and when no one approached the casket anymore, and someone coughed somewhere as if in signal, the organ began to play. The ceremony was over. Mikael thought that his father was more dead now than in the morning when he had awoken without remembering immediately that his father was dead. It had been a strange feeling, like he was ashamed that he hadn't remembered, as if it would hurt Dad that he hadn't remembered that he was dead.

The oak doors behind the casket opened soundlessly, and the casket moved out of sight. His mother burst into tears again, accompanied by Lotta. Mikael was irritated because he was not accustomed to funerals or to Mom crying. Up until now Mom hadn't cried often, at least not that Mikael had seen.

When the doors closed, the music continued for an appropriate amount of time and then ended with a long sliding sound, as if the pipes had come to life and then dried away to dust in the same moment.

In the foyer of the chapel, a line of people mumbled condolences and exchanged their shoes for boots and put on black overcoats. Some had umbrellas even though it wasn't winter anymore and not yet spring. Mom was surrounded by silent hand shakers.

Down the spiral staircase from the upstairs organ loft came a young girl wearing a too-long overcoat and carrying a shoulder bag and a large, light blue cello case, which she was trying to shift from the outside curve to the center of the spiral in order to fit down the stairs

better. The woman tried to come down carefully to not disturb the mourners, and for that very reason she tripped on the hem of her coat and fell headlong down the stairs. As she fell she let out a surprised, desperate cry that caught everyone's attention.

People jumped out of the way of the falling woman, all except Mikael, who reflexively jumped toward her, taking the cello case in a body block and holding onto it firmly.

The momentum of the falling young woman was so strong that Mikael fell on his back and hit his head painfully on the stone floor, the cello case hitting him on the chin, and the organ player collapsing on the cello case on top of the heap.

An eerie crash. Mikael's skull made a sickening thunk, after which everything was so quiet that everyone could hear a the low growling sound from the cello case like someone had plucked a base note. Mikael lay on his back, his head spinning from the impact. On his face was the neck of the cello case, which had a red wine-glass sticker indicated that there were fragile goods inside. On top of the cello rested the young woman, who was uninjured, but terrified by what had happened. Mikael blinked and tried to focus his vision. He saw the young woman's face only as a light splotch in the midst of which glimmered two brown stars. Mikael wondered how stars could be brown?

The woman lay numbly on top of the pile, but tried to at least get some word out of her mouth. Mikael tried to focus on the brown eyes right next to his face. Only the neck of the cello was between them.

"You aren't dead, are you..."

Mikael shook his head. Which hurt. He grimaced in pain.

"Hopefully I didn't..."

When Mikael finally got his vision focused and saw the girl's eyes wide in horror staring at him, he heard a high silvery ringing. Was the noise coming from the e-string inside the case, or had a tuning fork fallen from



its compartment in the case? Were they both hearing the same noise? The ringing could also be a result of the blow Mikael had suffered or be coming from his own ears.

Nothing happened, but how long did it last?

The moment was as long as moments in life are. Then the girl started to stumble to her feet. She carefully raised the cello case and offered Mikael her hand, but Mikael did not take it, rather easing himself onto his knees and beginning reflexively to brush off his clothes, which had not even gotten dirty from the clean floor of the chapel.

"I'm so sorry. This is just terrible," the girl said, who was visibly shaking.

Mikael shook his head and grimaced again. His head hurt.

"I mean, thank you. I mean, because otherwise my. It's just awful. I am so sorry. Are you hurt?"

"Yeah."

Mikael was still holding the back of his head. Blood began to drip from the small abrasion on his chin.

"Yeah...I mean...just a little."

The girl extended her hand again and helped Mikael up from the floor. Everything around them was meaningless, as if there were nothing and no one else there. They just looked at each other, now standing, for another moment. Slowly reality returned. Mikael's mother took him by the arm, but he did not look at her.

"Are you all right?"

Mikael shook his clothes. He rubbed his head.

"I suppose."

The organ player took Mikael's left hand in her right.

"I am so sorry for your loss. Your father?"

Mikael nodded quietly. His head was mixed up. Brown stars. Mom was starting to get restless.

"Now we should go."

Mom exited the chapel. The entrance hall had emptied unnoticed. Everyone else had gone. Mikael and the organist were in the foyer of the chapel, alone,

looking into each other's eyes. Mikael almost lost his balance and had to take a step to the side.

"I'm sorry," the girl said once again.

"Don't be sorry anymore. It's nothing," Mikael snorted in bewilderment, not intending to be unfriendly.

The girl looked offended; she quickly began to collect her sheet music from the floor and rushed out the door. The cello case was in danger now of being crushed in the outer doors. Luckily Mikael's foot was in time to tackle the door so that all that came from the case was a quiet grunt.

Mikael stood at the door rubbing his head and watching the brown-eyed girl leave: the motion of the cello case, the young woman's gait, its swaying, or rhythm, awoke something in Mikael that had always slept until this day. Mikael felt a black grief and longing for his father, but he also felt something new, something that made him watch the way the brown-eyed girl moved. Something shifted inside him, as if an involuntary muscle or organ had woken up and poked him in the solar plexus, just like trying to trap a football ball with your chest when the ball is moving too fast.

Alongside his grief, something else crossed Mikael's field of view, suppressed curiosity - perhaps?

His head hurt.

The clamor had roused the cemetery chapel caretaker, who came to check what had caused the noise. The caretaker was thin, with a dark complexion, and was distantly reminiscent of his colleague the hunch-back of Notre Dame, even though his hunch was only the stooped posture of an old man, which had come from a lifetime of bowing his head at strangers' funerals.

"Football?" said the old caretaker.

"What?"

"Your sport is football."

Mikael looked at the man in amazement. There was more weird about this day than that his dad was dying more the whole time.

“Life puts its stamp on the living person. The mark is easier to see on a young person.”

Mikael massaged his head in pain and surprise; he looked at the caretaker again; he shrugged his shoulders. The dripping of blood from his chin grew. The caretaker offered a clean paper handkerchief from his pocket and pointed at Mikael’s chin with his finger.

“The extension of your foot...”

Outside Mom was holding the taxi door open. The other funeral guests were already driving out of the chapel gates.

“Come on already!”

“I am sorry for your loss, young man. How old was your father?”

“Forty-seven this spring.”

“Oh, my. Did he play football as well?”

“Hockey. Mostly on the couch. He watched it on TV.”

The old caretaker looked sadly at Mikael’s mother.

“H.I.F.K.”

The caretaker said hifky letter by letter, like he was spelling it.

“How did you know that?”

“From the Swedish name.”

Mikael shook his head and let the door close behind him. The caretaker opened it again and looked after Mikael. Instinctively he crossed his arms.

As the taxi left, Mikael’s mind turned to his father again. His father was such a hockey fanatic that Mikael had been forced to choose football. In addition to politics, Dad and Grandfather had quarreled about hockey and football. Grandfather had though hockey was a game for street brawlers. Dad really thought football was a great game, but he always teased his humorless father-in-law by saying that “football isn’t a game for people, since you can’t use your hands in it, even though the ability to use our hands is what separates humans from animals.”

Mikael always went along with his dad to hockey matches, because he was interested in any sport where it was possible to beat someone else.

All of Mikael's friends were Jokers fans and sometimes in school they called him 'meatball' because someone had seen him with Dad in the HIFK stands once when he was a little boy. He had endured the teasing for Dad's sake.

In the taxi Mikael sat in the front seat, with Mom and Lotta in the back. Mikael was rubbing the back of his head. Lotta was crying.

"Wipe your chin. It has blood on it. Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't matter."

Mikael didn't bother to say that the back of his head hurt more than the insignificant scrape on his chin.

"You could have a concussion."

"Mom!"

Lotta stopped crying.

"He always has that."

"What?"

"Brain damage."

"Lotta!"

Mikael didn't even feel like yelling at Lotta. The taxi driver was trying to be serious, because the fare was serious. Lotta started to cry again. Mom took her in her arms.

"Oh Lotta! What will become of us now?"

Mom was as concerned about the continuation of life as a mother can be. Mikael looked out the car window, uncomfortable. On the street swayed the light blue cello case that the funeral organist had strapped to her back over her shoulders like a backpack. There was something very individual in the young woman's way of walking: the cello rocked on her back and its neck and the girl's neck changed sides every other step: left, right, left, right. Like a gigantic metronome—although Mikael had never seen a metronome and didn't even know that there was such an instrument to keep players in time.

Mikael stared at her walk: her motion, the hem of her coat, the vibrant brown hair which the backlight of the pale noonday sun somehow turned to gold.

Mom tried to cheer them up.

“That went very well. Thank you, children.”

“But Mom, Dad won’t ever come back,” Lotta said.

Mom burst into tears again. Lotta started to cry again too. She put her head on Mom’s lap. The driver was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Mikael looked at the girl and the bobbing cello case as long as she was in view. Then the taxi turned a corner.

He still had to endure his father’s memorial. In the entry of the restaurant people were being careful not to jostle one other or push ahead. The tables were set with white linens, hymnals, and white flowers, one bouquet for every six guests. At the tables people formed groups with their friends and whispered to each other.

First they sang “Nearer, my God, to Thee” a capela, everyone sitting stiffly, and then the priest spoke. He did not preach or read from a book, but instead just reminisced about the deceased as if he had known him. It did not sound believable, and Mikael didn’t hear a word of it. After the priest’s speech, they ate two sandwich cakes, salmon, and cheese, and drank coffee. After the coffee someone mused about how good the deceased had been. Someone told a joke about Dad and people relaxed because in the happy shared memories Dad was still alive - and some nostalgic laughter could even be heard.

Mikael had a strange, detached feeling about everything that had happened during the day. He had been to one cousin’s wedding. At the wedding people had almost all just cried. Now at a funeral they were laughing. Was this how the world was?

The rhythmic motion of the light blue cello case, as if set to the rhythm of the movement of the girl as she receded, was in Mikael’s eyes the whole day of the

funeral, even though Dad was dying more the whole time and Mom and Lotta cried until evening.

Mikael had fallen in love at first sight with a girl who had a light blue cello case, and Mikael didn't know who the girl was or even that the instrument in the big, light blue thing was a cello, which made sounds that were strange to his ear.

Mikael was very astonished.

## 2.

After a tearful weekend came a miserable Monday. Mom took a day off from work, and Lotta and Mikael got to skip school. Mom didn't know what to do. She had managed to organize Dad's funeral with Grandfather's help, but she had pushed the other practical matters off into the future. Mom was trying to hide from everyone that she knew that many things were about to start falling apart. Mom had never been alone since she turned eighteen. In twenty years two people become one and a half. Both take on half of the other and give up half of themselves. One and a half people are needed to keep a family with children going. One isn't enough. Mom knew this, and feared what would happen to her and what would happen to the children.

Mom started to come apart when she found Mikael browsing Liverpool's website on the net.

"Aren't you the least bit sad!"

Mikael realized that he did not know how to mourn Dad's death the way Mom thought he should. He switched the machine off without saying a word. He understood that it wouldn't help anything now, but he also understood that it wouldn't help for him to retreat into his grief.

Mom didn't understand that yet.

When Mom and Lotta got in a fight over almost nothing, Mikael decided to go to school the next day, even though he didn't like school.

"Before a boy would wear a black mourning ribbon on his shirt for a month when a father died. Your father wore one when Fafa died."

Lotta just had to jump in.

"He doesn't even tie his shoe laces. He just smashes them in dog crap."

“Shut your trap!”

“Quiet, both of you!”

Mom burst into tears, went into her bedroom, and slammed the door.

“Asshole.”

“You are. Mom, Mikael’s swearing!”

Mom came back into the room. She had fixed her hair that moments before had been a straggling mess, dried her tears, and she was smiling!

The children were stupefied.

“Sorry,” said Mom, “let’s just live like normal.” Even so, Mikael didn’t turn his computer back on immediately, and Lotta didn’t start bugging Mikael.

Mikael sat down next to Mom on the sofa, accidentally in Dad’s spot. He smoothed Mom’s hair gently, which had fallen out of place again. Mikael felt strange when he realized that he was stroking Mom’s hair the same way that Dad had stroked his own when he was saying goodnight in a dark room. Lotta came and forced her way onto Mom’s lap, which as a ten-year-old she was almost too big for.

“Don’t shove!”

“Mikael, let it be,” his mother said soothingly.

Dad had been a hot-blooded and colorful man, but he had magically peaceful hands. Mom missed Dad’s big hands, as did the children. Dad had been perfectly quiet and just stroked their hair, and many times a child had fallen asleep just with that. Then Dad had said goodnight in his gravelly voice and carefully gotten up from the bed.

The phone rang. Lotta got it for Mom.

“Hi.”

Mom listened. From how Mom listened to the phone, the children knew that it was Famu calling.

“It will be sometime next week. We get to choose the day ourselves.”



Mom listened more and then said, “Hej då,” which she had learned to say to Famu. Lotta was curious.

“What day do we get to choose ourselves?”

Mom squeezed Lotta tightly in her lap and burst into tears again.

### 3.

On Tuesday night, like every Tuesday and Friday and often also Saturday, until Dad's death, a thick chrome-plated iron chain and a brass Swedish padlock shackled Mikael's shiny and well-cared-for, complex mountain bike to the center flagpole of the football field. Mikael's football squad's practice was ending. Over their red uniforms half of the boys wore yellow vests, which differentiated the teams from each other in the practice game played at the end of each workout.

The player's numbers were visible through the vests.

The game was intense and the boys grunted and yelled requests for the ball and swore when they failed. The teams were different colors, but in each team there were boys who had already grown to their full height and slower-growing boys whose nimble, dexterous movements had not been ruined yet by too-fast growth.

The field where Mikael's squad practiced wasn't any old worn-down backfield for little boys in a sleepy suburb, but instead a real football pitch almost in the city center, where only teams were allowed to play that were "trying to grow future ballers," as Mikael's father had said many times to Mikael encouragingly.

Mikael stole the ball brazenly from a vestless opponent and started to move it through the defense toward the red goal. Mikael appeared to be playing in the center forward ten-spot, even though the number 11 showed through his yellow vest.

On the wing was playing striker number 13, Veeti, one of Mikael's best friends from the team. He was running hard, even with the back-most defender.

"Lord! Pass it here!"

The old friends' teamwork was seamless. The boys still knew how to read each other's thoughts, which introduced beautiful set pieces to the game, even though their relationship as friends had become somehow more

guarded when Mikael had suddenly grown a head taller than Veeti.

The team's trainer, Coach, as the boys called him, was following the game contentedly from the sideline. He was satisfied that he had managed to drum a non-Finnish way of playing team sports into the boys:

"In football you can't use your hands, but using your mouth is not against the rules. Talk to each other. Shout!"

Coach had made them do shouting drills where the boys stood in a circle with their backs toward the center and first had to yell the name of the one they were going to pass to and then kick. The receiver had to turn in time to take the ball and pass it in one touch to the next one. In two seconds they had to react to their own name, trap the pass, decide who to pass to themselves and shout his name or number, and then kick accurately enough that the receiver still had enough time to turn and receive the ball.

Because this was sports, this drill was repeated all of the previous fall, at every practice, until it was in the boys' blood. Now it was part of the team's game and often produced handsome goals.

Mikael ran another six steps to get the ball positioned appropriately and made a precise pass with the inside edge of his left to the wing striker, straight to his foot. Striker number 13 juked left, made a fake at the goalie and flicked the ball skillfully into the back corner.

Coach clapped his hands. He was the crowd for this game, the only one who saw the goal.

"Good. Lucky 13!"

The boys thought Coach had a strange sense of humor, which was also probably one of his training tools. Most of the boys on the team had a father who didn't have any kind of sense of humor. For most of them it was a result of the boys themselves and would pass right around the time the boys realized that none of

them were going to become ballers after all and instead would sometimes go for a few beers with their dads after a football match and the father would get to talk about himself too sometimes.

The boys kicked the ball lazily back to the center circle and breathed. Coach glanced at his watch. Veeti wanted to thank Mikael for the good pass. He flashed a thumbs-up and yelled, “Lord!”

Mikael waved his hand to return the thanks. His and Veeti’s old friendship felt good again.

Dad’s family name was Enberg, and he had said that the name meant a hill or mountain covered with junipers. Dad was Swedish-speaking by birth, but had not taught Swedish properly to Mikael or Lotta. Dad had the old-fashioned and incorrect attitude “one language for one child” and so Dad and Mom spoke Finnish between themselves and to the children. Mom better Finnish, Dad worse.

At Fafa and Famu’s place Mikael was forced to listen to Swedish, and his grandparents did speak mostly Swedish to him, but Mikael was shy about speaking Swedish even though he understood quite a lot. Dad wasn’t able to help much with homework, because not only the language but also the school and the traditions of Finnish language education were foreign to him.

Dad had old-fashioned ideas about language, but modern ideas about relationships. He had met Mom in Porvoo on the beach when she was 18. They had fallen head over heels in love and were soon living in a little studio apartment in Helsinki. Mom had studied to be a midwife, and Dad had been a sheet-metal worker at the docks, making ships and containers and almost everything big that can be made out of steel.

Mom’s name was Sormunen, which sounded a little like ‘ring’ in Finnish. Mikael was born, and maybe Dad had intended to register the boy in his own name, but

since the parents never bothered to get married, Lotta became a Sormunen as well. Mom only had sisters, and Grandfather was the only male Sormunen that Mikael knew.

Even though Dad didn't really know Finnish all that well, he had a good sense for language. When Mikael had gotten hooked on watching the movie *The Lord of the Rings* over and over, to the point of saturation, so that Dad didn't even always get to watch TV sports since Mom took the side of her son and culture against Dad and sports, Dad started to call Mikael the lord of the Rings.

Mikael Sormunen, lord of the Rings!

Grandfather was so serious that he was totally galled when Dad teased him by calling Mikael the lord of the Rings, as if Grandfather didn't even exist to him—to Dad.

Mikael remembered that Grandfather had reminded him once, "Remember now that I am also a lord of the Rings."

Mikael had been at in a cheeky phase.

"Grandfather. Aren't you the grand lord of the Rings?"

Dad had a good laugh over that one. After that they hadn't talked about it anymore with Grandfather, but somehow Mikael's schoolmates and then of course his football mates had heard the story, and so Mikael's nickname had become Lord.

Mikael was Lord at school, Lord at football, and even Lord at home when Lotta really wanted to be bitchy to Mikael, which was a word he wasn't allowed to use at home even though it was hard not to. Dad only called him it when Mikael was watching too much TV.

"Now it's time for the lord of the Rings to get to bed."

"Dad! Just this part!"

"Nope."

Click. The television was off. Nothing helped. Mikael knew he had lost the battle and finally accepted it.

Now they wouldn't have to argue about that anymore either, he thought sadly.

The ball was back at the center mark. Coach blew his whistle. An opening feint turned into a red attack. The ball slipped over the sideline, and someone went lazily to get it.

Coach looked at his wristwatch again, put the whistle in his mouth, and when the ball touched the field after the throw-in, blew three long blasts. The boys' movement slowed as if the power had been cut to a projector and the film was stopping like in an old-fashioned movie.

"OK, guys. Time's up. That's enough for today. A tie is a good place to stop. No one's left feeling sour."

"I am," one of the boys shouted, just to shout something.

Mikael wiped his sweat on his sleeve. When sports practice was over, the boys turned back into regular young men, who slouched off, rumbling quietly, in the direction of the dressing room.

Coach came over to Mikael and took him tight by the shoulder. Mikael stopped. Coach turned to stand in front of Mikael so that the boys couldn't see either's face.

"Mikael, I'm sorry."

Coach took Mikael's hand and shook it, too long.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm doin' OK. I have to."

"Do you want a break from training?"

"How come?"

Coach was confused; he let go of the handshake.

"I just thought..."

Mikael shook his head with determination. He passed his fingers through his hair, and avoided Coach's eyes, instead looking somewhere far off, behind the end line or still farther. But something caught in Mikael's throat; he started to feel like crying again, but now he had to swallow his tears.

“Listen, Mike, you’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Coach kept trying.

“If I can...something..”

“OK.”

“If anything comes up... or if there’s something... Or if your mom...”

Mikael broke loose. He straightened his shoulders; it was hard to talk. The coach couldn’t restrain his curiosity.

“So, how is your mom?”

“Mom’s OK.”

“They usually are,” Coach said, with forced energy.

Mikael left.

“Mikael!”

Mikael stopped, but he did not turn.

“What really happened?”

Mikael shuddered, but he tried to control it. The coach came and put his hand on Mikael’s shoulder again. Mikael twisted away from his hand. Coach did not try again.

“OK, let it be.” “Sorry...I...uh.”

“Aah! Dad saved one of his work buddies from ending up under a big steel plate.”

Mikael swallowed. He couldn’t say anything more; he couldn’t say that Dad had ended up under the plate instead. His shoulders were shuddering; he was shaking involuntarily.

Mikael set off with determination toward the dressing room. He swore under his breath, both at the coach’s stupidity and his own inability to control his own feelings. No one had been willing to tell everything about what really happened or how Dad had looked when he was dead.

Mikael had had time to imagine many alternatives. All of them were horrific. His beloved father was a hero one second and then a crushed corpse the next.

Coach was left standing, stunned, talking half to himself, half in sympathy.

“Damn. Terrible. I’m sorry.”

Mikael turned and made a high kicking motion in the coach’s direction.

“You already said that once.”

“What?”

“Sorry.”

Mikael turned and ran briskly after his friends into the dressing room, pulling the yellow vest over his head. Coach was left standing there looking after Mikael. He shrugged his shoulders a little and with that settled his account with the boy’s grief. As they went into the dressing room, the boys sent their balls flying with powerful kicks into the dressing room window mesh and wall. One kick was high and went right over the dressing room. An “oh fuck, high” rang through the air.

When Mikael made it last into the dressing room, the team motor-mouths were already in high gear. The story was reminiscent of a team sport with its shots and dribbling, but on slightly different terms than on the playing field: in the dressing room, when the numbered jerseys had been taken off, each of the boys slowly returned to his normal character. Someone dried his hair with his shirt before pulling it all the way over his head.

A fast striker, who everybody called Baby, drank out of a sports bottle like it was an infant’s bottle.

Mikael sat quietly and untied his cleats. Under the socks were red feet that the tightly-laced shoes had been squeezing.

Mikael didn’t concentrate on the conversation, instead rubbing the soles of his feet.

“...and the dude just watched while his chick fuckin’ just pulled and kicked her below the belt. And his own old lady was yelling whore the whole time and was trying to pull her by the hair and...”



The storyteller was a big goalie, a boy who was called Goliath. The smaller Veeti, the wingman who had made the evening goal off of Mikael's pass, let off a shot now too. "How can you kick a chick below the belt?"

"Right straight in the fucking boiler room."

"There's one too many women in your story," someone interjected.

A few of the guys hooted with laughter, but it wasn't very natural. One looked a little shyly, another turned his head away intentionally, but his ear still soaked up every word.

"I hear it hurts even worse in the pussy." When the conversation turned to using words for female anatomy other than as punctuation, they weren't quite willing to come out of some of the boys' mouths naturally.

"As in the balls?"

"Yeah."

"Like fire on your nuts."

Again a torrent of laughter, but they looked at each other sidelong, shyly but curiously.

"Where did you see this show?"

The dressing room was filled with a roar of side comments, everyone trying to get the ball, to get on the inside and make the tackle. Mikael was fast getting ready because he wasn't participating in the bragging. He was ready. He got up and left without looking to the left or right.

"At the station. Over on the train side. Then the train came and they started..."

The boys suddenly went quiet. They looked at Mikael again sympathetically, but didn't know what to say. Mikael went out the open door.

"Fuck, I didn't remember."

"You couldn't have. Now tell the rest of the train story!"

"OK, well then they were about to fall in front of the train and..."

When Mikael had walked far enough away from the field house that he couldn't hear the team's noise anymore, he stopped on the edge of the field. Spring was coming. The purple band of the setting sun was visible between the buildings and tinted the sky. Mikael drew a deep breath. He was serious and determined. Mikael walked to his mountain bike, which was chained to the center flag pole. Instinctively he looked up. The flag pole was empty.

Mikael's home was in a high-rise apartment building so high that his whole childhood he had looked at flying birds from above. It had never occurred to him that almost all other people looked at birds from the belly side rather than the back side, until Dad died. Mom had been terrified and depressed. She had sent Mikael to the maintenance company to tell them that the flag should be set at half-mast.

The maintenance company man had been friendly but precise. He had checked the list of residents to make sure that a Viking Enberg really did live in the building. Everyone else had not always believed that Dad's name was Viking either.

Dad had made ships for Viking Line at the yard, which had led to plenty of joshing. His workmates asked if Dad's family owned the shipping company and if they could get discount tickets.

"I'm more related to the gypsies who travel the lines than the ship owners. I'm just a poor Swedish meatball worker who would be perfectly willing for you to offer him a beer."

Sometimes someone had offered him a beer, and then Dad's story would go on until the closing bell. Mom had watched TV until Dad came home, even if it was two in the morning on a Saturday night. Mikael had been sleeping with his head in Mom's lap when Dad came home. Once this had been followed by a high-volume argument, at the end of which Mom had gone crying

into the bedroom, with Dad carrying Mikael in next to her, stroking his head, giving him a foul-smelling kiss saying goodnight in a rough voice, and then going to sleep on the sofa.

In the morning nothing was said of the matter, and it was just a normal Saturday.

Mom was quick to forgive. Sometimes in the morning she would give Dad a kiss and say that, "Viking must have been having a seminar cruise since Dad still smells like a seminar even in the morning."

At home Mikael had watched out the window as the maintenance company's pickup had turned into the yard carrying a wide snowplow on its front for no reason. A man in blue overalls had gone to the flagpole carrying a folded flag and hoisted it all the way up. Mikael was already opening the window to yell down that the flag was supposed to be set at half-mast when the man had lowered it a third and tied the rope to the cleat.

Mikael had looked at the flag for a long time, and when a bird flew past the flagpole, he understood that he had a different perspective on birds than almost all other people had.

When Mikael undid his bike lock, he heard a strange silvery ripple of sound. It couldn't have come from the thick chromed steel chain, nor from the lock. Mikael checked his bike; everything seemed to be in order there too. Mikael had put half of his first summer wages into the bike. Half of the price of the bike had been a gift from Dad as an incentive.

"Even if school isn't to your liking, at least you'll be a good worker. Job well done!"

Mikael kept very good care of his bicycle.

Dad had helped at the store. Porvoo was the bicycling capital of Finland, *nummer ett*, as Dad had reminded him more than once. Dad had a connection with a

bicycle shop owner in Porvoo, with whom he negotiated a discount in Swedish.

“You’ll save a pretty penny,” Dad had said. And so Mikael had.

Another thing was that the bicycle store was in Porvoo, and even though Mikael would have wanted to jump right on and ride the bicycle to Helsinki, Dad insisted that the new bike be shoved in the back of the car and tied down with cargo netting to keep the station wagon’s back door almost closed. Mikael jammed his T-shirt in a ball between the rear door and the frame of the new bicycle so that the shiny paint wouldn’t get scratched, and traveled back home shirtless.

At home Mikael pulled on his T-shirt, which now had holes worn in it. There was a small scrape on the frame too. This irritated Mikael a lot then and ever since when he saw it. Now he looked at the small scrape on the frame tube and stroked it with a finger. He wished so badly that Dad was still alive.

Mikael walked his bike.

Mikael never walked his bike, instead always riding, even if he had to ride next to pedestrian.

“That thing has way too many gears,” Dad had said.

“No way. Number one in the front and two in the back and I stay right with you.”

Dad was trying to exercise and Mikael was coaching him by riding next to him on his bicycle. Soon Dad’s speed slowed so that Mikael had to constantly shift down, finally to first gear in front and back. That was when they turned back home.

When Mikael walked his bike off the field and threw his leg over the bar, he saw something light blue out of the corner of his eye. Mikael took his leg back off and walked his bike over to the blue car. The car was a one of those soap box types. Sometimes in Helsinki you still saw a real genuine Soviet Lada, but this had to be even older than those.

Mikael put down his kick-stand and walked around the car.

Renault R8 Gordini it said on the back. The hood was held down with leather straps and the nose had a battery of yellow add-on lights. On the front doors there were large white circles with big black numbers inside: 8. On the upper edge of the left-front door next to the mirror was painted in white inch-high letters: MIKANDER.

The evening sun fell between the buildings onto the car. Its light blue glowed as if lit from within. The car was well cared for, painted, and waxed. The only other thing that Mikael paid attention to other than the color was the black iron cage inside the car. Mikael was a physical sports guy, but he understood that this was someone named Mikander's old rally car that had been restored to its former glory.

Someone loved this light blue car, probably too much.

"Everyone has his own insanity," Dad would have said if he still could have seen the car.

Although Dad and Mikael watched all sports on TV, Dad didn't consider all sports 'real sports,' and his son didn't approve of everything his father did. On top of it all, blue was the enemy color to Mikael: Liverpool played red on their home field and yellow at away matches. The worst opponents were blues.

A new color had come into Mikael's life, a color he had gotten used to treating as a rival color but which now made a silvery sound in his ear. The source of the sound was not the bicycle: Mikael checked again that everything was whole, in the right place, and working on his bike.

Mikael tried to remember what the girl looked like, but he only remembered the brown eyes and the light blue color.

## 4.

The light blue cello case did not look light blue when it lay like an open casket in the corner of the small white room. It did not look light blue because its lining was salmon-red velvet and the small leather straps and buttons, with which loose items and various compartments were fastened, were shiny black.

A small, simple room, almost like a prison cell. Even the window was up high. On the naked wall was one old poster, on which there was a cello and across the poster vertically the text KUHMO written so artfully that it was impossible to comprehend or read at first glance.

The brown-eyed girl had on a cheery dress, and she was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, playing the cello. In addition to the chair, the girl, and the cello, there was only a music stand in the room. And the light blue cello case, which looked like a gutted salmon.

The high window revealed the same purple strip of spring evening sky, which made the old rally car's blue color glow as Mikael looked at it once more before he jumped on his bike and started to shift to a lower gear.

Somewhere an old trolley car rattled past. The girl stopped playing in the middle of the piece. Perhaps the window frame vibrated as the trolley screeched when the tracks turned, because a quiet silvery sound lived on in the small room. The brown-eyed girl sighed tiredly and began to collect her sheet music. The girl put the cello carefully in its case, and from her movements it was apparent that she loved the instrument. When she closed the cover of the cello case, there was the noise again, very quiet.