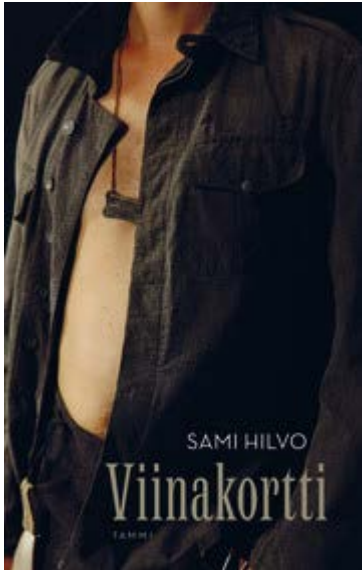


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***The Liquor Card***

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SAMI HILVO

# The Liquor Card

A Novel

By Sami Hilvo

Translated from the Finnish by

Owen F. Witesman

The correct approach to fruit tree cultivation is that we must never force the tree to grow contrary to its own disposition, but rather we must support and assist it in all ways. Surely one may achieve certain results by proceeding in the opposite direction, but this will usually be followed by a penalty sooner or later.

*Erik Lindgren*

*THE GARDEN BOOK*

ADVICE FOR THE CULTIVATION OF VEGETABLES, FRUIT TREES,  
BERRY BUSHES, PARK TREES AND BUSHES, AND INDOOR AND  
OUTDOOR FLOWERS FOR ALL GARDENING PRACTITIONERS.

1903

## MIKAEL

At the station a woman offers me a ride, but I turn it down. She addresses me by my first name, but I remember her only vaguely. Her husband is sitting in the car waiting. I don't remember his name either. Once the car sweeps out of sight, I lean against the rough, splintery wooden wall of the station and vomit.

Around me lies a village, stopped, frozen in time. The drapes of one of the windows in the building on the other side of the tracks—a former dairy—flash back down when I straighten my back and look in that direction. I have become a stranger, so my behavior is suspicious.

The day is bright, and the road is dry for walking. The only snow left is in the bottoms of the ditches and the cooler shadows of the trees. Over the snow is a layer of black gauze; the gravel left on the road scrapes underfoot, but a warm breeze dries the sweat from my brow and lifts my spirits.

I'm late. The others have arrived at the house before me. I lower my suitcase to the floor in the entryway, next to the door to Grandfather's office. The door is locked. The handle is cold metal, and the coolness of it calms me.

Grandfather was the sheriff and discharged his office in that room. When he was away I would sometimes open the door, but I only ever dared steal a look inside. Then I would start to get afraid and pull the door closed. The room itself didn't frighten me, but rather the idea of myself stepping in, opening the drawers, disturbing the order of the papers, accidentally scratching the shiny surface of the table, peering into the important-looking books, and touching the black, mute, leather sofa. Its surface was cool even in summer. Would it squeak and would it leave a depression if I sat on it? Would it tell Grandfather what I had done? During my childhood the door had been closed when Grandfather was out, but never locked.

I take my toiletries out of my bag and go into the bathroom in the hall to clean up. I can still hear the thumping of the music in the nightclub and the banging of the bed against the wall as a stranger pumped back and forth panting on top of me. By the time I'm alone again in the morning, I've already missed my train. I brush my teeth again, drink two glasses of water, crumple up the phone number I find in my toiletries bag, throw it in the bowl, and flush it into the sewer.

I walk into the living room, where people are conversing quietly. Everyone recognizes me, falling silent for a moment, but after I nod in greeting, they continue their conversations. My aunt is here. We don't speak to each other. In her mind, it wasn't her nephew who just entered the room, but rather the devil himself. Her lips are silently muttering either prayers or curses. She has found the truth. Everything outside that truth is of Satan.

I stop at the window and look out into the garden. The village has retained its tranquility, but the garden has changed. The stems and stalks being revealed from beneath the snow, dried by the spring sun look like they were already dead in the fall when the first snows fell. The source of Grandmother's pride and the object of everyone else's envy hasn't borne fruit in years.

"Mikael, a garden has everything," Grandmother would often say.

Preparations are being made in the kitchen, but the rhythm is different, more careful than Grandmother's, who was buried today next to her husband.

This house has been more of a home to me than the building in which I spent my time with my father and mother. Even though Grandmother, who brought life and warmth into the house, has now died, I still feel like I've returned to where I belong. The building put up by my father that I was forced to call my home also brings back memories, but those memories are pallid, cold.

Now nothing is expected of me. I can call things what I want. I can be here or there or leave, and no one would have any place or need to say anything about it.

One head follows me as I walk across the living room to the kitchen. I think her name is Hertta.

Tuulikki, Grandfather's sister, is in the kitchen. She notices me, wipes her hands on her apron, and comes to hug me. I'm surprised by the gesture, which isn't something I'm used to in my family, extended or otherwise. I had expected a handshake or a few sympathetic words, but now I have to wrap my arms around this fragile, aged woman. Tuulikki disengages and digs a handkerchief out of the pocket of her apron and uses it to wipe her eyes. She pulls a key out of the same pocket and offers it to me.

"Your mother asked for this, but Aili made me swear in the hospital to only give it to you." Everything is as it was in the kitchen.

I put the key to the office in my pocket. Tuulikki bends down to take a pie out of the oven. The room fills with a safe, familiar smell.

The cognac is in its old place in the cupboard. Both Grandmother and Grandfather visited it, but always alone, never together. "It's medicinal," they both said. I pour myself a little medicine, return to the living room, and sit down in Grandfather's chair.

## URHO

There were various rumors circulating at home and at the border, but I didn't want to listen to them. I didn't want to give them power over my peace.

We spent a day on an island of smooth, glaciated bedrock. I would have to return to the border the next morning. I had started work as a border guard right after the army. I had been on the border for a year.

The wind was cold, and your questions didn't warm me.

"Is it coming?" you asked.

"What?" I asked, even though I knew what you meant.

"The mobilization," you answered.

"Do you mean extra exercises? Those are just rumors; there's no sense in listening to them."

You opened an elegant cigarette case. Its silver flashed in the sun.

I didn't want to listen to your words, just the low humming of your voice. It calmed me down. I sat up and brushed off my legs—dry pine needles stuck to my sweating skin. You were on your back, and your bare breast heaved.

"Where will we go if war breaks out?"

I inhaled the scent of the tobacco.

I didn't know. I looked out over the expanse of the lake and the glittering waves. Their color was deeper now than at the beginning of the summer. Something had happened to you too during the summer; I just didn't understand what.

I looked at you and wondered how your hard body reflected the autumn sun so softly. I inhaled the scent of your sweating chest. The wind circled in your hair, it too radiating light. Despite your questions there was a small smile on your lips. I remembered their softness and

your scratchy stubble, but then you opened your mouth and the memory disappeared. You were irritating me on purpose.

“Is that where they would come from?” you asked, turning your bright gaze out over the darkening lake.

The rocky island was deserted, free, and full of light. We had become part of it, but soon we would have to leave again. You became more serious, turned towards me, and looked me straight in the eyes.

“What will happen to the Olympics?” you asked, more of yourself than of me.

I moved over next to you, tickled you. You laughed out loud.

We washed in the lake, which still retained the warmth of summer. We stood in the shoals. A moose was swimming across the middle of the lake. Its crown of horns rose up high towards the sun.

“Wait there!” you said, jumping onto shore and getting your camera. “Darf ich vorstellen . . . Herr Carl Zeiss!” you continued in a language I didn’t understand.

“Blas mich!” I responded, as you had taught me. You said it was a greeting, but only between friends.

I doubted that, because your expression always told me something else when I said it to you.

Herr Carl Zeiss was a Zeiss Super Ikonta 6x6. Made exclusively by Zeiss. It had both a rangefinder and an exposure meter. The lens was a Tessar and the shutter a Compur-Rapid. An expensive rig. You carefully set it on a rock.

The camera shutter fired. You scooped water out of the lake and doused me again. The water shimmered around me like the crystal crown in the lobby of the City Hotel. We had sneaked in to see it together.



I tried to get you wet too, but you dodged nimbly. You moved your delicate Herr Zeiss to safety and we climbed up the beach.

You opened a bottle of milk and took the bread out of your rucksack. Your rucksack was fancy too. Its leather was the same as the case for your camera: thick and rigid. You brought a lot of amazing things back with you from Berlin. Even though I played nonchalant, I was secretly jealous of them and wanted to hear more about everything you had seen and experienced during the summer with your aunt Selma and her husband.

Everyone knew that neither you nor your family had the money for those things, or for the trip for that matter. After seeing the camera, the others didn't see you anymore, they saw your aunt who had departed for the great wide world. She no longer had to suffer the discomforts of long journeys or ruin her nice shoes on the rocky main road of the village just to come show what she had. You were doing it for her.

“Tell about Berlin, Toivo,” I asked.

“Do you see that promontory?” you said, disregarding my request. “At the base of it is a house, in a pretty spot. Sauna on the shore. Forest all around and fields a little farther off. There is another promontory and another house like that, empty and in need of repair. In Miesvaara County. It belongs to my aunt.”

“And Berlin?”

“Berlin was . . . my aunt, her husband, and their friends, all artists and musicians and fancy people. Everyone said schön, schön, sehr schön. Did I want to become a German? they asked through my aunt. I would get better training and I would be able to throw the javelin farther than any Finn had before. Everyone laughed and one of them blew his nose in a handkerchief that was the same as the swastika flag in front of the City Hotel. Just smaller. I didn't understand everything. I want to fix it up, turn the fields and start farming. When should we go look?”

“Amanda would make a good wife. Why don't you take her there?” I said, teasing you.

Early in the morning, when you were still snoring asleep at home, I packed myself a lunch and walked to the station where Aili had come to see me off. I held her hand for a moment; I hadn't managed to make anything more than that happen with her. And you? With your Amanda?

The landscape changed slowly outside the windows of the train. The day before your breast had been warmed by the sun of the rocky island without longing for the past or caring for tomorrow. But after night had fallen I pressed my ear against you and listened to your heart; I was afraid.

The sun was already high in the sky; you may have already woken up. Soon you would meet Amanda again. Perhaps then your longing for me would finally pass and my picture fade from your mind, if you had ever missed me at all. Soon your mind and hands would be full of other things. You would get an answer to your questions, because the rumors would come true: your Germany would march over its own eastern border and attack Poland.

## MIKAEL

The light outside is harsh. It forces its way in, bringing with it more mourners. They are all old. Their ranks have thinned. There are fewer of them than at Grandfather's funeral.

Young. Old.

Living. Dead.

Free. Captive.

Everything is relative.

I can still remember Grandfather's smile.

Grandfather didn't smile often, but when he did smile, his smile was free and easy, sincerely happy. We saw it when he had been drinking. He always drank when his job didn't prevent it.

When he drank, I knew that he was nearby. There was a sweet, dark smell in the air that I learned to like. If he was sober, I couldn't be sure whether he was home or away. Sober he was like a phantom soldier. No one could follow his movements, not even his wife. Aili disapproved of his drinking—as was proper—but was also thankful in the knowledge that when he was drunk, he stayed home, inside four walls. Drunkenness slowed Urho down.

I saw the smile sometimes too when he was washing and ironing his uniform shirt. Then he wasn't drunk. The others didn't see this. The connection between his shirt and his smile enchanted me, because I was a child.

What was his prison from which drinking and ironing his shirt freed him? I never considered it until I found myself in my own prison.

I learned to drink too, and I can't abide people trying to interfere with that. But I'm the most free when I write. Writing is the highest canon of freedom. If I didn't write I would almost

certainly be a hardened criminal, maybe in jail, maybe dead. Because I write, I'm even more hardened than a criminal, but at least ostensibly free and most unquestionably alive.

We have made the world complicated.

That's why Grandfather drank and ironed his own shirt.

That's why I write.

## MIKAEL

My father enters with my mother. They drove from the church to the house one after the other. Despite their divorce, they feel it necessary to arrive together and most likely will leave together. When the gathering is finished, they will drive about a kilometer together until Mom turns into the drive of the building she calls home and Dad continues on to the highway, speeds up to merge with traffic, and points himself back toward the city and his life.

While they were still married, they only took one trip abroad together. Afterwards they wore the t-shirts they had purchased there summer after summer. Mom's was red and Dad's was blue. They both bore the same misspelled slogan: *Highschool Sweathearts*. My parents didn't go to high school. My mother had me when she was 17.

After Mom and Dad, Ilari steps into view in the living room. Dad just now notices him, looking surprised and annoyed, but he accepts the extended hand and condolences. A woman has entered the room with Ilari, but I only have a vague recollection of her. Her name is Hannele or Helena. I have trouble remembering women's names. Mom greets them both. Ilari coolly, only letting her gaze rest briefly on his shoulder, but his wife more warmly.

As Dad turns to greet the others, Mom cranes her neck toward him and asks something, whispering. I can read the questions on her lips. Dad shakes his head three times. No, he didn't tell Ilari about the funeral. No, he doesn't know who did. No, he won't ask him to leave.

I avoid my mother's gaze, and because I don't want to watch my father avoiding my own, I catch Ilari's eye myself. He has noticed me sitting in my grandfather's chair and smiles; then he remembers where we are and purses his lips, creasing his forehead sympathetically.

Ilari's wife's name is confirmed: Helena. There are wrinkles etched around her mouth, and her eyes dart around nervously as if looking for a way out. Under her eyes are the marks of dark blue makeup recently cried onto her cheeks and only hastily cleaned away.

I had forgotten Ilari's wife's name, but not what a handsome man Ilari was even in the harsh light of spring. In that my memory did not disappoint. Remembering is perhaps the wrong expression, because my perspective is different now. The pictures that I am now forming of my surroundings by weighing the possibilities and probabilities suggested by them are different from the pictures that just came to me when I was still young and innocent.

If I were to close my eyes now and remember how Ilari looked during that spring 27 years ago—when Grandfather's body was found and Ilari left—I would see before me a glossy, beautiful hero, whose eyes would be filled with an ice-blue stare restlessly scanning the environment.

I don't close my eyes, because I want to see him now. His abnormally dark, nearly black hair, now peppered with gray and the brightness of the eyes now tinged with shadow. He is less image, more human. He has become a man.

Ilari is now 53. I am 40. He is 13 years older than me. Now those years wouldn't have any significance.

I don't know what he remembers of me, what image he would see if he closed his eyes. I can't know what he sees when he looks at me now, but his relaxed manner, having smiled just then, calms my mind.

I look on him as an equal. I told him about Grandmother's funeral. I wanted to see him.

## URHO

Men had gone from house to house in the villages giving notice of the time, the place, and the equipment that was to be brought along to the extraordinary reserve maneuvers. The list covered nearly everything of note to be found in the house. They took the best of everything. Including the boys.

Knowledge of the men had traveled from mouth to mouth along the lanes and tracks, from house to house, back behind the buildings into the forests, finding every cottage and cabin faster than the deliberate feet of the messengers. Before they managed to introduce themselves, the master and lady of the house already had a name for them: the reapers. They were harvesters, and they did not leave unless they received what they wanted.

The houses gave up their sons in the prime of life, their toughest boots, their thickest greatcoats, their goatskin sleighing furs. Their whitest sheets sewn into snow suits, their fastest skis and thickest fur hats. Socks and trigger gloves. Mittens and bread. Horses and rifles.

You wouldn't have known the men stepping onto the train, either glancing frightened to either side or staring ahead glassy-eyed, as soldiers. Gone was the bravado, the machismo. They were boys. But it was time to leave.

On that morning there were goodbyes. Mothers and fathers said goodbye to their sons, sons to their sisters and younger brothers, the few men to their wives. Some their lovers, either real or the ones they would write to from there, sometime. From where no one dared say publicly, but every soldier boy had to have a sweetheart waiting back on the home front.

You said goodbye to one too. Amanda stood on the station platform watching the train disappear around the bend.

I didn't have to leave: I was already there. I hadn't been back to the home front that whole fall. I was guarding a border the significance of which had now been called into question. I

was guarding, and the insanity of the world was reaching here, all the way to these borders. Did we want to join in? Weren't there other options?

I knew you were smiling. Secretly. You were sitting with your rucksack on a hard bench, on the way to somewhere none of you knew anything about. You were impatient. The others could barely choke back their tears, and you were already digging your milk bottle and lunch out of your bag. It was just like you were on the way to sports camp.

You weren't allowed to bring your camera. You left it with my sister, Tuulikki. You made her promise to take pictures of everything important, as long as there was film. There were rumors of shortages. There were rumors of famines. You were worried about the film.

I like that smile of yours, the one you conceal. Maybe the others should have taken a lesson: if you leave cheerful, you're sure to come back cheerful. But no. The whole rest of the detachment, the whole car, and the whole train were united in the melancholy and fear of the young man's mind.



## MIKAEL

The table has been set. Rice and meat pies, cabbage pie, Vyborg pretzels, comb scones, quark pies, spoon cookies, cinnamon aces, cat's tongues, coffee, and berry liqueur. There isn't any juice for the children, because there aren't any children.

I collect both savories and sweets on my place and return to Grandfather's chair. Dad, Mom, Ilari, and his wife are still avoiding each other and don't know where or how to sit. The others notice this and, without complaining of their age, move to the chairs next to the window. The quartet performing their tense ring dance end up on the sofa and the chair belonging to the same set.

Mom has no desire to sit any closer to Dad than is required by the prevailing lack of space and for the maintenance of their unrecognizably crumbled facade.

Dad couldn't care less about Mom or where she sits, but he seems to be avoiding Ilari. He doesn't see a friend in Ilari anymore, or even Grandfather's former subordinate. They are only connected by the professional ring they wear, which Dad doesn't really have the right to anymore.

Ilari's wife, Helena—I'm trying to imprint the name on my mind—is avoiding not only my mother and father, but also her husband. Helena doesn't want to be here. She is sitting uncomfortably on the sofa, right on the edge. I don't know how the others would react if she were to slip off onto the floor.

In addition to Dad, Mom is also avoiding Ilari and his unperturbed chitchat. In order to avoid responding to Ilari's attempts at conversation, Mom tries to start up a conversation across him with his wife, who after growing impatient at guessing at which of Mom's broken snatches of conversation are questions and which are statements, finally bounces up unexpectedly, not quite knocking over the small table between us, but succeeding in launching a gold-yellow blotch

from my cognac glass onto the lace tablecloth, and makes her way toward the kitchen before the deceased's next of kin, against all propriety, tripping on legs as she goes.

My mother, her lips painted too orange, faithful to her habit, doesn't say anything, does not tut-tut Ilari's wife, who is already filling her plate with pastries from the buffet table with shaking fingers, but is casting telling, vexed glances at the cognac stain, which has marred a memory precious to her in particular.

No one takes exception to me drinking my cognac without offering any to the others, or to my muteness and indifference.

These people's laws don't apply to me.

"Mikael, would you bring me a glass of water," Mom says suddenly. At first I don't understand what she's saying, that the request was directed at me. She is addressing me for the first time in many years. She wants to play my mother.

"I can get it," Ilari answers. Mom doesn't say anything.

Ilari stands up, more confidently than his wife, looks at my cognac and raises his bushy eyebrows questioningly. "In the cupboard," I whisper.

"The wife will drive back, when she calms down," Ilari says, rewarding the information with another smile.

Everything I put into my mouth from the Arabia-stamped Asiatic Pheasant plate was made with effort and skill. Tuulikki's fussing in the kitchen has resulted in a good spread. The old folks know their stuff.

Mom receives her glass of water. She starts digging in her handbag, which is on the floor next to her. First a mobile phone appears from the bag, which she punches at a few times, enough for the others to notice what she has in her hand. The phone disappears back into the bag. Then a pill box clicks open and two white tablets appear in Mom's hand. She puts them in

her mouth. She empties her water glass and a few drops drip onto the front of her jacket. Dad stands and is forced to step over the bag as he leaves for the front toilet.

Another cognac appears next to my own, and Ilari sits down on the couch his wife has abandoned once and for all. I nod to him approvingly. He smiles again, loosening his tie and opening the top button of his shirt.

“Aili was a great person,” Ilari says.

“Thank you.”

“Do you remember when you and I met last?” Ilari asks cautiously, almost whispering. He leans toward me. I can smell him. I know the answer to his question, but I don’t know if he is afraid or hopeful that I will say it out loud.

“Wasn’t it at Urho’s funeral?” I ask back, avoiding the truth. Thick hair bristles from Ilari’s open collar, and there is gray in the ranks there too.

“Your grandfather was a great man!” Ilari says, too loud, as if his tension has released. “Urho arranged my first vacancy post for me here,” Ilari continues, a little more calmly, relaxing against the back of the sofa again. I raise my eyes from Ilari’s chest hair and meet Hertta’s gaze on the other side of the room. There is a smile on her lips. She may have been one of Grandmother’s friends, but I don’t remember seeing her more than once before, a long time ago.

Ilari falls silent, eyeing his plate, its pheasants and flowers; he lowers his plate to the table, takes a business card from the pocket of his jacket, and extends it to me. Ilari’s spiced, warm scent has the same calming effect on me as his smile. I linger as I take the business card.

“Congratulations!” I say, loudly enough, and at the same time I look at Dad, who is watching what we are doing. Mom digs in her handbag again.

“I became Helena’s father.”

“Excuse me?”

“Helena’s father’s successor.”

We both give a laugh and fall silent. Ilari has progressed well in his chosen profession. Taking a vacancy position in the city after Urho's death was a wise move. Marrying the police chief's daughter was wise too. Did his career path open up before the holy union or only after it?

"Do you still have those cassettes?" I ask him. Ilari's gaze turns back to the plate.

During the firing stage its pattern bled, turning the pheasants' sharply detailed garden into a nocturnal roost. The series is very beautiful. Looking at it you can hear the mating calls of the pheasant cocks.

"I still have the cassettes, but I don't have anything to play them on anymore," Ilari replies.

"I don't have any records either. I gave them away when I left.

"How were things going out in the wide world?" Ilari asks, thankful for the offered opportunity to change the subject.

"They were going," I answer, a little irritated at the direction the conversation has taken.

"Are you here now?"

I've met all my friends I still have left here in my home country. They all present that same question in their turn: "Are you here now?"

I'm not leaving anyplace or returning anywhere, so I'm here, here at this funeral, but I don't know anything more than that.

"If you don't have anything to play them, what are you listening to nowadays?" I say, trying to return to the discussion of the cassettes.

"We're into church music," Ilari answers.

"Hannele and you?"

"Helena and I."

Silence falls over Christendom. The wall clock chimes four times. Everyone has turned their eyes out toward the bright sunshine except Mom, who is wiping her plate, now empty, on a

napkin. She bends over toward her bag, slipping the plate into it, and then straightens her back, folds the napkin on her knee, sighs audibly, and crosses her hands in her lap.

I'm wearing an old shirt. I've only put it on once before, on the road, traveling from my confirmation to the party afterwards, on the way to this house. Mom was too tired that day to organize anything too. Between the church and the party Grandmother gave me a memento of Grandfather and a gift from herself. Inside the brown paper I found a blue shirt and inside the blue shiny paper two books, whose names were simply and succinctly *The Garden Book* and *Cooking*. "I don't need these anymore," Grandmother said. I pulled the shirt out of the crinkly paper under the summer sun. Its sleeves had been pressed sharp and the metal of the buttons shone brightly.

I changed the shirt for the one I was wearing along the side of the road. It was like a half-platoon tent on me with my head peeking out the stovepipe hole. It was hot. The crickets were chirping. My father's back was receding in the dust that had risen into the air.

A handsome shirt. I remembered its forerunners. I also remembered how I sat under the kitchen table, pretending to hide. I would watch what Grandfather did in those rare moments he was home and sober.

I had followed the careful washing of the shirt, watched from my hiding place its precision ironing, at the same time wondering why Grandmother washed and pressed all of the other clothes, but Grandfather did his blue uniform shirts himself.

Time after time the color would fade, until there was only a trace left of its blue, and a new shirt would rise gleaming from its brown paper under Grandfather's eyes, glittering with admiration. Time after time he opened the breast pocket of the shirt and slipped something into it I didn't have time to see. He fastened the button, let his fingers linger on the pocket, and then looked at me and smiled.

Ilari recognizes the shirt I have on and its buttons, but asks as if as a matter of form—perhaps to restart the conversation—whether I inherited the shirt from Urho. I answer in the affirmative. Now it fits like a shirt is supposed to fit. I've grown into it. Filled it in.

After my confirmation party, I had sat alone on the floor of my room with the shirt on that had belonged to Grandfather but was too big for me. Dad had demanded it be burned when we came home, but Mom got him calmed down. I sat on the floor of my room and inspected the *Garden Book* I had received from Grandmother. The book was old; on the cover page it mentioned Porvoo and the year 1903. Under the preface was an inscription from Grandmother: *Mikael, a garden has everything. Your grandmother, Aili.*

I put the books on the shelf with the other books, the Tarzan and Mars series. I was taking the shirt off when I felt something in its breast pocket. I felt it with my fingers through the fabric of the shirt. It was hard, but not completely inflexible. It was smooth, thin, and rectangular. It was the thing that had always flashed into the pocket. The thing I had never had time to see. In my fingers was the solution to the mystery!

I opened the button of the pocket and pulled out a card, protected by a smudged plastic sleeve. My grandfather, stapled into the upper left-hand corner, was looking away from the camera and smiling. Next to the picture were stamped the letters: STATE ALCOHOL CORPORATION. Under the bluish text was a part written with a typewriter that said “City: Lahti” and the date, 7/2 1961. Under these were my grandfather’s personal information, profession, and place of residence.

I calculated the age of the man in the picture at 42. He already looked like Grandfather then.

That chapter of our cultural and social history didn’t interest me then, so I slid the card back into the breast pocket of the shirt, took it off, and folded it into a drawer with its cuff links and the card.

The shirt and the books about the offerings of gardens and how to prepare them have traveled with me always. Everything else, both things and people, that changed along the way, aging and going out of date, I often exchanged for new and better. I have traveled light.

## MIKAEL

Tuulikki is washing dishes in the kitchen. I ask her to lock the cupboard before she leaves. She nods without saying a word.

Hertta appears next to me while I'm pouring more.

"Pour a little for me too, Mikael."

I pour her one finger's worth.

"It's too bad the funeral landed on today, Mikael."

"Funerals are always unfortunate."

"Maybe your father and mother were so shocked they didn't remember your birthday."

"Maybe. You would be Hertta, correct?"

"No need to be so formal. My late husband knew your grandfather quite well."

"Probably better than I did."

"How are you doing, Mikael?"

"Well, thank you."

"Do you mean to settle down here? Or is someone waiting for you elsewhere?"

"I haven't decided yet what I'm going to do."

"I have something that belonged to your grandfather that I'd like to give you. I assume you'll be here tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"You're a good boy, Mikael."

I take the cognac bottle along with me, walking back into the living room with it in my hand, and pour two fingers into Ilari's glass.

Mom is trying to tell Hannele something. Hannele can't understand what Mom is saying. Mom's tongue won't obey her. The tranquilizers have done their job. Even I can't understand



what she's saying, but I learned in my childhood to read her slack, drooling lips. Mom is complaining about how objects and things only have a monetary price anymore, the higher the better, and how the memories connected to them aren't given any value. Everything just gets thrown away the moment something new appears on the market. At the word "market," drops of spit fly from her mouth like startled starlings. I feel sorry for Ilari's wife.

I smile at Ilari in farewell, walk past Mom, and as I pass bend down to pick up her handbag and take it with me. No one pays any attention to me. Mom has adored her garish scarf with Grandmother's brooch, the amethyst heart of which has split. When the departed was still alive, that heart had been whole too. I open the door to the office. I remove three plates from Mother's handbag and place them carefully on the desk. The bag I hang on the handle of the front door and take the keys to the house from the key cabinet. I'm surprised because they are still there, not with Mom. I move my things into the office and lock the door behind me.

The room and its smells are still the same. On the left is the big cabinet where there were papers, office supplies, and file folders. Then is a window, and in front of it the desk. In the opposite corner of the room stands an empty coat rack, stiff and bare like the trunk of a dead tree. Along almost the entire length of the back wall is a black leather sofa, and on it a red and green checked wool blanket. Over the sofa, on the wall, is a map, ripped and yellowed at the edges, with Finland's old borders. On the right wall is a low cabinet with glass doors full of leather-bound books with faded black and peeling gold on the spines.

The desk is made of pine, the surface bleached with time. On the table is a desk pad and next to the desk pad a tall pile of watermarked, pure white paper. I know without looking that the watermark is a heraldic Finnish lion. Every once in a while I would get a page to admire and hold it up to the sky.

In front of the desk pad is a week-by-week calendar lying open. Closer to the window rests a heavy, black telephone with a rotary dial. Next to the window, against the wall, is a small table for the typewriter. The machine is a green-gray Olivetti, model Studio 44. Grandfather

showed me how by pressing the black keys rapidly I could chase the type bar out of its hiding place, making it contact the clean paper like a viper striking and then pull back out of sight, waiting for the finger that would force it into motion again. A letter appeared on the white paper, followed by another, and finally before me were all of the words and secrets of the world. All the poison of all the snakes.

The sheriff's typewriter had been able to decide, if not quite about life and death, about so many other, serious things.

One clean, bright white piece of paper is ready in the typewriter.

## MIKAEL

I put the bottle and glass down on the desk pad, pull the chair under me. Its wheels are well-oiled and silent. I take Grandfather's liquor card and Ilari's business card out of my breast pocket and set them on the desk before me. I fill my glass and take a swig. As the warmth of the cognac is spreading through my body, I interlock my fingers behind my head and lean back in the chair. The chair gives nicely. The food and cognac have done their job. I feel good, peaceful. I'm here.

I see movement outside. Mother is staggering toward the garden swing with her bag in hand and Ilari behind her. There is a fat cigar in Ilari's hand. Ilari sets his own jacket on the cool surface of the swing, and Mother sits down on it. They smoke in silence, just looking ahead. Finally Mother stands up, swaying, and sets off back toward the door. There is a darkening stain on the front of her bell-shaped skirt, and, judging from the look on Ilari's face, also on the back. Ilari stands up, lifts his jacket from the seat, and leaves it to dry on the backrest of the swing.

The noises in the living room and kitchen die down, and the key to the dish cupboard slides under the door with a clink. The old folks leave first. Then Tuulikki with my aunt. Tuulikki turns to look toward the office window and me, but my aunt hustles her along. Then Ilari and his wife get into their car and drive off. My father leaves last, having to carry my mother to the back seat of his car. As the car turns onto the road, my mother's figure has already disappeared from the back window. The dust that had risen into the air subsides, settling back down to the ground and onto the windshield of Mother's car, which she was forced to leave behind. No one came to interfere with my decision to stay in the house overnight. Another time and another law have entered the house.

The desk calendar is open to the first week of August, 1970. The brief notations end on Tuesday, August 4th. *Liquor destroyed. Write report.* I stand up. The darkening room is as it was, but it has

changed. The walls have grown closer to each other; the ceiling has moved toward the floor. The heavens toward the earth. It has shrunken like the sandy beach of my childhood.

Next to the filing cabinet is a black-and-white, unframed photograph impaled on the wall with a thumbtack. It has been through the wars, tattered and sprayed with dark spots. On the dirt field in the picture stand two lines of men, and behind the men the edge of a forest. The front row is crouched down a little, the back row standing. The men are young, and their military caps are all askew. Someone is smoking a cigarette in the back row.

I pick up the liquor card and look at the man on the front. I lift my eyes back to the wall, to the mirror between the photograph and the filing cabinet. I'm beginning to look like him. In the picture he is two years older than me but already looks like an old man. We all just have to survive.

The liquor card was a necessity, but in its necessity it was both good and evil. It was a ticket for a train that led to momentary freedom. The train picked up speed slowly, but then after reaching full velocity it became a ten-ton block of hot and cold iron that didn't swerve or stop for anything.

The liquor card was a key that opened a cell door, but usually within the same 24-hour period it was also a one-way street back to prison, smoldering with the cold everyday of a marriage grown rutted.

Time was cyclical. For Grandfather its circuit was intoxication, hangover, lucidity, intoxication, hangover, lucidity. Time after time. I knew that cleansing cycle myself.

With the card the state monitored and limited personal pleasures. Every visit to the State Alcohol Corporation store was stamped on the card.

There were also terms on the card about the conditions under which the certificate could be taken away. The certificate could be taken away *from one who is intoxicated, from an individual who attempts to use another's certificate, from an individual who procures alcoholic beverages for another in exchange*

*for money or compensation, or without compensation for those who have been banned from purchasing or for those to whom alcoholic beverages may not be sold under the law, because of changes or deletions made to entries on the certificate, and in other situations in which there is presumed abuse of alcoholic beverages or their illegal handling.*

The card did not say “liquor card”, but rather more properly *Sales Certificate*. It also had instructions for use of the certificate. *Each purchaser will be sold alcoholic beverages at the sales point indicated for him in localities with multiple alcoholic beverage sales points.*

The liquor card was personal and an important tool in everyday life. The ones who had it, the ones who needed it, always carried it with them. Travel connections were slow, distances were long, but the thirst was the same as now.

*The same purchaser will be sold a maximum of 2 liters distilled alcohol, 5 liters wine, and 8 liters malt drinks at a time. The purchaser is authorized to hold these amounts in his possession without police permission.*

The liquor card was always with Grandfather, in the breast pocket of his uniform shirt.

Near his heart. The thirst of his heart.

The card protector is smeared. I want to look Grandfather straight in the eye. I can't ask him anything, I can't answer his questions, but I want to look at him. I want him to look at me. I take the card out of its protector.

Out of the liquor card, its protector, falls another, loose picture. The picture enters the world conscious of its importance and falls in the center of the desk pad.

Grandfather, from the liquor card, avoids my gaze. I go to the tattered group picture on the wall and compare. I look at the men in the larger picture, my grandfather in front and the dark-haired man in the back row.

They are smiling.

I pour more cognac. My fingers search for the worn spots and dents in the desk. The surface is warm and approving. I try the first drawer. It isn't locked and opens smoothly. Pens, paper clips, a coin or two, and a smooth rock from the beach.

In the second drawer is a phone book. In the third are Grandfather's medals and awards, pell-mell on the bottom of the drawer. The fourth, bottom drawer is the largest and opens squealing. Inside it is a pile of logbooks. I take them out and set them on the desk. There are four of them.

The top one says War Diary and has the initials U. H. The second, third and fourth are the same. The time period of the first war diary covers the Winter War. The other three are the Continuation War years. I open one of these in the middle. From the upper-left corner of the left page to the bottom right corner of the right page continues an almost unbroken string of diary entries in small print.

## URHO

*War Diary / U. H. 3rd Rifle Company*

10.18.1939

The political situation in Europe has come to a head.

We had the idea that due to our country's remote location we would be able to stay outside the great powers' conflict, especially since we have had a non-aggression treaty with our neighboring great power that is in force until 1945.

However, in early October the Soviet land demands became such that we were forced to call much of our reserves to arms in order to protect our sovereignty.

The governing bodies of Finland decided unanimously that our country would not capitulate to such an ignominious, arbitrary exercise of power without armed resistance.

10.19.1939

Both platoons had tents to sleep in. On the first night the stoves smoking was a problem, and some of the boys "practiced" using gas masks, with poor success.

10.20.1939

Complete cleaning of stoves.

10.29.1939

The company received our first packaged addressed "To a Soldier", which went to Corporal Keijo Mikkola from Platoon I when we drew lots.

11.3.1939

We received detailed orders about private phone calls, leaves, and assignments.

11.6.1939

The company received a phone dispatch dealing with daily allowances for reservists.

11.7.1939

The company received socks and mittens from the Muurla women's auxiliary, which were divided evenly between the platoons.

11.13.1939

The delivery platoon received a Finnish tent to replace the Swedish tent they had been using since before the war.

11.15.1939

In Platoon I there was a lecture from 0730-0830 on the topic "Red Army tanks and tank suppression." Twenty men from the platoon went for vaccinations. At 1900 hours Platoon I held a quiz competition between the tents. Tent 1 won overwhelmingly. The best man this time was Private Vieno Loivarinta.

11.16.1939

As daily allowances were being paid we collected money for the aid of reservists' families. The money collected tallied up to about 1200 marks. The purpose of the collection was especially to help families that were experiencing difficulties.



11.18.1939

We ended the day with an evening gathering arranged by the company at the Leipäsuo community hall. The event was hampered by crowding.

11.19.1939

Platoon I participated in church services. We used our free time in singing practice. We especially practiced F. E. Sillanpää's "Marching Song". The other platoons enjoyed complete "freedom".

11.21.1939

Duty like yesterday. Platoon I received a package from the Koski TI women's auxiliary containing 7 pairs of socks and 4 pairs of gloves. The package was brought by Corporal Martti Nikkola, who was returning from leave. The clothing was divided up to those most in need.

11.24.1939

Corporal H. Lehtinen donated a radio to Platoon I, which was immediately fixed up for listening to news and music.

11.27.1939

Tension in the atmosphere due to the Mainila incident the Soviet Union cooked up. The pace of work has picked up. Second Lieutenant Holmström: "What will come of this?"

11.28.1939

Bad news from the radio. The Soviet government responded to our government's note of protest very sharply: "The non-aggression treaty is canceled."

11.29.1939

At 22:30 a notice arrived from the battalion that Moscow has cut diplomatic ties with Finland.

11.30.1939

At 08:30 Second Lieutenant Holmström and his battle messenger left for Leipäsuo and noticed 7 bombers in the direction of the railroad flying toward Vyborg. They thought they were Finnish. After arriving at Leipäsuo, they learned that the planes had been Russian.

At 10:00 an air raid warning was issued at Leipäsuo. A notice came from the regiment that the village of Kanneljärvi was being bombed.

At 12:00 a telephone notice arrived that all leaves were being canceled. The regimental commander and his staff, along with the battalion commanders and their staffs moved into the forest during the course of the day. A notice came from the battalion that our national borders had been blatantly violated at many places.

At 16:20 came an order that the battalions were to move into fighting formations. On the radio they said that the president of the republic has declared a state of war and turned over supreme command to Field Marshal Mannerheim. Usually during the day we could see Russian bomber squadrons flying over the platoons' exercise grounds. The boys tried to drop them with rifle fire, but without success. The war has begun.

## URHO

### Booty from encirclement operation:

22	<i>Horses</i>
23	<i>Horses, dead</i>
11	<i>Saddles</i>
200	<i>Horseshoes</i>
50	<i>Bits</i>
8 pairs	<i>Socks, clean</i>
143	<i>Prisoners</i>
10 hectoliters	<i>Rye</i>
15 hectoliters	<i>Oats</i>
150 hectoliters	<i>Potatoes</i>
150	<i>Hides</i>
1	<i>Decimal balance</i>

The cold tightened its grip. You could hear it in the trunks of the trees, in their branches, and in the breath of anyone walking in the night. The sky was cloudless and the stars in it clear holes in the black surface.

I relieved myself in the shelter of a large fir tree. I imagined my urine freezing into yellow crystals amidst the white ones of the snow. I hadn't slept well for weeks, but my mind was clear.

I got back in the car. The narrow, dimmed strips of light from the car's headlights divided the world into three parts: two dark, upper and lower, and the world where we saw a little light. Hell and heaven were lost in the dark. Only reality remained, frozen and narrowed into a thin band, and we didn't have anything else.

We drove through the village. Its doors were open, and its hallways full of snow. The windows were broken, and they followed our progress, empty, blind.

Something flashed in the darkness. A cat stood for a moment in the narrow light of the headlamps and then flitted toward the shadows of a house. All that was left of the house was the chimney; everything else was gone, but the lost animal wanted to go home. No cows were visible. Late in the fall they had still wandered between the front lines. Now they had disappeared. They had perished, abandoning their freedom.

Our vehicle passed a horse fallen by the side of the road. Its corpse was twisted into an unnatural position around a tree trunk. It had no head. 24 horses, dead; 204 horse shoes; 12 saddles

The moon rose cold over the landscape like a frosty, silver platter. It looked just as frigidly on the enemy from the steppes of the south as the men protecting their own land.

I long for your warm gaze. The touch of your skin, your smell, and the beating of your heart.

The shadows of the trees fell from high above, and their menacing made us hesitate. I ordered the driver to stop, to turn off the motor and the lights.

The vehicle cooled, making clicking sounds. We were silent. The world had stopped. Nothing smelled like anything.

Something appeared in the stagnant darkness, making us uneasy. A black figure broke away from the border of the forest; it was visible in the white snow of the road for a moment and then disappeared into the darkness rising up on the left. *Were there still enemy alive and free?* I thought.

“Stay here,” I ordered my driver. “I’m going after him myself. Have your weapon ready. If more of them come while I’m away, turn the car around and get out of here. If you have time.”

I walked along the road, the snow crunching too loudly. No more figures appeared; no shot was fired. I continued on. I stepped into the deep snow. Finally I stood at the edge of the forest. I stepped into its darkness. I sniffed the cold, heard its cracking, felt its cold, but saw nothing.

I could have laid down and let the cold take me away. In my last conscious moments I would have felt the warmth of summer again. I thought that if I would be found someday, you would be able to imagine a smile on my fleshless face.

“*Tibo, tibo,*” a voice whispered behind me in Russian.

The barrel of a rifle pressed into my back, colder than the surrounding winter. I felt it through my overcoat.

The weapon pushed me forward—I knew where to. If I would have yelled for my driver's help just then, I would have gotten the others after him. Even if there weren't any others and even if the driver had happened to go in the right direction in the darkness of the forest, he would just have found me dead, shot in the back. I didn't want that.

My foot hit the curved root of a tree. I opened my eyes. The bare tree root was like a swollen blood vessel, throbbing with life. I grabbed on to the small possibility it offered. *Trip, damn you, trip, because I want to see my friend at least one more time*, I said in my mind.

I raised one foot over it and then the other. I didn't lose my rhythm, just walking forward in the indeterminate darkness.

A root rising from the fatherland.

My enemy did not notice the root, and the toe of his boot stopped in it like a trap. For a fleeting moment the muzzle of the gun pushed more sharply into my back, and I waited for it to go off. It didn't happen. Its coldness swerved away from me. I was able to turn in the darkness, to throw myself at my enemy, to pull my knife from my belt and nail the man with my weight into the snow. My knife was at the throbbing vein of his neck, a hand span away from his warm, agitated breath. I hesitated.

*Light.*

I could smell summer. I could smell you.

I was on top of you. I was breathing your breath. Slowly, taking care that the blade would not leave a cut, I pulled the knife away from your throat. I lay on you, heavy, bereft of strength. I still couldn't see you, and yet I saw. Before me was the face I had longed for. I pressed my smooth cheek against your bearded one. Your cheek was hot, your forehead the same.

"I made it out of there," you said, leaning against me as we waded in the deep snow and finally arrived back at the road and the car.

My driver and I helped you into the warmth of the vehicle. I handed the driver your Russian rifle and provisions bag, which was full of papers written in Russian. I sat in the back next to you. You fell asleep in my lap in the darkness of the back seat. The sun began to rise in the south-eastern sky. The driver switched off the dimmed headlights, and we slowly set off.