

THE OVEN: A NOVEL

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I remember how we went to see the oven that wasn't there after all, with Lassi and Hannu.

At one end of the red building I had a living room, seven by eight, height a little over three, otherwise done enough, but with no floor and no oven. I thought I would do the oven first and then the floor, but what kind of oven?

I had looked at a book that had pictures of villages; there was this village called Pirttimaa with a drawing of the layout of a farmhouse living room, and in it the kind of oven I wanted, a baking oven, with an open fireplace in the corner.

I got Hannu and Lassi to go with me, since Lassi's mother was from that village originally.

Lassi's house was just down the street from mine on the other side. Even before Lassi existed I would take off from the corner of our house down the gently sloping hill, the fragrance of the green spruce needles just above my head. The sunshine warmed them up, and they moved when the wind blew. When I stopped by, Lassi's mother wasn't angry; if she was baking bread I would get a sandwich.

And then there was the old lady at Koivula, a little farther behind the school forest; she agreed to sell me eggs back then during the war. The old lady would say: oh alright, I'll get some for you.

Back then, when I was six or seven and was with dad in the forest where the logs had been felled and cleaned and we came home into the living room and mom was sitting in her chair and I went toward her and she pushed me away with her hands and wouldn't let me near. It just occurred to me that when I had just come from the snowy forest, I was totally cold and frozen.

We drove across the bridge over the Iijoki River canal.

I remember when I was here at school how I longed for home. I might even now if the same place still existed, perhaps more so.

I drove—the asphalt ahead moved, gray and streaked, curving and then straightening.

“I know this place,” Hannu began to explain.

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, when I was here with Kauko at school, and when there was a time we could get away, a day off or on Saturday when school was out, we went by bus to Pirttimaa.”

Right, I thought, the boys were here at school, in the same school as I was a few years before.

“Right,” I said, “you were at school here then.” All of us cousins, I thought, and the brothers Kauko and Lassi, their mother, the girl from Pirttimaa.

“We always went and worked, stacking grain, driving horses, and then in the evening we went to sauna and stayed the night. It was sure different from being in the flophouse in Hamina.”

“Yeah,” said Hannu.

Yes indeed, I thought. I was out stacking grain and all that, but I had an apartment in mother’s home, where once upon a time mother’s mother, Aurora Sofia was for a while and gave birth to mother and died. Mother’s father went to America and mom was left to be cared for by her aunts.

The bright autumn landscapes when the sun shone and the sky was blue, the pines green and the river bank and the big river, but still longing for home. I went to school by bike, about three kilometers away, down the pine bank, over the river on the railroad bridge and along the highway toward Hamina.

“Tell me when we turn, Lassi.”

“Soon.”

“There, there’s five.”

“Are any of them left alive? Well, Pentti is.”

“Pentti is,” Lassi said.

“And Paavali’s wife lives in the old house,” I said.

“Laina,” Lassi said.

I drove along the gravel road, with pine trees on one side and green fields on the other, and farther off what was surely once a river bed.

We had already crossed over the power station channel.

“Leevi had that IFA,” I said. “Have you heard what the IFA driver said when he took it into the shop?”

“Well?”

“I’ll just leave this here.”

“I was mostly hanging around with Leevi,” I said.

“I tried Leevi’s IFA once in the fifties and thought wow if only I could have one of these. And then we bought the 2CV.”

“Do you know, by the way, what that means, 2CV?”

“Well?”

“Well?”

“Two horses. Not two horse power—two real horses.”

“Latvians?” Lassi said, “the two Isaaks.”

“Do you remember Isaak?”

“I do. But now we’re here.”

We stood in the yard. How is this going to go? I thought. I looked at the long building in the center of the yard. Two verandas; the six-paned windows in the living room of the center building are small, smaller than mine, old work. Is the oven visible? On the shore side a sideways building, Lassi’s mother’s home. That’s where Laina lives. We walk in that direction and go inside.

“Good day.”

“There those boys are,” Laina says, coming to greet us. “This is our Anni, here visiting.”

“Ah, hello, hello.”

“How lovely of you to come,” Laina says. “What is it that brings you here?”

I begin to explain.

“I’m supposed to be building a stove, a baking oven, and I saw a picture of that center building in a book, that it has a big oven, with a fireplace in the corner, so I came to look it over.

“Oh my, it isn’t there anymore.

“How’s that?”

“When they dammed that river it got cracks in it and Pohjola Power had a mason build a new one.”

“I would guess so. Could we get inside there to see how things look?”

“You’ll have to ask Arppa,” Laina said.

She called and got permission to go inside. We drank coffee with buns and pieces of cake.

“You’ve visited here before, Pietari,” Laina said to me.

“Me?”

“You. You got pieces of that Hourrootti glass.”

This, what happens now, feels somehow temporary, not like anything, I think, then sometimes recall—no, remember and hope—that times were still like before.

“Indeed. Well, let it be,” I say.

It’s like a package being torn open: gradually I remember—in the attic of that house I got pieces of old window glass; it was green and wavy. I made four panes just over ten centimeters square for the small four-paned window of the outhouse toilet. I recalled they were the same as the dung hatch in the stable, the same kind of hole in the back wall of the building and at the same height, but at home the dung hatch opened under the outhouse. And the outhouse isn’t there anymore either, I thought, but I had the same kind on one end of the sauna near the big bird-cherry. And when the bird-cherry blossoms...

“Thank you, that was quite enough.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

We went out into the yard and through the old veranda into the entryway and then into the old living room. In the corner was an oven, from my perspective utterly useless, even though it was a perfectly good baking oven. The old oven back then, large and with a fireplace in the corner, was whole and the sides were warm and there was life here, as human life is, as if a flower were to blossom and then dry and wither, and there is no way to get a hold of it again.

Grass dries and flowers wilt, but dried grass in the fall or even more in the spring, brownish and soft, is beautiful. Just like an ancient building like this, when it’s fixed up, even if no one lives there anymore, dried grass in the light of the spring sun. Now here inside there is a melancholy feeling, small windows, smaller still than I have, uninhabited, melancholy.

I gazed at the windows, the window bench a little different than mine, and the window frames; have they ever been changed a little? The panes are curvy, but not from the Huorootti factory. I have old glass. I recall how in the sixties, when Toivo was living in Eira on Kapteeninkatu, and they changed out the windows in the building, I carried the old ones away in my trailer, the ones with the uneven squares that made it through the bombing. Unski put the squares in the four-pane windows in the shed, in oak frames. Unski made frames for me for the sea shore as well, for the white building, and cut the panes from the glass from Kapteeninkatu. But now for the red building on the seashore, where I need to build the baking oven with the fireplace in the corner, I’ve made new frames patterned after the old, and the panes are traditional, old glass. I remember how I managed to buy some salvage window

frames somewhere in Porvoo that had three of the frames old glass, so greenish yellow that the light rippled through them. I had bought a good glass cutter with a spring on the wheel and when you cut with it oil flowed out of a reservoir. I cut the old uneven panes with it and didn't break a single one and puttied them in place in the frames. But then some board fell on one and it broke.

"Hannu thinks," I said, "that old glass can't be cut."

"Pertti said so, and he's installed windows," Hannu said.

"It is possible to cut it if you know how and have a good cutter."

All of the panes broke, I remember, when the German blew up the telephone pole in the fall of '44.

Those windows had the old curvy glass.

"Diamond," Lassi says.

"No," I say. "When I went to buy a glass cutter from this old master, and I said that I wanted diamond, he said that there isn't a single master in all of Helsinki who still cuts with diamond. He sold me the oil cutter. It cost about three hundred, but it's good. Pekka has one like that, but he never lends it to anyone—he just loans out his regular one."

I look at the windows of the center room. If only those were fixed up, and the whole building. The ceiling has been lowered; they've put planks across under the beams—off with those so that the beams are visible. I walked around, into the kitchen, the bedrooms and the entryway; I inspected the attic stairs. Would I make the stairs from the entryway to the attic? I thought, a little like those: very narrow, and steep—they take up space too.

"I'm sure it's OK if we climb up," I say and climb up.

I begin to sense the interesting smell of the attic and the dimness of the attic comes into view, the roof joists, the lathwork through which the black points of the shake nails protrude, the thick timbers at the dividing walls, the inclined chimney masonry. What might I find here if I started exploring?

I back down into the entryway. We go out into the yard and back over to Laina's side.

"There's still coffee; shall I pour you some?"

"No thank you."

"Even one cup?"

"A shame that Pohjola Power demolished the oven."

"But now that I think, I remember that there's one just like it in the Högman farmhouse," Laina says.

“Is there?” I say and see in my mind the old baking oven with the fireplace in the corner. “Can we get in to see it?”

“There are two brothers; the house is locked. But I’ll call.” Laina calls and gets a man on the phone and explains the situation; I can hear talking.

“Well, call back then,” she says and puts the handset back in place.

Laina explains that the man is leaving on vacation somewhere for a couple of weeks.

“Well there you have it,” I say, “it would be right now that he had to leave for somewhere. But things has been put in motion. Thank you.”

We thank her and slowly exit to the veranda and outside and toward the car and I see the smoke sauna, the granaries, the timbered cow sheds, the drying barn, the fields and the pine woods.