HEARTBORDER

”Side by side we marched down Mannerheimintie, turning onto Kaivokatu. There were five of us, five women, but even then I suspected that at least one would break away from the fold.

We knew that we were drawing attention. Even if we had tried to fit in, we would have been noticed: we strode broadly, side by side, with such ruthless determination that passers-by stared at us in bewilderment.

That day we walked with extra steel in our spines. We were no longer the “Sachse gang”, a label I abhorred: I wanted the name of no person, particularly my own, for a cause as important as this one. That day, one of us came up with the word *Heartborder*. It became our banner.”

(1940 and 2011)

1

*Only a few days on furlough, and already I am sorry I came. The gloom etched into the wallpapers of the living room, the muted hiss of father’s carpet slippers, the monotonous tick of the grandfather clock; life in this house has become surreal, only half a life. And as for me, I feel uneasy, and at the same time curiously listless. A cruel wind from the sea howls in the eaves. That sound brings back the endless three days we spent huddling in a windy swamp, surrounded, while the frost turned the blood of the wounded men into black goo.*

*By the time we had our first cup of coffee, the restlessness had grown unbearable, and a timidly spoken ”Otto, how did you make it through those last months?” jolted me to my feet. Without my sister there to stop me, I started to pace in an anxious circle. I trammelled my parents inside the circle of my steps, listening to the sound of my words: they rang out like shots in the wilderness – and it felt good. Like a relief.*

*What did they think would happen, when they agreed to come here? That their old life would travel along as a stowaway inside the living room furniture, the bolts of cloth and the dressing tables, that it would burst out as fields of golden wheat over the new yard? That all those familiar details from the photo albums would slide into place as if they had always been there? I suppose that was what they longed for, waking up in these bleak rooms that smelled nothing like home. It is hard to watch people who have submitted to their fate, people who only want to adapt, to chase rebellion and every option out of their minds.*

*I opened the medicine cupboard, and gulped down some spirits brought home from the pharmacy. Then I brashly announced that I held this place in as high regard as the gash we zit-faced vocational school boys from the Isthmus used to buy at Vyborg market, humping away in a moonshine stupor just so we could call ourselves men. Father and mother bashfully pretended they had not heard me, staring into the distance almost by mutual agreement: past the window, past this last year, past the border. I stated that this limp-wristed attempt to go back to the past felt like cheap theatre. And as their wary silence stretched out, I smashed my fist into the doorframe, carved in the odd Ostrobothnian style. I made it clear that I would rather crawl through the forests, living and eating like a badger, catching scents and going from hideout to hideout, than agree to play the part of a happy soldier in a tattered Fatherland. I would not forget the trout streams, the sweat of the horses, the first pull from a contraband bottle, the glow of the lamps over the dance floors; not the beam of the motorcycle’s headlights cutting through the village roads in autumn, nor the scent of overripe strawberries crushed under her bare back, the lust, that girl, those women under me, the moon that lit the trail in front of me and the fox that leapt over my skiis, its fangs bloodied and its leg caught in the jaws of the trap. Because I could tell you exactly what was going on there right now, and how they had taken care of places: the things they had done, and more importantly, had not done. I could describe this all in detail. Would you still stare out of the window and past the border with those mournful, unseeing eyes?*

*It was something like that, the things I shouted at them, though not of course using these words that I have afterwards cobbled together and that now drift into my mind, but far, far coarser language. I slammed the door and threw myself into bed, longing for a woman for a brief moment. For some reason, that is the first thing that always comes to me when anger grips my mind.*

*I stared at the roof, painted yellow and brown, lit a cigarette, and assembled my thoughts into simple truths:*

*life exists where it can be extinguished by a wire stretched between the pines,*

*where the eye staring through the gun sights bursts and drips into the moss,*

*where you stare at your own veins, watch them open and bubble with black blood every time you try to squeeze the ruptured, yawning ends together.*

*I cannot imagine life existing anywhere except where men gulp down every lungful of burning hot oxygen they can, like it was a guarantee of something to come. Of that which has been lost.*

Otto’s breathing is so heavy I can barely hear my own. I stand at the entrance to the living room, unable to tear my gaze away from my sleeping son. I watch the way the breast of his sweater moves, the rhythmic twitch. The muscle must be strong and tough. The spring sun flows in through the window, making the room almost too hot. Cigarette ash lies scattered over the crocheted cloth. Should get it cleaned before mother sees and gets upset.

Last November, when chaos engulfed the world during the blackest month of the year, feels like a strange dream. Back then I thought: we have failed to produce an heir, someone to continue the line. Otto will never experience the span of a normal human life. Already then I suspected that that boy, whose stout shoulders I saw vanish into the falling snow from the porch of the shop, would be lost forever. But why was he suddenly letting such radical ideas out of his mouth? Such passion could not have stemmed even from his membership in the Civil Guards. Otto only went there to exercise, rather than listen to fiery speeches – after all, that young buck could never concentrate on anything. He would always run away from the training camps with the other hotheads, going to the dance houses, to sandpits for scuffles or to the stills where they brewed contraband spirits. The boy had never paid much heed to patriotic lectures, preferring to go to the pictures and to booze in Vyborg, chasing after maids, fixing his motorbike and dreaming of a car. I only managed to get him to keep a job after I took out a loan and bought us a used Ford, to transport goods from Kanneljärvi to Vyborg, and sometimes to Helsinki. “Sachse Clothiers” was for many a guarantee of quality. The driver of that car never needed to be ashamed of his load. Quality is in my fingers, and I can smell and recognise a good fabric. When I stitched dresses for fine gents from precious fabrics, they knew that it would last from father to son. And now the tattered suits of dead men are being sown into skirts for their daughters.

– I’m taking the night train back to Lappeenranta.

The boy has developed the instincts of an animal: even deep asleep, he can sense my stare. Otto keeps his head turned away, throwing me a sideward glance from his cruel, bright, slitted eyes.

– Aino is at the pharmacy until evening. You should meet your sister.

The boy remains silent, shoving his fist into his pocket. Probably digging for cigarettes. His hair is tousled from sleep, and there is a softness about him. It gives me the courage for further questions.

– I can’t stop thinking about what you said. About seeing what it’s like there these days.

The first match breaks, dropping onto the striped rug. I start to pick it up, but the boy waves me away.

– Been there, seen enough.

Otto’s cheeks hollow out as he draws in the smoke, green eyes hard with defiance.

– Every place full of human shit and other filth. Windows broken, outhouses burned, a busted tank behind the elementary school.

The things I have tried to suppress, to forget so they cannot be completely broken, burst out onto the surface of my mind with such force that I can barely breathe. When peace came in March, the boy stayed on in the army, rather than coming to help us. A few short letters and distracted phone calls, and that was it. He is stationed at some barracks in Lappeenranta, apparently spending his furloughs living it up in Helsinki. And only now, with the birch starting to bear buds, does he have time to come see us.

– Don’t you have any other plans besides the army? You should start settling down. We could use your help

Otto turns, sitting up, and draws in a long, greedy lungful of smoke, puffing out a grey cloud in front of me.

– Is that what you lot think, over here? That there won’t be another war?

I am unable to find any words for the possibility he throws at me.

– Cook dinner early so I can catch the five o’clock train.

I nod like a footman to my own son. Feeling stumped, I flee to the bedroom. I stare with sightless eyes at the photograph of our home at Kanneljärvi, set on top of the dresser. A huge ash tree spreads its boughs over the yard. The tree had died, Otto said. It had sprawled there in the snow like a slain guardsman. It was not the war that had killed the ash in the yard, but the merciless frost. Or perhaps it was the bleakness, the grief of being abandoned? Trees have souls, a wisdom drawn from the depths of the earth and the reaches of the sky, a wisdom that makes human beings instinctively respect them. Or at least that ash tree did. It was after all a great tree planted by my father, drawing in every visitor to the house.

I listen to the clink of dishes from the kitchen, and my wife’s careful, quiet words, which draw curt answers from Otto. I used to be a man too, but now I am just a shade stitched to the light. Of my wife, only thin gauze remains. But Otto is a thing of hardness and defiance. It seems after all that it is not war that breaks people, but being home, far from the front. Here we have time to ruin ourselves with too much thinking. Here we presume to imagine, over and over again, the horrors endured by our sons.

The train will soon leave, bearing away an icy-eyed soldier. Bearing away the skinny little son of Sachse the clothier, with his fishing rod clutched in his hand, the summer breeze of Lake Suulajärvi stroking his bare shoulders. I wish I could see into his heart, so I would know what comes from inside, and what has been copied from others. I am not one to ask questions or to pry. My anxiety could only be cured by strong dark cognac.

2

Even an ordinary children’s disease can twist a life out of joint. In January 2005 I caught chickenpox, and was sent away from school on quarantine. It was unbearable; I was after all a 17 year old in high school, and everyone who has caught chickenpox only in their late teens knows how much longer it takes to recover. Without those three weeks of agony, I probably would never have dragged myself up the stairs to the unheated attic, angrily yanking away the old rug draped over the cardboard boxes, and with a pair of pliers hung on the wall of the attic, snapped the packaging cord wrapped around the boxes.

When grandmother was put in the old people’s home, and her own home was mercilessly scattered among relatives, flea markets and auction houses, the “manuals of Civil Guard tosh” and “butchers’ chronicles” that dad so deeply loathed ended up, for some reason, at our house. Mom stopped dad from destroying Aino Sachse’s library of memories, which was what grandmother called the oak shelf of neatly arranged novels, historical works and documents. At a quick glance, they all seemed to have something to do with the Second World War. Dad, on the other hand, had forbidden us from reading all this “right wing bullshit”. That was in fact the only thing that was forbidden to us. Dad wanted to be the most bohemian of bohemians, the most intellectual of left wing intellectuals. The fruits of dad’s marriages had ripened in the shadow of this ambition: four wives turned into nervous wrecks, and six more or less odd children, children who were left to lead anarchistically free and wild lives, so long as they did not breathe the wrong air. The precious books of my grandmother Aino Sachse, a member of the Lotta Svärd, were squirreled away up in the attic. And I, Ronja Aaltonen, the evening star of the family, the youngest spawn of that virile, almost seventy year old grey-haired left wing radical, was the first to grasp the dusty hand-grenade hidden up in the attic.

It was not until that January day that I got to read the name of my great uncle Otto Sachse printed in black and white on the pages of a book. Underlined with lilac ink, it jumped out at me from the pages of history books, war diaries and historical novels. I who had never gotten worked up about anything, I who had never had a hobby, never mind a passion for a cause or revolutionary movement (looking back, the reason for my chronic apathy was probably dad’s relentless demagoguery, endlessly politicising every little thing to the point of absurdity), suddenly burned with a fervour that I had never before experienced. Pustules were allowed to burst unheeded, and I barely noticed the itching or the fever. That freezing attic did not feel like a bleak hideout, but rather a secret garden that I had accidentally uncovered. My shock-laced enthusiasm only grew when I realised that dad had cheated me of a blood relative whose courage, boldness and heroism could have swept anyone away (especially dad himself: he had after all never achieved anything in life except for petty politics, spawning children and setting off family crises).

My grandmother, a self-sufficient apothecary, never married. She did, however, give birth to a son by way of a casually employed mason called Aaltonen, whom dad always proudly mentioned when anyone asked about his family background. Dad never boasted of his mother. He was probably ashamed of how meticulously she had managed her finances, of her bourgeois life and her “ultrapatriotic” principles. Dad drew his passion and his political credibility from the imagined charisma of Aaltonen, whom he had never known.

A few years later, the spring when I was to graduate from high school, I changed my surname from Aaltonen to Sachse. I still thank that stubborn bout of chicken pox for making me into Ronja Sachse.

3

*Scattered raindrops patter onto the plastic map cover. We are taking shelter from the rain in a partly collapsed barn about a hundred yards from the demarcation line. Weasel and Sinkkonen are sleeping, while I stay awake and wonder what is to come. We have only now gained some idea of what lies in store for us. Maybe our neighbours have reinforced their chains of patrols after the embarrassment of our week-long surprise trip over the border. On that trip, me and Weasel managed to uncover information on new side roads, repaired railway lines and fresh supply areas. We also did a quick tour of our lost homes.*

*Sinkkonen has a bad cough. My instincts are warning me: the “little cold”, in his own words, may get worse. No one wants a man with a cough on the same patrol, where everyone has to move silently. The lucky ones who even make it back alive from these trips are always sick in one way or another, if not maimed for life.*

*With the dark grey rain clouds sprinkling drops through the sparse ceiling, I move to a more sheltered spot, and stop for a moment to stare at Weasel’s face, barely able to grow a beard. He still looks like a little boy, even though we, who grew up next door to each other, are almost the same age. Weasel has not uttered a single complaint, even though I have put my old neighbour through hell, just like everyone else: we have started every morning with a ten kilometre run, bearing bags loaded with rocks. Weasel, a small man, has even swum over the lake many times in his clothes and gear, performing as well as anybody. A few of my weaker recruits have collapsed from exhaustion, while a few others have been driven to such uncontrollable rages that I have had to use my fists to get through to them. Usually the weak-willed ones have themselves asked for a transfer, to get away from me.*

*I remember watching Weasel a month ago, while we were creeping through our old lands under an April moon. The Russians quartered at Weasel’s old farm were asleep. We got a shock, grabbing our guns, when an elderly man opened the front door, stumbling out into the yard for a piss. Weasel hung back – I suppose he wanted to inhale the scent of the thawing fields one last time and to listen to the sounds that a homesick man imagines he can hear only on his own land. He stroked the wall of the log barn, the one he had built with his father, like he was stroking the cheek of his baby boy. He even shoved a few pebbles from the beach into his pockets, for keepsakes. In the end, I had to drag Weasel away from his sentimental errands. And as the yard was disappearing from view, I saw the shoulders bobbing in front of me shake with grief. The next night, it was my home fields that we snuck onto. I was surprised to find I did not feel the same bittersweet longing of coming home. Why did I even go out on these patrols, if I was short on patriotic fervour, had no hate of the Russkis, or thirst for vengeance for losing my home?*

*I have seen mutilated bodies, bloated and black and breeding worms. I have smelled the stench of death, and picked the pieces of my patrol mate’s skull from among the shrubs, to take home for burial. I have carried a seventeen year-old, screaming for his mother, through grenade fire across an endless swamp.*

*On prisoner snatches I have without hesitation liquidated prisoners, who were nothing but a burden to us after interrogation. It had to be done silently, using a knife or an axe. So who would believe me if I were to say that for me the greatest shock of the war had been the new, serene life that father and mother had set up for themselves over in Ostrobothnia.*

*On furlough there was no urgency, nothing was happening, and as I stood there under the resigned gazes of my parents, far away from the barracks and the border and every possible threat, I suddenly felt myself starting to drain away. I was hurtling headlong toward some distant, pre-war state, changing back into that clothier’s son whose greatest adventure had been driving the Ford on the road to Vyborg. The bent shapes of my parents ignited a rage in me, and disappointment, but in the end I was more concerned about myself. The spark that had kept me alive throughout last winter was on the verge of flickering out. The only thing holding me together was the excitement aroused by danger, the pressure and fear I had learned to shape into the lightning reflexes of an animal. I also realised that I could sooner give up the booze and the whores than the drug of death, the one that set my veins on fire.*

*Sinkkonen gargles snot, and spits a greenish lump onto a damp pile of hay. Weasel warily cracks open an eye, then goes back to sleep. I fold up the map and put it back in my bag, and then, before Sinkkonen has time to react, sneak a hand onto his brow.*

*– The man has a fever, and is trying to pretend he’s healthy!*

*Sinkkonen shakes his head, but the way his eyes gleam and his thighs tremble proves that his fever is rising.*

*– Weasel. You are going to take Sinkkonen and his gear back to the road. You will march eight kilometres to a house with a phone, and call Rautio, asking for a car.*

*Sinkkonen moves slowly, even more dejected due to the disappointment of having to go. Weasel swears quietly, angrily pulling his bag open and digging out the packs of cigarettes, holding them out to me:*

*– Well what are you going to do, then?*

*I act like I did not hear the question. I empty out the chocolate bars and canned meat from Sinkkonen’s bag, and put Weasel’s cigarettes into my pocket, along with a little bottle of liquor. Sinkkonen coughs into his sleeve, mumbling with bright, bloodshot eyes:*

*– What if Rautio loses it, hearing that you’ve gone off on your own…*

*I cut through his wretched monologue:*

*– Of course he’ll lose it. At you. A grown man running a fever, trying to go out over the border just so he can get chased down by Russki patrols. I didn’t train you for stupid tricks like this.*

*Weasel shoulders his weapon, and creeps dejectedly to the head of the path, crouching there in the rain to wait for Sinkkonen, who only manages to get up from his resting place on the second try, and is shaking so bad he cannot even get his bag on his back.*

*I listen to the men moving around; even in the dense bushes, the boys know how to move as silently as foxes. I glance at my watch. It is time to leave for the border. Thanks to the clouds, darkness is already falling, and a May night is never dark enough.*

The front door slams shut. Aino drops her purse on the threshold, and the Ulster draped over a hanger slips onto the floor of the foyer, as if touched by a ghost.

– You let Otto leave?

I can read my own thoughts in my wife’s eyes: we are unable to please either of our children. My daughter rushes from room to room, like expecting to miraculously find her brother.

– They just didn’t let me go, even though I told them that my brother was home today.

When I take a step toward the living room, Aino rushes in front of me, shouting in my face:

– If we still had a car, I would go after him!

– You don’t even know how to drive.

My wife and I listen, not knowing what to do, while cupboards clank open in the dining room. With a clink of glass, Aino runs in front of me, two empty bottles of spirits from the pharmacy clutched in her hands.

– You let him touch the medical supplies!

– Otto was restless again.

Aino collapses onto the bench of the foyer, bottles dropping from her fingers, rolling along the bench until they clink onto the floor. My wife picks up the bottles, not daring to get a word in edgewise. She knows she will only get shouted at if she does.

I creep into the bedroom, tired of Aino nagging at me. My family has always been partial to booze, but I at least only touch the finest brands. Otto sniffs out, and drinks anything that even vaguely smells like alcohol.

– Who knows, I might never see Otto again.

Aino curls up by the door, wiping at her eyes as she draws the wool coat around her, as if cold. But the house is warm and snug, of sturdy Ostrobothnian make.

– Well what on earth could kill him now? He made it back from the front with just a few scars.

Aino shakes her head, rolling a cigarette with shaking fingers, gluing the paper with spit with practiced ease. She has started to smoke again, picking up bad habits with the Lottas. Even though she is otherwise wiser than her brother. She is a mother to her brother. Of the three of us, Aino has always been the one to keep the boy in check. Shared secrets, shared adventures, secret agreements and vows of silence – that has always been the nature of their bond.

– Father. Otto went on patrols all of last winter.

The smoke curls toward me like a thin white scarf, dispersing into mist in front of the dresser mirror.

– And still does, even though the war is over.

I turn my back on her, swallowing. I dread asking the question, but the chance of never finding out feels even more frightening.

– And what trips are these?

Aino silently closes the door, making sure her mother will not hear.

– Spying.

I struggle to draw in breath, the hollowness seizing my guts. I have for a long time now suspected that Otto had not been a grunt in the trenches ever since the first weeks of the war – after all, no ordinary front line soldier would be able to tell us news from the other side of the border, never mind getting long furloughs. Otto had, it seems, regularly had two weeks of furlough, at least one of which he would spend in Helsinki in expensive hotels. These were the kinds of things Otto’s army friends would hint at while drunk, when we met them during the winter in the stagecoach from Turku to Helsinki. In April, a gossiping hag from Kanneljärvi had seen Otto and an unknown man board the eastbound train at Kouvola. The woman had asked where they were heading.

– Herding, us boys are going off herding, the two men had answered her, with sly grins and chuckles.

A wedge of sunlight reflects at an angle off the glass over the photograph, making the trunk of the ash tree glow liquid silver, like the moon on the river Terijoki. A small clock, won at a raffle at Vyborg market, ticks away, two hours slow per week. I feel so full of emotion that I want to scream. I have no interest in daily chores, and my work gives me no joy. I live as one in a strange land. I am fifty four years old and I have lost all vitality. The world has twisted itself into lunacy, bitten its own axle in half, now spinning madly and recklessly. It is even taking my son from me; peace is for the civilians, never for the soldiers.

– You are going to bring as much liquor from the pharmacy as they will give you.

Aino does not object, and that is good. I stop there, staring at Aino’s pale cheeks, thinking back to my vision last summer. I was measuring out brittle cloth, with the light streaming in dribbles through the weave, spreading over the fabric like a map. The iron burned my fingers as I cut over the line, over the border. I had to cut out a coat for my son, but the fabric was melting away under my shears; I had to sow a shirt for my son, but the needle would not obey my fingers.

I grasp the dresser for support, the ash shuddering in front of my eyes. The wind is coming in from Lake Ladoga and the Bay of Finland, a wind from over the burnt Isthmus. A crosswind.

4

We met in the echo-y hall of the service home, in the midst of the clink of coffee cups, dozens of trembling hands reaching for slices of sweet bun from a tray sweeping by in the hands of a busy nurse. Grandmother inquired whether I was the same girl that had called her a few days ago. As the old woman searched my face, I hoped she would not bring up the ugly scar left by the chickenpox, which I had tried to hide this morning by hurriedly cutting my bangs so they fell to the side.

– Which of Aaltonen’s litters are you from?

– The fourth one.

I knew grandmother would not remember me. I had after all only met Aino Sachse a few times, at the graduation parties of older half-sisters.

– I really got to know the first wife, but after that, the boy has had a carousel full of women.

– We haven’t been able to keep up either.

Grandmother laughed, and absent-mindedly remarked that, being dark and small, I resembled dad’s first wife. A strange bliss swept over me, when I realized just how confusing the mess was that I had been living in. Around me slithered the shadows of four families, mothers in law cast aside each in turn, adult half-sisters that were almost strangers to me – a shifting world, in which the only truly solid thing was dad’s relentless tendency to sort things into left and right.

– Was it money you came for?

I blush with embarrassment. Grandmother, put away in an old people’s home, must have assumed that the only thing her relatives wanted from her was money.

– Otto threw everything away, and hardly ever came home for anything, except to beg for booze or money.

– I came because of Otto.

Aino asked me to repeat this several times, before she was willing to believe her ears.

– None of the family have ever been interested in Otto.

It was just when I was about to head home that the idea first grazed my mind. The idea was, even to me, completely new and quite inconceivable. I turned in the doorway to ask Aino about it, but something made me hold back. After all, I was only 17 years old, and all the ideas of people that age get dismissed as the foolishness and bravado of youth.

*Otto would have greatly liked you. He would have made you exercise like the others, taught you how to do flips and cartwheels, and had you running around in the woods.*

Aino’s words contained the indirect answer to my unspoken question. In the bus on the way home, I squeezed my bag hard against my chest – someone might have thought I was a courier carrying money. The stiff wind beat icy rain against the window, and the heater in the bus was broken, and yet I felt strangely warm. I counted the weeks: there had been three since I had ripped open those dusty boxes. Three weeks I had lived in the grips of a strange passion. Even my grandmother was transformed in my eyes: here was Otto’s sister and confidante, the one person who had known Otto through and through. Those hands had touched Otto, those ears had heard Otto’s voice. When Aino asked me whether I wanted a photo album of her brother’s life, for a moment I did not know what to say.

That evening I locked the door of my room, opened the album, and... Even now, I can remember how the seconds ticked by as I burst through the thin film, falling into a world of muted sounds, frozen gazes and gestures and expressions, all condensed into the grainy time-dust of the photographs. I engrossed myself in every line of that face, every fibre of the striped rugs and the folded collars, and the cracked leather of the shoes. In my mind, I stroked the linen cloth spread over the table on the porch, felt the chink in the cream jug and the folds of the curtains. I reached for the boughs of the ash, boughs that swirled close to the bloated clouds in the summer sky, and I hugged that ancient tree until I felt like I was leaning into a powerful wind – drowning in a black and white world from decades ago.

That night I woke, drenched with sweat, to see the light of the full moon lapping at the floor. Breath coming in a pant, I recalled the nightmare. I remembered wading through water split by the beams of floodlights, dodging past the bloated bodies of soldiers, constantly rocked by the waves.

I shoved the window ajar, letting the wind scatter snowflakes over the map of the Isthmus spread over the table. I slid my fingers, silvered by the moonlight, from the Bay of Finland to Lake Ladoga, from Lake Ladoga to Lake Ääninen. I picked out place names from the map, quietly repeating them; the names burned in my mouth like molten shrapnel. I grasped a fistful of snow from the windowsill, and rubbed it over my face. My anxiety dissipated when I realized it: from now on, I would devote my whole life to Otto Sachse.