[The Message Bearer](http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-message-bearer)

In the entrance hall of the library the children’s coats let off the damp smell of an autumn day.

The patter of feet, the giggling of girls, the scrapping of boys: the sounds filled the quiet space of the library.

I welcomed the visiting students and their teacher.

It had become my habit to bribe the children first, and this time, too, I handed out stickers and a small notebook where they could record what they were reading. I showed my own as an example, and asked the children what their favorite books were at the moment. Their mouths all opened at once, like the beaks of baby birds. The racket grew as answers spilled out.

A newspaper slipped onto the floor to reveal two girls who had hidden behind the rack. One of them wore her fair hair in plaits, the other was red-haired and freckly. The girls whispered to each other behind their hands. I tried in vain to draw them into the group discussion. I glanced meaningfully at the teacher a few times, but it seemed she didn’t care what the girls were up to.

I felt uneasy, especially when I noticed the blonde girl with the plaits stopping every now and then to stare at me. What might she be thinking; did I make her feel shy?

During the tour of the library, too, the girls dawdled at the back of the group. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them lagging behind to browse books in the adult section.

A close pair. Cut off from the others, it was as if they were in their own world.

As the children rushed impatiently to the coat racks, I went to look for the girls. But apart from a couple of students, the adult section was deserted. I was about to turn back when I saw that a book had been left open on the reading desk.

Those scamps had slipped out ahead of the others and forgotten to return the book to the shelf.

Annoyed, I snatched the book up from the table, and looked at it with surprise: a volume on prehistoric Finland.

That’s what they were leafing through? An old, rather dry tome featuring only black-and-white photos and drawings.

I shook my head and pushed the book back onto the shelf.

In the office, I moved papers absently from one pile to another; I realized I couldn’t focus any more on drawing up the budget. Every so often, I got caught up in looking out of the window at the park across the street. The wind was stripping the shrubs of their clothing; yellow scraps flew onto the lawn in the whirling breeze. Only a couple of children were wandering about in the park; the swings swayed, unoccupied. Was it the wind swinging them?

I stared at the glowing screen. The blueness broadened out, becoming a vast expanse before my eyes.

After the school visit, a couple of days went by in the usual fashion. Then it happened.

The fair-haired girl was sitting on the library steps as I arrived at work.

I looked around, trying to spot her freckly friend, but it seemed the girl with the plaits was alone.

It was a chilly day, and I waved the girl into the library.

Maybe the girls were planning to meet here. I myself used to meet friends in the library, though not as early in the day as this. At this hour, I would have been sitting at my school desk like a good girl; it would not have occurred to me to play hooky at that age.

I made tea in the office, read the paper, and peered into the library a few times. The girl was reading books peacefully, apparently uninterested in what was going on around her.

From then on, the girl came to the library steps every day, sometimes an hour before the doors were opened. She always sat on the same stone step, swinging her legs and glancing expectantly in the direction I came from.

I heard her voice a couple of times, but generally, she stayed silent; she would merely nod in answer to my greeting.

We always went inside at the same time; me first, then the girl, cautiously coming behind me.

As was my habit, I would go first to the office, but I knew what was happening in the library itself: left alone, the girl would bravely make straight for the natural history section. There, she would always crouch at the same shelves, select a few books, and spread them out on the round table that no one else would have had to time to occupy yet.

She did this week after week—read with concentration, fetched new reading matter from the shelf—until late in the day. It seemed the girl was in no hurry to go anywhere. Then she simply disappeared out the door, never borrowing a single book.

As the autumn went by, I tried several times to chat to the girl by the coat racks. Once I asked her how her friend was doing, but she simply stared at me, silent. For a moment, I thought I saw an accusatory look in her eyes.

I tried to hide my growing curiosity; one day I walked past the girl and stealthily glanced at what she was reading.

The books were all to do with natural history and prehistory. The girl was running her finger along the necks of dinosaurs, moving it then to great, tropical rainforests, and from there, to ape-skulled humans at their camp fires. I saw the girl’s lips moving soundlessly.

She turned the pages slowly, stopped for a moment at prehistoric birds, and then switched to a book that explained old hunting practices.

“I suppose you’ll be a great historian one day, one of those archaeologists?”

My careless question was a mistake. The girl did not even glance at me as she closed the books, placed them on the shelf in a practiced manner, and disappeared quickly out of the door.

For the rest of the day, I thought about that strange girl and regretted my stupidity in interfering in what she was doing.

For many days after, the girl failed to appear on the library steps to await the opening of the doors. Every morning, I expected to see her on the steps, with her fair plaits, but I was disappointed.

A sense of guilt got me imagining all sorts of things. What if the girl had been badly shocked and done something to herself? Who was I to poke my nose into other people’s reading? Why had I not let the girl enjoy her peace and solitude? Perhaps the library was the only place she could be in peace.

One evening, going home from work, I spotted a familiar figure in a corner of the park. I slowly approached the girl, who was busy with a heap of sand.

The girl glanced quickly behind her, then immediately dashed across the road to an apartment block and disappeared behind some lilac bushes.

I stood at the edge of the sandpit.

Before me was a carefully constructed, small-scale model of a Stone-Age village. Bonfires and tepee-like huts had been fashioned out of gravel and broken branches. At my feet was a hollow; sharp sticks protruded from its base. A pitfall trap.

The girl had read her books with care.

I sat down on the wooden frame and tried to figure out why the girl was so interested in such distant things. Was history like a fairy tale to her, an exciting fairy tale, because it was also true? Or was this prehistoric world a hiding place for the girl?

Deep in thought, I moved some bonfire-sticks, and used gravel to straighten up a hut made of moss and bark.

Everyone has a place of refuge, I supposed. For some, it’s a hideaway, for others, a secret hobby. And many roads can lead to refuge. That girl descended through books into the strange murmur of ancient forests.

Or was the girl even of this time?

A feeling of unreality took hold of my whole body and I felt cold.

I shook sand off my trousers and glanced at the wooden frame of the sandpit. In the dust upon it I had written a message, as if by instinct: Come back.

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Mother stared at me over her glasses.

White blouse, black cardigan, white Mallorcan pearls peeping out from under the collar.

“You’re awake, then.”

Her tone of voice revealed nothing.

“I’ve made coffee. And booked a cleaner.”

I pushed a pile of old newspapers off the quilt onto the floor. A glass of juice I had left by the bed fell over, and Mother moved swiftly to make sure the juice did not spill onto her carefully maintained leather shoes.

“Buck up. You’re a grown woman.”

My sick leave was about to end. The doctor had prescribed me two weeks’ rest, for exhaustion. I tried to explain to him that this was no ordinary tiredness I was experiencing. There was something alien inside me: like a thorn or a shard, embedded in the flesh, which had begun to stir. A smell, sound, or taste—any of these could act as a trigger at any time, and restlessness would take over my whole body in an instant. Sometimes it seemed as if a mystery were about to rise up to the surface. The sensation was strange and frightening.

The doctor had encouraged me to reminisce, look at photos, read letters, but the very idea of rummaging through old things seemed like a waste of time. Memory was like a patchwork quilt tacked together from fragmentary scraps of thought, a bright splotch to be seen here and there. I could not concentrate on anything, neither books nor films.

During my sick leave, I had lain, heavy as a slab of rock, arising only to fulfill my basic needs.

“Library rang, sent their regards. They’re expecting you Monday. There’s a backlog, jobs needing doing. Things only you can do.”

“Did they say anything about the girl? Has she been seen?”

Mother plucked her glasses from her nose, slipped them into their case, and snapped the cover shut.

“There is no girl.”

I sat up, accidentally knocking a shriveled apple from the nightstand onto the floor with my elbow.

“Thirty years, nearly, and still you need looking after. I canceled my theater trip for the privilege of seeing this mess.”

I dragged myself to the kitchen and poured out a mug of coffee. Mother had done some tidying, piled up newspapers and ex-library books which I had picked out for myself.

“Give those old ones to the second-hand bookshop. It’s not as if you want to turn your home into your workplace, is it?”

The pouring rain was thinning into a drizzle.

The small huts and bonfires would be collapsing into piles of sticks in the girl’s sandpit. The water would have tugged at the moss and straw roofs, the wind filled the pitfall trap with fine sand. The land would soon be flat. Empty and desolate.

“They said at work that those books weren’t there.”

“Which books?”

“The ones you kept asking about, apparently several times a week.”

I frowned and tried to remember. Perhaps I had rung work, I recalled dimly. I had asked about the girl, if anyone had seen her and if she’d perhaps come in to borrow books on paleontology, prehistoric animals, life in the Stone Age. I think I even remembered the names of some of the works, and asked if they could be looked up on the computer to see if they were on loan and, if so, to whom.

“What did they say? Were the books out?”

“They don’t even stock them. Really.”

Mother sounded peeved. Suddenly, I felt her chilly, bony fingers on my shoulders.

“Let me give you a quick massage. It’ll make your blood circulate and get your brain going.”

Mother was trying to make a joke, but I could tell she was distressed.

“Stop it, my muscles are hurting. And cancel that cleaner, this is no time for people to come over.”

Mother lifted her hands and moved away, hurt.

“I’ve got quite enough to do, what with your Dad. I’m going to try to get him into the dementia ward early next year. I can’t cope with him any more.”

I turned around and caught Mother’s expression. Care had stamped its traces onto her face, which looked twenty years older than it should.

Mother looked at me for a long time, saying nothing. Then she rang the cleaning agency to cancel the booking, and put on her coat. The front door was about to click shut when, to my surprise, she came back, to stand at the threshold.

Her face was pale, and her worried eyes looked beseechingly at me.

“You’re not going to ask about that girl again, are you? They’ll chuck you out of a job. You’ll go to the loony bin.”

I shook my head and sighed. Mother never let up. I was just about to start lecturing her, when I happened to glance out of the window. Suddenly, my hands felt like lumps of ice.

The girl was sitting on a park bench on the other side of the road, swinging her legs, just as she had while sitting on the library steps. She was wearing a short, old-fashioned coat, really too short for this weather.

“I’ll leave you in peace.”

Despite her announcement, Mother remained standing at the threshold.

The girl got up and began collecting maple leaves that had fallen onto a path in the park. They were like large, glowing, pointed stars.

“I left a parcel for you in the bedroom cupboard. Liisa’s Mum brought it for you a long time ago, but I couldn’t give it to you then. You were just a little girl. It felt so bad.”

I was only half-listening. Mother was beside herself, for some reason, guilty.

“I know Liisa was your best friend. I just couldn’t let you go and see her. I was trying to protect you.”

I started; a shudder run from my neck down to my ankles, like a crack. Mother’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“Protect me from what?”

Mother stood before me, as if awaiting judgment. My head roared. Through the roar, I heard a faint sobbing.

“Death.”

My head felt like a heavy lump, like a strange, separate part of me, as I bent toward the window again.

The girl was carrying a large bunch of fiery-red leaves in her hand, and circling the maple tree, almost hugging the trunk.

“I should have given you those books straight away. You always used to read them together. Do you remember? I’d call you to come and have your tea, but you said you and Liisa had run away to the Stone Age. It was your secret game. I called you cave girls.”

I kept my eye on the girl: she wandered further away, from tree to tree, circling the trunks.

“It was leukemia. They couldn’t treat it properly then.”

Mother’s shoulders shook; her crying was ear-shredding.

“I hid the books in the attic at first. I thought it would be better for you to forget. You did forget, too, strangely. For twenty years. Not a word about Liisa all that time.”

My hands looked pale and lifeless; I heard my own breath, unnaturally forceful.

The girl stopped at the furthest maple and looked behind her; at this building. Into my window, straight into my eyes.

I stepped toward the window and pressed my hand against the cool pane.

The girl stood motionless under the trees. Pale-brown coat, fiery-red maple leaves, stirred by the wind. A gust of wind mussed up her fine hair so it became a tangled bird’s nest.

*Come back. Walk along that wire, made long and fragile by the years. Come back.*

Suddenly, the girl turned and continued her journey, until only the park could be seen and a few erratic gusts among the leaves.

I drew a cross in the condensation on the window, and started. Reflected in the pane was a freckle-faced, red-haired girl.

“Open that parcel when you can. And forgive me.”

The rain ceased by evening.

I had told the library I would stay at home until Monday, “to be on the safe side.”

I lost track of time, of where I was sitting, if I was eating or drinking, if I had answered a single phone call. The only thing I understood was that in my hands was a parcel wrapped twenty years ago, meant for me.

My whole body shook as I opened the wrapping and allowed light to spread out on the pages where the childhoods of two girls were written.

Five books, five painful books opened under my hands again and again. I ran my finger over one page then the next, from the wings of a prehistoric bird to the neck of a dinosaur, from the neck of a dinosaur to the carapace of a tortoise, from the shell, along the curve of a palm tree, to a distant bonfire around which a tribe gathered.

There was the mark left by Liisa’s pen: a fair girl with her hair in plaits drawn onto a stone, near the nocturnal fireside group. And on the following page, that of my own: a red-haired girl, fishing rod in hand, on her way to the riverbank.

Our secret imaginary world, ours.

Forgotten by me.

What did you think in the hospital? Not one letter, or phone call. Not even a greeting.

I don’t remember anything clearly about those distant months. Just a vague sense of anxiety. Of fear and loneliness. And that I did not even want to imagine the bad things that were happening to you there in the hospital, and after.

I lay down and did not resist. Ungrieved grief rose up like a storm cloud.

I took a shortcut through the park, wading through the sea of leaves and listening to the swishing sound; the maple leaves whispered like little girls. I passed the sandpit, whipped by the heavy rain, and stopped at the library steps.

I no longer expected anyone to come.

Autumn was becoming winter; you could smell it in the morning air. The grass was yellow and flattened, like the earth’s fur.

Back then, we both knew the smell of earth and stones. Liisa was already there, in the heart of the earth, among the ancient open hearths and sauna stones. The small bones of a girl, barely bird-sized.

I sat down on the stone step, where no one would wait for me any more.

Tomorrow I would look for Liisa’s grave. On its mound, a couple of moss huts would rise up—or a whole tiny village—and at the shore, a leaf-sailed boat made of a pinecone would sway. That imaginary boat, where the soul would settle, to sail away along a river furrowed with rainwater—slowly, rocking.

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