

'Journeying down the years'

by Maritta Lintunen¹

Mother was pretending not to hear the question. I put down the open album on her lap, with my finger on the dried spot of glue, on top of the half-torn photo.

"I'll ask again. Who has torn off half of this photo? And why?"

"I can't remember."

This has been mother's standard reply for the last five years, after father died. Her expressionless eyes were staring at the flowering rowan tree beyond the window. I fingered the rustling tissue paper interleaf. The poison green album with its fake leather cover that I had found from the top shelf of the closet was new to me. There was a note on its spine: 1976. I wouldn't have thought anything of it, if it hadn't been when I was born.

"If you'd only look. You are standing on some wooden jetty. You have a strange smile. Jaska is three years old in this; he's holding onto the hem of your skirt. And you have a bun in the oven."

Mother didn't take her eyes off the rowan tree swaying in the wind, not even for a moment.

"If the picture was taken in June, that must have been about the time I was born."

"The trees are full of bloom. It's going to be a good year for rowanberries. And for snow."

I shook mother's shoulder.

"Look, you're pointing at the other shore with your hand. What are you pointing at?"

"Where's the coffee?"

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My brother pulled into the driveway; the crunch of the gravel carried inside. I wrote a note to mother just as I was about to leave.

“I’ll come over tomorrow around noon. Let’s eat together. I’ll cook. Sirpa.”

I closed the front door and leaned against it for a while. Jaska lifted his hand by way of casual greeting, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, the AC/DC bass booming in the car and reverberating through the garden patio. I dashed down the stairs and pulled the car door open.

“Let’s drive somewhere where we can talk. I can’t cope with mum anymore. Three more days and this lay-off will be over.”

Jaska shook ash on the floor and turned the wheel roughly, but skilfully. My big brother knew how to handle cars, women and problems: they never got one over him.

“What was the old hag whining about this time?”

“Refuses to reminisce. Won’t co-operate at all. She just stares at trees, eats and sleeps. Probably Alzheimer’s.”

Cigarette smoke curled from the corner of Jaska’s mouth into his eyes. Little crows’ feet appeared at the corner of his squinting eyes. I’ve always liked that cruel, focused Clint Eastwood look. As did Jaska’s numerous women.

“I have another take on things.”

My brother reached out to turn off the cd player.

“Mother isn’t senile. She doesn’t remember. On purpose.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me.”

We turned right, so I guessed the car was heading towards the old harbour. I felt lighter – my brother knew that we desperately needed some time together. That was what I missed as I browsed through agendas, as I sat in endless EU meetings in Brussels trapped behind glass and steel, something I had been doing for the last four years of my life.

Jaska parked in a corner shaded by lime trees, with a sea view. The wind carried along a rickety boat that navigated south along the coast.

“Jaska, do you remember those boat trips of ours? Mother had terrible fits what with the boat swaying from side to side. And neither of us would wear life jackets, because they were so damned uncomfortable.”

Jaska stubbed out his cigarette, leaned partly against the door and threw his arm casually across the back of the seat.

“Make up your mind. Are we talking about boats or mum?”

I gave half of the photograph to my brother. I watched as his brows began to furrow and his lips pouted. Jaska is movingly handsome with his stubbly jowls, I thought and then I thought about Daniel, who looked astonishingly like my brother. So much that little by little Dan became uncomfortable with the similarity. Did you want me just for the sex, or as some sort of substitute for family, he once asked me in the middle of the most terrible row. Crazy, pervert, I yelled back at him, and realised that there was some truth in what Dan said. I missed my brother every single day.

“The photograph was taken by Dad. We’re at the summer cottage of a childhood friend of mum’s. You can see from the face that they were crying when the photo was taken. It really pissed me off to be standing on that rotten jetty. My foot went through the boards and I got a massive gash on my leg.”

Jaska took a cigarette pack from his shirt pocket and lit up. I opened the side window, I felt like smoking, but checked myself. I took care of my skin. No good giving in to urges when you’re in the PR business.

“What was mother’s friend like?”

“Probably in a state. I seem to remember her funeral was in the spring. Cottage empty, completely run down.”

I watched a woman pushing a pram through the park towards the beach.

“Why on earth did you go to a dead person’s cottage?”

Jaska blew lazy smoke rings between us, lips pursed.

“I have no idea. I watched them argue as we drove there. Mum just kept shouting that we’re going now and we’re going take a photo.”

“What was that for?”

Jaska’s attention was fixed on the shapely behind of a woman passing by.

Finally he answered, as if from a distance:

“How the hell was a three-year-old supposed to know that?”

I drew deeply on the scent of the smoke.

“What about mum’s hand, what is she waving at?”

“No idea. Why don’t you ask her?”

I relaxed back into the seat and buttoned my cardigan.

“She says she doesn’t remember. She won’t even as much as glance at it.”

My brother started the car but kept looking at me expectantly.

“A torn photograph. So what?”

I plucked the picture from his grasp, and pressed mum’s face with the tip of my nail.

“That smile. Look at her expression.”

He snatched the photo back. Deep in his focused gaze, there was a scintilla of unease.

“What do you make of it?”

“What can I say? A wicked grin.”

The photo flew into my lap, the car gave a lurch and Jaska headed towards his flat where I would stay for a couple of days.

“Where is that cabin? Could you still go there?”

“You mean the route to the lakeside of Päijänne? Like somewhere near Jyväskylä? Sure. A three-year-old can memorise that quite easily. Shall we get going?”

I started laughing and poked my brother’s side with my fist.

Suddenly he lurched towards me and grabbed my head under his arm. We remained in that position throughout the few kilometres we had left, me struggling and screaming and him steering with one hand as he leaned toward me like a tree leans away from the wind.

When the car stopped at the yard of a terrace house, Jaska seized to move for a moment with his eyes closed.

“What is it?”

“It’s the picture. There’s something weird.”

I brushed his arm. It was sinewy and safe, like always.

“Weird?”

“You know. A child can record something like that. There’s no way to explain it really. Like a nightmare. Dread.”

Mother squeezed her handbag until her knuckles were white. The scenery moved behind the train window. I felt dizzy. I lost myself in the map.

“Tuulikki told me that you and dad went over to Päijänne the same summer that I was born.”

“Tuulikki? You shouldn’t rely on anything she says.”

I caught a glimpse of a bitter stark look just before the habitual frozen expression took over. Mum couldn’t stand dad’s sister, and I knew why. Tuulikki accused mother of completely neglecting father during his difficult illness. Mother tormented dad with dismal phone calls as he lay in the hospital, and in Tuulikki’s opinion deliberately hastened father’s death.

“Why do we have to travel by train?”

There was a helpless tone in mother’s question.

“The trip might refresh your memory. I heard you often travelled by train to see your childhood friend.”

Mother snapped open her bag and rummaged for a handkerchief.

“Who did I see?”

“Riitta.”

“I don’t remember a Riitta.”

I folded the map and glanced at the text message that had just come. Jaska was announcing he had started the drive to central Finland. I replied, telling him not to drive recklessly. In case he

couldn't find his way there, I asked him to call Tuulikki – she would help him.

The ticket inspector appeared in front of my mother. I was searching for my purse and jumped when she snatched the ticket from my hand.

“I can manage my own papers, thank you very much.”

Mother gave the conductor a vague smile. When he moved forward, her expression broke off. I was still staring at mum. After father's death she had burnt all her bridges to the outside world, one by one. Her recollection of the past was what it was – going to the grocer's was still something she could manage, as was cooking and cleaning. I turned my gaze towards the tranquil lake beyond the window. Jaska's words from yesterday came to mind.

“Have you ever once wondered about mum not leaving the lights or electric devices on? Or not forgetting to pay her bills, though she keeps claiming to have such a bloody bad memory. She manages her money without screwing it up, and during the work on the conservatory she watched over the builders like a hawk. That's one strange kind of Alzheimers, when it only strikes the grey cells from the late 1970's.”

The taxi driver wasn't too happy to drive to the end of the overgrown track, where the blackened and decaying villa stood. A querulous expression swept over mother's face, as we got out of the taxi and stood in the courtyard overrun with nettles.

“Does it look familiar?”

Mother slowly shook her head. I went up to the front stairs. All five steps had rotted through. The porch pillars seemed so shaken and fragile it was a miracle they still managed to hold the heavy roof beams in their place. The stone steps leading to the waterfront were covered in moss and slippery. I grabbed mum's hand. We went down the steps to the place where the wooden landing stage had

once been. Now there were only a few stakes, which jutted out from the lake, black and ugly.

“Here was the dock where you and Jaska were standing. And there you were pointing in the picture. Look.”

Mother glanced reluctantly at the photo in my hand, then she looked at the dark ripples. The lake was black, the bay shaded by firs, and the waterside seemed uninhabited. A remarkably unattractive view, I thought, and couldn't have imagined spending my summer in a wooded, gloomily silent bay, the forest encroaching, blotting out the sun.

“In the picture you are pointing at the place where Riitta was found drowned two months earlier.”

Mother's face tightened.

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Tuulikki told me. Riitta was found in a boat that had sunk by the shore. The autopsy revealed that she had drunk an enormous amount of alcohol.”

Mother ripped up a handful of tall grass.

“Riitta was a drunkard.”

I realized that mum remembered everything, had always remembered. A light breeze rippled over the water, right where Riitta had drowned. I helped Mother sit down on a rock and just stood there on the sand fringed by reeds.

“Why did you have to force dad to drive here after Riitta's death? Why did you have to take the photo?”

The bag slipped out of mother's hands and I grabbed it just before it would have ended up in the water.

“And don't tell me again that you don't remember!”

Mother gave me a pleading look.

“That trick won't work anymore. Me and Jaska have had enough of this game.”

“Jaska?”

I stubbed the sand with the tip of my shoe.

“He has known for ages that you pretend to be demented.”

Mother pouted; it was a sign of consideration. She was thinking of different options – the truth, the half-truth or nothing like the truth. She was thinking of how to escape the hide-and-seek that had gone on for years and caused us so much anxiety.

“Your father ripped that photo in two after some quarrel.”

I stood with my back to her and stared at the weak rays of sun, striving to reach the water over the forest.

“Why?”

For a long time we said nothing. Eventually I turned around to look at mother with a start, just like all those years ago. A sharp, hostile look on her face, improved posture, a bitter quiver at the corner of her mouth.

“Your dad mourned Riitta’s death until the day he died.”

Such a traditional, unimaginative love triangle. What a cliché. Dad screwing mum’s beautiful friend – and mum bitterly resentful until her spouse is lying on his deathbed.

“And as for you, you of course rejoiced when Riitta sank in the shallow lake water right beside her own summer place. You even came back to capture the moment with a photograph.”

Mum’s glance was a slap in the face.

“Riitta’s death was the best moment of my life. I got rid of that farce. That mockery. I was able to concentrate on my pregnancy. You.”

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets. It felt oddly cold. There’s the woman that gave birth to me.

The phone buzzed in my hand. I started climbing the stone steps towards the cottage. Halfway up I stopped, and read Tuulikki’s message twice. I glanced down: mum was still sitting straight, as still as a statue in the moonlight.

Suddenly I was pressing Jaska’s number. Answer, answer now.

“Jaska. Buy a bottle of something strong. And get here quick.”

“Is this wise? Getting a 70-year-old woman hammered? What are we going to do with her here in the middle of nowhere?”

Jaska peered from the rotting porch down to the shore where mum was sipping the strong toddy I had served.

“You build a small fire on the beach over there. We’ll sit a few hours, I’ll have a taste, you’ll be fit to drive. But mummy dearest can knock back the whole bottle if she wants.”

He hopped over the shaky railing to the gravel and spread his arms in impatience.

“Why on earth?”

“Stop whining. You bring the vodka, lingonberry juice and stuff for the campfire down there.”

I came down to the beach with a bag in which I had packed woollen clothes and a small blanket. Mum was staring at the setting sun that barely peeked through the black spruces on the opposite shore. I kicked at the wet sand to make a shallow hole, broke up some dry yellowish reeds and placed them at the bottom. Jaska dropped the birch logs he had found in the open shed on top of the reeds with a crash and ripped off a few strips of bark. The lighter clicked twice, and a flame soon licked at the grey bark.

I placed a thick, blue woollen blanket round mum’s shoulders for warmth. My brother pointed at the rock on the opposite shore – a family of long-necked divers was gliding towards the reeds.

“We’ve always had those squawking birds here. Riitta always pulled faces at them and mimicked them. I prodded Jaska with my elbow. It took a moment for my brother to twig and pour mum another mugful of lingonberry vodka.”

“Tell me about that night.”

Mum sipped at her drink, her grey eyes apparently gazing across the water, over the large bay, far into the past when the pine forest on the opposite bank was still young and lanky.

“It was April, the ice on the lake had already melted. I was six months pregnant. Riitta had been gulping down wine all day and

had started blurting out secrets. Their affair had not been a brief encounter after all. It had been going on for all those years.

Jaska glanced at me with a look of uncertainty – I furrowed my brow to indicate he should not interfere in the conversation in any way.

“Riitta got drunk and started taking the piss. She was varnishing her nails a screaming red against the railing over there and laughing about how I couldn’t keep a man for myself. She even made fun of me, telling how my pregnancy was just part of a pathetic family drama.”

Jaska spat out a curse through clenched teeth and chucked a piece of wood into the fire so that sparks fell hissing onto the damp sand.

“Then Riitta began boasting and gloating. Told me your father had promised to take her on a holiday to Rome.”

Mum shifted her gaze from the distance and turned her hateful eyes on us.

“To Rome! I had wasted two years nagging your father to take me there.”

The strong, raw spirits slipped down, barely noticeable. I could only guess what mum must have felt like: a woman in the last stages of pregnancy, who hears she is going to lose out on her dream trip to her best friend.

Mum's mug was empty again. Her cheeks were flushed, her pupils strangely glazed.

“The affair I could have somehow forgiven. But not the trip. Dear Mother of God, what a cheek!”

Jaska stoked the fire solemnly. I swallowed some more of the spirits, my mouth numb by now.

Mum threw her mug down in the sand and stood up. The blanket slid off her shoulders to the ground.

“That day I opened one bottle after another. I didn’t drink a drop myself. By the time it got dark Riitta had passed out. Dead to the world.”

Jaska shook his head, his face pale, as if he wanted to cut mum off right there and then. I got in quickly before he had a chance to ruin everything.

“What happened that night?”

Mum took three steps towards the shore, then three back to the campfire.

“I dragged that whore into a boat, pulled out the plug and waded into the icy water. I pushed the boat as far as I could.”

Jaska was squeezing my arm so hard I had to yank it away. Let mum speak, I hissed and wondered what had suddenly come over him. A man who never panicked about anything.

“That's where the boat slowly sank. And Riitta with it.”

Jaska stood up. I was surprised to see my brother's hands shaking

“Mum, that's enough.”

My brother's plea was a feeble one—a distant echo of childhood.

Mum turned to look at us like we were strangers.

“I brought your father here in June. A week later you were born, Sirpa. I forced him to take the picture, so through it your father would remember my pregnancy, his son, my friend and —”

Jaska rushed in front of mum and seized her by the shoulders.

“Shut it!”

Mum calmly took Jaska's hands and lifted them off her shoulders.

“Wasn't it supposed to be my turn to say something?”

Jaska took short, frantic breaths, glanced at me in despair, then at mum and I realized my brother had all of a sudden also travelled several decades back in time.

Mother regained her composure and straightened the sleeves of her cardigan as if she was about to give an important speech.

“The photo was taken as a reminder that your father was responsible for his children's lives. Sirpa's life.”

Mum turned to the lake and stretched out her hand the same way as in the photo from 1976.

“And the life of Riitta's child.”

The mournful cry of the black-throated diver cut across the surface of the lake.

Jaska hung his head.

“I remember some of it. All of a sudden. You whispered to dad when the camera clicked. I heard what you said. ‘That’s where I sank that woman. I hate you and Riitta, but I accept your son.’”

I gulped. Mum's cold, evil face in the photo, her cold message to dad. By the time I could manage to say anything, my voice had shrunk to a tiny whimper:

“Did dad only find out how Riitta died at that moment, the moment the picture was taken?”

Mum looked up and at me, straight in the eye.

“That moment, yes. And at that moment the man's life was over.”

Jaska drove with his cheekbones hardened. I secretly eyed my brother. Did he have a lot of Riitta in him? Which features were Riitta’s and which were dad’s? Was there anything left of my old, real brother? Mum was hunched up in the back seat, pale and small. My brother threw an infuriated look at me.

“So you and Tuulikki decided to lock mum away?”

I sat perplexed, looking at Jaska. My brother was more of a mother's boy than I could have imagined.

“Tuulikki told me about the drowning. And today she sent me a message saying she knew mum had been a guest at the villa that day.”

“What about me? Did Tuulikki say anything about me?”

I quickly glanced at mother and shook my head.

“No. Your adoption is something we don’t talk about.”

The car swallowed the road. Jaska took the corners recklessly - the curbs were soft from the rain and treacherous. My brother’s words were half-throttled:

“Dear God, why can't I remember anything about my own mother?”

I kept blinking and didn't know which felt worse - mum's incomprehensible act or the fact my brother turned out to be weaker and more brittle than I was prepared to contemplate. I turned my head towards my mother and avoided eye contact as I told her:

“Mum. We are driving straight to the nearest police station.”

I trembled as her hand touched my shoulder.

“Why there?”

“You are going to tell them what you told us.”

She removed her hand and leaned back.

“What is there to tell?”

I was paralysed. I unfastened the seatbelt and turned to look at her. She appeared pale, scatty, with a reticent expression on her face. I tore myself off the seat and tugged her towards me by her wrist.

“You're going to tell them everything! Every last detail. And no forgetting anything!”

Mother closed her eyes and muttered indifferently:

“I don't know what you are talking about. I can't remember a thing.”

Jaska hit the brakes, sending me careening into the dashboard.

“You leave mother alone, d'you hear me?”

My eyes were wide open, I couldn't so much as blink an eyelid. Jaska fumbled for a cigarette, lit up and blew smoke in my face.

“This is your last warning: You leave mother alone. She can't remember a thing.”

His words fell into my lap, quietly and menacing. I gasped for air to express an objection, but Jaska raised his finger to my face, and it seemed clear that he wouldn't hesitate to strike.

“I'll take mother home. You fly to Brussels. I'll take care of mother by myself from now on. You can live your fancy international life with Daniel in peace.”

I swallowed painfully. I tried to touch my brother's arm, but he moved it away from me. He tossed away his half-smoked cigarette and started the car.

“We'll get your stuff from my place. Tell Daniel that you're coming home tonight on a late flight.”

My brother drove in silence towards the airport. I kept glancing at him, wanting to say something beautiful. Something irresistible to inject even an ounce of intimacy back into our being.

“Let's make one last stop at the lakeside.”

His face remained blank, but he took a right and parked the car in a shady corner under an old lime tree that was swaying in the breeze. We shared a long silence. I felt a chasm in my stomach when he uttered quietly:

“Take care of yourself.”

My throat tightened. What was left of our family? Dad was dead, mum was living in a world of lies she had created to protect herself. The only thing I longed for was a big, strong brother, the dependable brother who could see right through me.

“You know I have to protect mum for as long as she lives. Protect her even from you. Especially from you.”

I held my breath for a long time and squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't open them until I was standing in front of the terminal. He passed my suitcase into my powerless grasp, brushing my cheek with his finger. The planes were ascending and descending behind us like overgrown paper planes tottering in the wind. Their movements were marked by the sluggishness and indecision that would mark every step taken from that point on. My brother looked straight into my eyes for a moment. I opened my mouth to say something important. The one thing most important.

The one thing that none of us had said to each other.