MARITTA LINTUNEN

The Canada goose

A short story from Tapaus Sidoroff *('The Sidoroff case', WSOY, 2008)*

It was no use even trying the old cart track branching from the main road. I turned off the engine and glanced into the back seat. My aunt lifted the brim of her hat, her bright eyes peering at me questioningly.

'We can't get any farther by car. The road's nothing but rough brush. What do you think, Aunt Alli, can you walk the rest of the way?'

My aunt shook her head and didn't even bother to answer. She opened the car door and clambered out. A swarm of blackflies wafted into the air from the brush at the bottom of the ditch.

'For heaven's sakes, there's sure enough of these flies.'

She fanned at the air with her hat, straightened the hem of her dress and trudged across the ditch, without looking back, through the thicket of willows. In spite of her hip trouble, the old woman made her way in such a hurry that I had my work cut out keeping up with her.

A farmyard opened out at the end of the overgrown road, looking bright and lived-in. My aunt spread her arms and seemed not to know where to begin.

'Honey, this grass has been cut! Did you put them white curtains and geraniums in the window for me?'

'It was a good excuse to fix the place up.'

My aunt took a step, but she immediately started to fumble for some support and dropped down to sit limply on the cover of the well. Her wrinkled hand latched onto the water ladle that lay there with its bowl turned downward.

'The last time I drank from this well was sixty-four years ago.'

You could hear from her trembling voice that she was shaken.

The wind carried the scent of old hay from the broken windows of the barn, swallows twittered from the eaves. There was a melancholy sinking in the pit of my stomach. Everything was gone from the farmyard – the people, the animals, the way of life of an entire two hundred years.

The snap of my aunt's purse clicked and with a trembling hand she dried her eyes beneath her hat brim.

'I met Upi the spring I turned twenty. That same fall I told my folks I was goin' with him to Canada.'

I bent over to pick a daisy growing at the foot of the round well wall. It sounded weird when she called Urpo Upi. In Canada, Alli Karvonen had become Allie Carson and Urpo had become Upi.

My father, now deceased, had been irked at how 'Americanised' and 'snobby' his sister had become. He thought Alli lacked the 'humility appropriate to a woman'. He couldn't comprehend that Alli got more customers to her dress-maker's shop if she published ads that read Allie Carson instead of Alli Karvonen. And he couldn't understand why Urpo took his fiancée's last name, when the straight-jawed Ontarians mangled the pronunciation of Väätäinen. Instead, the name Upi Carson rang out on the vast logging sites where Urpo did his life's work, first as an ordinary sawyer, later as a foreman.

My aunt came to a halt at the flat stone in front of the steps, took off her shoes and her lace-trimmed socks, and put her bare feet down on the stone. For a moment, neither of us could say a word.

'Good Lord, what a *fiiling*. To think how many times I traipsed through here when I was little.'

With this, she wiped her cheeks and walked barefoot from the doorstep to the granary, from the granary to the sauna, from the sauna to the spot under the old birch tree where the remnants of the play house built after the war were still standing.

I tried to imagine how everything must look to her now – washed by dozens of winters and summers. To my eyes, my father's childhood home seemed like a hovel now. When he was still alive, we came here to take a sauna and to fish every week. He cut the grass and pruned the bushes, divided the bulbs, sowed potatoes and onions with his last bit of strength.

Now the cottage had been left to its own devices for a year. The most important person was gone.

Aunt Alli stepped carefully over the threshold, as if she were afraid of breaking something. I let her walk around the room in peace. Photographs and knickknacks lingered for a long time in her palm as she felt the familiar objects and chatted about this and that.

'How did I ever make my home on an altogether different continent?'She stared past me with a helpless expression, as if she were trying to see her youth from beyond the decades.

I led her to sit down, poured some coffee into Grandmother's old cups and placed a gingerbread cookie on her still upward-turned palm. Suddenly she got so excited that she crushed the cookie to powder between her fingers.

'I'm sure they done plenty of gossipin' about me around here! They never thought we'd make a go of it.'

I glanced at the old woman. She was shaking with irritation.

'We had our own house – had it standing first thing! Upi made oodles of money. And I worked that sewin' machine till it smoked.'

Then why didn't you come back, I felt like blurting. Once you had the money, couldn't you have remembered your brother even with just a small wreath?

'Things were so busy. Running every which way all the time.'

Suddenly I saw my father's face in Alli's face. The same curve of the jaw, the same hooked nose. The curious, sarcastic eyes. And a familiar tone in the voice; a mixture of griping and lamentation.

'Did you ever miss this place?'

Aunt Alli turned her head and opened the lace curtains a little. A swallow streaked past over the lilac bush.

'If you only knew how much.'

She gulped down some coffee, moved, and took a long time swallowing her cookie crumbs.

'There used to be such a peculiar smell in the yard evenings. Reminded me of midsummer and the roses behind the sauna. Made me cry.'

The tin alarm clock that my father bought from the market square ticked on the bureau. It was an eyesore, and showed the wrong time, but it was soothing to hear its homey ticking. A warm wind that smelled of rowan wafted through the open door into the cabin.

I would have liked to sit myself down in the middle of the patch of sunshine that glowed on the front step, like I did when I was little. I would have liked the house's last cat near me, to pet him, drowsy with heat. I would have liked to have my father there in the yard, Tuisku in the stable, the neighbours' beat-up boats on the lake, the shouts of Sunday anglers coming up from the rocks on the shore.

I stared at the bottom of my empty coffee cup and a bizarre thought darkened my mind.

Alli didn't belong here. This place became a wasteland when my father died and it was the place of my memories now, a place that a stranger couldn't take over.

I picked up the brimmed hat that had fallen on the floor from my aunt's lap and struggled to make my voice polite.

'How about if we warm up the sauna?'

She lifted up her face and a timid expression spread across it.

'It's the sauna I was born in.'

There was a rushing in the flue, the birch bark curled, and the fire took hold of the wood.

The burning alderwood let loose a smell of autumn and evenings smoking fish. There was still a high stack of alder wood in the shed that my father had cut from the hill slope. I wouldn't burn all of it – I would leave some for my own memories. For the fragrance.

I listened at the crack in the door of the sauna. My aunt sat in the entry silently, her eyes closed. I was worn out, too – it felt like I was playing host to an

imaginary person who had popped out of a photo album. That's still what Aunt Alli seemed like to me: the sum of my father's stories and the photos she'd sent from Canada. An immigrant lady dressed in frilly chiffon, pretending to cut enormous rambler roses in an uncomfortable posture, smiling at the camera with lips painted pink.

She knocked on the wall on the other side of the wood stove.

'Did you light the sauna yet?'

'It's already on fire.'

We both knew how to answer that question. But it felt strange to hear my father's old refrain coming from her mouth.

'I was always quick to make decisions. I just got it into my head one night that I ought to visit here before I died. Upi ordered the tickets first thing next morning. We already had our bags packed out there in Thunder Bay and the greyhound waitin' in front of the house when I called you.'

I grabbed a stick of alder and grit my teeth. My plans sure got remade that day – my aunt's call had thrown me for a loop. The visitor from Canada was going to see her childhood home looking ratty after the work of winter and mice.

Later, as I washed the windows and hoed up the weeds, bitter thoughts sprouted in my mind. Alli hadn't even asked if it was alright for her to come and visit, just like that, on such short notice. What made her dash off to Finland only then, why hadn't she come the year before, to her brother's funeral?

I tossed the stick in the fire and watched it burn. All day long I had waited in vain for her to take up the subject of my father, the death and funeral, but she was avoiding it – only mentioned it in passing, saying 'cancer's an awful disease'.

Dad thought that Alli had abandoned her home, her family, and Finland.

Alli didn't come to her father's or her mother's funeral. You gotta be a cold-hearted person to leave your own brother and your folks.

The water started to bubble in the hot water tank. I closed the stove door, swept the bits of wood and dead flies up off the floor. It was only then that I noticed the old midsummer rose blooming outside the window. The rose that Alli had missed. The bush was nearly smothered with thick clumps of cow parsley. I peaked into the entry and noticed that my aunt was leaning on an overturned bucket. Her cheeks, powdered to the colour of cream, shuddered with the power of her snores. Listening to her wheeze, poisonous thoughts bubbled up in my mind.

You could have come here every summer if you wanted to sniff around at your roses and lap up your well water. You could have helped your brother when he was young and going through the death of his parents alone. You could have come to give support in the end, when your brother's wife became seriously ill. Did you manage to even send my father your condolences when my mother died? I didn't see anything like that when I went through my father's papers, in any case.

I stared at my aunt's wide open mouth. There lies a *cold-hearted person*, interested in nothing but her own self.

I stepped outside and slammed the sauna door, even though it might startle the old woman. Sauna smoke descended over the birch grove in the yard. I bound up a bath whisk with branches from the bed of the ditch, stripped the longest branch clean, twined it around the bunch and tied it. I still didn't know how to relate to this relative escaped from a photo album. My aunt had made a trip to Canada and tarried there for more than fifty years. I would have imagined that, having returned to where she grew up, she would want to sift through her memories one more time, at her leisure. That's why I was shocked by the stern command that rang out behind me on the path to the sauna: she had to be taken to the nearest railway station the very next day. From there she'd continue her journey – she didn't bother to reveal where to.

Just when I was about to suggest that we visit father's grave.

As I went to bed in the evening I spent a moment going through the Karvonen farmyard in my mind – and the odd feeling intensified. Was my aunt's pilgrimage to the old homestead mere nostalgia, nothing but theatre?

I sat up and listened to her breathing. The last time I had been to the graveyard, I had taken away the rain-battered roses and left a little space in front of father's headstone for Alli's flowers. It was such a naïve thought. And it had been so important to me.

Suddenly I was so angry that I wrung the bedspread till my knuckles were white. Not one little flower for her brother's grave. Not a sign of grief, aside from the mere statement of his illness.

What kind of vain butterfly was the woman, anyway?

The old wooden church flitted by in the side mirror, then disappeared into the shadows of the trees with their orange leaves.

I was driving quietly away from the town – the autumn river crept along nearly motionless, the expanse of fields spread on both sides of the road like a prairie, pale gold and mellow.

No wonder people from around here spoke their dialect so forcefully, as if they were yelling at each other from opposite walls of an enormous cabin. When there's space and openness, there's room for your voice. And there's no mistaking that everyone is master of himself and his own space.

There's nowhere to hide in this landscape, it's useless to look for shelter in the valleys or the clustered bluffs. Here you learn to stand steady in the middle of the windiest open field. And there's no shying away from things here, much less cringing. People take the measure even of someone they don't know – and whatever's on their minds comes out of their mouths, unvarnished.

I glanced at the roadmap spread on the front seat. Töysä. I repeated the odd word aloud, until I realised that I sounded like an idiot. I hesitated a second, then stepped on the gas. I thought I had turned in the right direction. There should be

a 'two-storey, red ochre house built on the river bank' somewhere around here. Which one of these countless houses? The directions I'd received were extremely sketchy.

I passed six riverbank houses – all of them light red, almost frightening in their Ostrobothnian uprightness. The road ended at the shore of the river, which was the local young people's gathering place, as evidenced by the remains of campfires and beer cans tossed into the grass. I backed into a grove of trees and went back the way I came slowly, from one cluster of mailboxes and dairy sheds to the next.

Pennants flapped from the flagpoles of some of the houses, every yard displayed the common measure of wealth: tractors and Mercedes along the walls of large granaries or threshing barns. I compared the sight to the more modest views inland and my mind was overcome with uncertainty. In this landscape you needed the real temperament: fearlessness and self-assurance. I was the wrong person for the task. A task that was, in fact, impossible.

When I reached the third mailbox I reflexively took a deep breath. I turned off the motor and took out the letter.

I didn't get away. Yli-Prinkkilä was the right name, hyphen and all.

I stepped onto the side of the road, lit a cigarette and looked around. No Karvonens or Väätäinens lived here, just people whose names were like their house: bold and multi-levelled.

The autumn sun blazed generously on the shoulders of the fields. Some of Yli-Prinkkilä's grain was already cut, some waited for the combine's blades. A blanket of sedge ran in a straight line, so did the banks of flowers laid out at the front of the yard. There were no circles or curves to be found.

Suddenly I had to turn around. The windows of the house looked deserted, not even a shadow of a curious face, no fluttering drapery. Still, I could have bet that someone was watching me.

I jammed my cigarette butt into the grass beside the road and bolted for the car. I folded the roadmap, shoved it into the glove compartment, and spread the letter, written with a trembling hand across my lap.

...Alli says she had gone to the other side of the road. Sitting in front of the dairy shed, resting. The tractor drove into the yard all of a sudden and she got out of there. That put the kibosh on the trip. She said the whole thing started to feel trivial. You can bet I put up a fuss about that. To travel thousands of kilometres and turn around without seeing anything but a tractor. I can never for the life of me understand Alli. There's something not right about her. On the outside you'd think she was a happy, friendly person. But I couldn't get that woman on a plane if I came at her with an axe, even if both her parents were dying. I flew off the handle a lot of times. And then that summer we got the sad message that your father had died. I told her it was her last chance to prove she was human. Told her you're going to your brother's funeral if you have to get there by cargo

ship. She said she still had to cut out the Donnell sisters' dresses, and then there was that barbecue next week. And that was the end of that.

I been thinking about it, and I reckon there's two possibilities. Maybe going to Finland is hard, difficult for her. Maybe she's afraid her heart couldn't stand all the memories.

Or maybe it's something worse. I hope it's not. But sometimes I think Alli just don't care. That she can't grieve like normal people do. Sure, she missed it all a lot, I could see that. But I could see there's something missing in Alli, too.

She had left a doll on Ylirinkkilä's dairy shed. One of those that has Catherine *written across the apron. I could tell she had some good reason for going there. But how a woman could come all the way from Canada, then take a detour at the dairy shed in Töysä, just a few steps from the house, that's something a man can't fathom.*

The baby was given away right after it was born. The seed of some drifter. In those days, babies were adopted through ads in the paper. We got an answer from Ostrobothnia. Later on, this Ylirinkkilä fellow married Alli's daughter.

But if you do happen to drive out that way, here's directions: a red-and-white house on the banks of the river. Big fields all around it. The name's on the mailbox.

If you get as far as the yard, tell them Alli died on the first of August. And could you ask Katariina not to judge her too harshly? Alli was just a child herself back then. And she was in such a hurry to get away from home. It weren't easy for a young girl to carry a shame like that. I wonder if something broke inside her back then. I've thought about it many long nights. You see, even your own home can be a den of wolves sometimes...

I put my head against the steering wheel and let my arms hang limp. Weariness sank into my limbs, it was all I could do to breathe.

I'd read the letter from Canada I don't know how many times, first in a frenzy, then with horror at the way I, a bystander, was sent to wash out someone else's dirty laundry. Sometimes the letter lay in a ball in a corner of the desk drawer, sometimes I spread it out with my hands, and cursed people's indifference and downright stupidity.

On the long drive from Savo to Ostrobothnia, a thought that was gnawing at me deep down bubbled up to the surface like a dry cork. A single light and yet chafing word: *trivial.* The word she had given to explain her retreat.

And I would have used that very same word to define the entire year that had passed since my father's death. Everything felt trivial – the summer drifting by, the overgrown garden, the chirping birds who had nested in the birdhouses in the yard at the Karvonen cottage. I was cold to the bone about things that had seemed so important before.

Taking a break at a gas station, it hit me in the eye again like the devil's face. What if it was in me, too? The same family coldness. Suddenly I could imagine how Alli felt at the fork in the road at the Yli-Prinkkilä place, looking into an unknown farmyard. The triviality of it all, the transitoriness. She was late. Her

child was already an Ostrobothnian farmer's wife in her sixties, and Finland was a different country than it was when she left it.

Did the same genetic coldness overtake me, too, on the very day of my father's funeral? At the memorial service I was thinking about how Alli wasn't there, father's only sister. At first I was so heavy-hearted that as I picked up the piece of cake on a plate, I salted it with tears. And immediately after that a thought: who cares? What joy would I get from Alli any more? My father wouldn't have wanted Alli at his funeral. He would have wanted her there in the flesh, to be hugged, to reminisce their common past.

After the funeral, the weeks crept by, overcome with torpor. A trip to the cabin didn't sound inviting. Even on the most summery days, you felt a north wind blowing there. There wasn't anyone there any more to marvel with over the bursting gentian flowers or to make plans to tar the leaky boat.

You see, even your own home can be a den of wolves sometimes...

When you were chasing after riches in Canada, did you have any right at all to criticise your family, plodding away in poverty back in your home country? I gulped. I sounded prejudiced, even to my own ears.

Father was a good father to me, it was as simple as that. What kind of brother might he have been to his sister? Was my father's longing for his sister a figment of my imagination? And what about Alli, did she get nothing but scolding and arrogance from her family? What was that demand about, that Alli should feel humble? Was it a desire to humiliate her? Father inherited the farm as if he were an only child – no one ever said a word about his sister's share.

What was the real reason I was trying to understand it from every point of view? I wanted to think like my father. There was something wrong with Alli, something left out. Alli was icy inside. She abandoned her child, her home, her country.

I opened the thermos and wrapped sandwich and thought about my resolution. Under no circumstances would I set foot in the yard at Yli-Prinkkilä, let alone knock on the door or ask whether Alli Karvonen's abandoned daughter lived there. I would not serve as a messenger from the dead, definitely not. I wouldn't face the puzzled, angry looks, hear the merciless, Ostrobothnian accusations echoing from the log walls.

I wiped the crumbs from around my mouth and peeped in the mirror. I turned my face to one side, then the other. They might see something distantly familiar in me – the large, bent nose or pepper-coloured, slanted eyes. They would become provoked, ruffled, they would skulk, flash their fangs, surround me, and pounce.

Sweat ran down from my armpits to my waist. I opened the window a crack, there wasn't much oxygen in the car. My hands were trembling as I tossed the wrappers and thermos onto the back seat. I had to get out of there before the front door opened and someone stepped onto the grounds. Before someone drove into the yard or rode a bicycle up to the mailbox.

'You lost, ma'am?'

Or maybe they'd climb silently over the grassy roadside with a berry bucket over their arm and rap on the slightly open side window. That was something I absolutely hadn't anticipated.

I was paralysed, startled into stillness. A woman was standing quietly with a bucket. Out of the corner of my eye I registered a blue parka, brown corduroy pants, a white bucket full to the brim with lingonberries. I finally forced myself to wind down the window slowly and shook my head.

'Just taking a coffee break. I'm on my way to Seinäjoki.'

The woman bent closer and I was able to see her face. I was startled. There was nothing familiar about her, no glimmer of Alli.

'Good a place as any for a coffee break. Sure is pretty weather for a drive. Woods have turned colour, and no wind.'

I felt relieved; she was pleasantly unfamiliar, an unfamiliar manner, unfamiliar looks. No forced kinship, no recognition, and no need to recognise.

'Looks like a good year for lingonberries.'

The woman stretched her back and offered me a taste. I scooped out a handful of berries and thanked her. The sharp sourness filled my mouth, the taste of desolation.

'They're sure at their best, ain't they? I picked a bucket for the neighbour lady. She's been sick for a few weeks. Thought it might perk Katariina up to get some fresh vitamins.'

I swallowed the juice, the skins got stuck in my throat, made me cough.

'Get a piece stuck? I'll go get you a glass of water from Prinkkilä.'

'No, please don't!'

My words came out like an ugly squawk. I didn't even have time to be embarrassed, the whole situation seemed to be slipping out of my hands.

'I have to go now.'

I started the car and rolled the window up in a panic. I didn't dare look in the rear-view until the next crossroads. The woman was still standing on the shoulder with her head on one side, the bucket over her arm. I'm sure some odd questions were crossing her mind.

The blue and white road signs and the freight truck rushing ahead of me made me slam on the brakes.

I realised I had been driving down the gravel road of the village without paying any attention at all. 'They'll think I'm a thief, send the police after me', a voice kept thudding in my skull. I had sped up to that accelerating rhythm, heedless of the curves and washouts.

I listened to my own panting breath. The car was smotheringly hot – I hadn't realised the air conditioning wasn't on. Neither was my seat-belt, or the headlights. Instead I had switched on the heat in my hurried exit. I struggled out of the car

and anxiously opened all of the doors, as well as the back hatch. I groped for a cigarette, but then gave up on lighting it after three attempts. I breathed the fresh air deeply into my lungs and tried to calm down. I had been awfully close to meeting my cousin face to face.

Grain waved in the neighbouring field, a whirlwind churned out among the stalks at the edge of the forest – you could see its advance in the rhythmically twisting ears of grain. The large spirals made them dance, the stalks bent and rose as if under a gigantic paintbrush.

I spread out my arms. The coolness dried my armpits, the whirlwind came closer, it reached the edge of the field, rose up over the bank and whirled sand and dry grass into the air. The quivering heat of the highway struck the side of the cool tornado and the whirlwind changed its direction and came toward the car.

I retreated against the back hatch in surprise, the sand buzzed angrily against my arms and cheeks. I heard the gust of wind swat open the letter that was still lying on the seat. The driving wind bumped around in the open car until suddenly it changed direction again; it struck my back, cold, and pried my blouse loose from my sweating breasts.

Something large and light coloured took off from behind me, it glided high into the air, then fell onto the road and continued bouncing in fits and starts along the village in the direction I had come from. I took a couple of steps toward it before I realised that the wind was just leading me on a chase after the snow-white brimmed hat, back towards the village. I ran after the hat a little way until the wind wrenched it up off the surface of the road and up into the air again, toward the open fields of Yli-Prinkkilä.

I stopped, winded, and lifted a hand to shield my eyes, but I couldn't see the hat anywhere now. It had lain on the back seat since the summer, forgotten under the newspapers and gloves. My only concrete memento of Alli.

I turned and walked back to my car and smiled at myself. Alli's hat hadn't been left to me on purpose. It was just another accident, another thing forgotten, like so many things in Alli's life. The train had already jerked into motion as I strode from the car toward the train's window with the intercepted hat in my hand. I could still see in my mind how Alli waved her hand carelessly, pointed her finger at me, and clapped her hand on her head. As if I would have been glad to walk the streets of the city in my American aunt's lacy hat.

After the whirlwind, the air felt cool, there was a booming somewhere far off. An autumn thunder storm was brewing. I closed the doors of the car, gathered up my cigarettes and sandwich wrappers, which the wind had scattered, and brushed the sand from the seats.

A raft of cloud swelled beyond the woods and stretched itself over the field. The landscape wove itself into violet shadows. The first drops of rain fell against the windshield sparsely and lazily.

I listened to the patter of the rain, my own heartbeat. Who or what would

essentially guide my actions? One surprising whirlwind had washed away my stubborn certainty. A runaway flying saucer flashing before my eyes.

I pounded my fist on the dashboard. It's very easy to churn out letters over the ocean from Canada, to ask an innocent person to do your dirty work, pleading old age and death.

Autumn phlox drooped after the storm, damp and closed up. The setting sun reflected pale and yellow on the horizon, some water bird croaked with a dry, throaty sound and flapped its lazy wings as it followed the dark, motionless river.

I vainly shook the sand from the worn old hat. The tiny holes of the lace were filled with smelly slime from the field. Some people might have considered it an omen that the hat finally turned up in the field at Yli-Prinkkilä, not far from the farmyard. I don't believe in that sort of thing.

I left the hat perched on the garden swing under the oak tree in the yard.

I held tight to the letter in my hand as I stepped onto the broad log steps. Alli hadn't had the courage to come this far. Action withered into intent, but crossing the wide gravel road and climbing the two massive steps was left undone.

The house was quiet with evening, as was the neighbourhood. I took a deep breath and hung back a moment longer. I searched for the right words to begin with. My mind was as blank as a snowy field.

I glanced behind me, looked once more at the tattered hat. A couple of yellow oak leaves had drifted down onto it – and for just a moment I saw Allie Carson's lonely grave, among the shadows of the oak branches, a little mound adorned with yellowing maple leaves somewhere in the hills of Thunder Bay.

TRANSLATED BY LOLA ROGERS