

Annemari Warro

# *Tom, Maiden of St. Donat's*





To Eeva,  
my muse and a loyal executor of the UWC ideals.

And to my friend Alison.

Annemari Warro

Tom, Maiden of St. Donat's

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## Part I: Tom and Her Friendships

### 1. Headmaster's brainwave

It was on Monday the 1<sup>st</sup> of September at 5 o'clock in the morning that the black taxi swerved into our yard. We did have a car of our own and we only used a taxi in exceptional circumstances or in an emergency. This was now what you could call an exceptional morning. My stomach didn't seem to be able to cope with breakfast at this ungodly hour. My Mum was fluttering between the kitchen and the hall in her nightgown trying to push a bag of snacks into my hands, and in the end she was left standing helplessly by the window waving me goodbye as my Dad came with me into the taxi with the purpose of taking me to Pori airport. They were better qualified than me to understand that from this moment on I would only come to my childhood home as a welcomed guest, but that I would never actually live there again. I was leaving the nest.

I sat on the back seat of the taxi holding on to my brown handbag made of imitation leather. Inside the bag were my passport and my purse full of English pounds and traveller's cheques. Sitting in a taxi was something I hadn't done very often, and what was about to happen after the taxi ride was all completely

new and foreign to me. The people. The language and the customs.

My palms were sweaty against the imitation leather of the bag. Soon I would be boarding an airplane for the first time in my life. I was really looking forward to it, I felt a lurch in the pit of my stomach, but I wasn't afraid.

I promised my Dad to write home every week. Making a phone call would be far too expensive, my pocket money wouldn't stretch to it. In case of an emergency I would have to make a collect call, paid for by the person receiving the call. We had gone through all this the previous day, and my Dad had shed some words of wisdom.

– You'll have to take responsibility for yourself earlier than we had envisaged. We trust you and we expect to hear from you every week. You will get to know many new friends, which is great, but we would prefer it if you didn't come back with a foreign boyfriend. A Finnish girl is better off with a Finnish boy.

My Dad looked at my Mum who nodded in agreement, and then he turned his gaze back to me. I was a little taken aback, but I managed to mumble something.

– I guess so.

At the airport Dad gave me a pat on the shoulder, wished me a good trip and said:

– A card will suffice.

The morning flight to Helsinki was hazy and hasty, I think my ears were a bit blocked as I didn't want to

waste the candy I had been handed by the stewardess. I thought I might find better use for it during the next months.

In Helsinki, my travel companions Jarmo and Pasi had already found each other. They were easily distinguishable among the businessmen in suits, and tourists heading for a holiday in the sun. We actually shook hands, and the boys sounded a bit self-important as they laughed at my virgin flight.

– We'll get real food on the plane to London, Pasi knew.

And we did get food. The plates were tiny, as were the forks and knives. I put aside the little bag of sugar that came with the coffee, as I noticed that unused bags were thrown in the bin. I was lucky to sit by the window so nobody saw me slip the bag of sugar in my handbag.

I thought the flight to London Heathrow was amazing, I could have continued forever. All I needed to do was push a button and my seatback would fall down into sleeping position. It felt really luxurious. Looking out of the window I could only see the sky, nothing else. There was a little curtain that you could pull over the window if you felt too dazzled by the sun. I was suddenly pulled out of my reverie by the disturbing fact that the curtain looked exactly the same as the curtains we had in our classroom back home.

The sun forced me to close my eyes even though I didn't feel tired in the slightest.

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An early fly was buzzing behind the grey curtains of the classroom windows, captured between the double glazing. Presumably it had been revived by the sunshine on this February Tuesday, rather than been invigorated by the English grammar lesson. I quite liked the English lessons, the same way as I liked most of my school subjects, but now I felt a little bit tired. The school curriculum on the sixth grade of Secondary School was only slightly more demanding than the year before, but there were many extra- curricular things that were infinitely much more complicated now that I was sixteen, and on the upper grades. Things such as friendships, the right kind of clothes, and other questions related to your looks.

Eira, the Headmaster's wife, and our English teacher, seemed to be going on about some scholarships. Several Upper Secondary School students from Rauma had attended exchange programmes in the USA already at the beginning of the 70's, so this was nothing new. I had even met one American exchange student, Patty, in the home of one of my teachers. The place Eira was going on about was somewhere in England or something, and you didn't come back to your old school to take the matriculation examination, you took it there. I figured that nobody from my year would like to go to a place like that. We had a good group, the best in the school.

The fly squeezed itself into some hidden hole. The lesson was over and we were making our way out of the stuffy classroom, Kaisa, Eeva-Maija and me.

– Hannamari, would you be interested in applying for this scholarship? Would you like to study abroad?

I turned around and my mates left me facing Eira's enthusiastic expression.

– Uh, I don't know...why not, I was forced to mutter under my breath, too embarrassed to say anything else. Eira beckoned me to follow her, and I obeyed, of course.

The next thing I knew, instead of attending the Arts class, I was standing in front of the towering figure of our Headmaster Mr. Nyroos nicknamed Jali as he was droning on about the urgency of getting the application underway. I was in the perfect position to stare at the roof of his mouth.

– You want to get recommendations from your piano teacher and dance teacher. And dig up all the certificates you have ever received from your hobbies. I take it that you're a Scout?

(Yep, went there once, only to see that they were sewing.) I nodded my head backwards as Jali was standing so close to me that nodding forward would have meant banging my head against his chin.

The Headmaster went on ranting, at the same time inching his way closer and closer, so that in the end my back was arched against the railing of the upper floor corridor.

– The School will give you a recommendation, too. Now you just have to ask your parents for permission, and on Thursday we have to get the papers in the express post, the deadline for the applications is on Friday, Jali concluded.

We didn't talk about the scholarship with my mates. I wondered what to say at home as I didn't actually know very much at all about the whole thing.

At the dinner table that evening I was cutting my potato into little pieces, at the same time listening to my younger sister Kati complaining about the fish bones. At some point I delivered the Headmaster's message in passing. Mum and Dad listened to me as I tried to repeat everything I remembered about the subject. I also told them that this whole thing wouldn't cost them anything. My Mum was the first one to recover enough to point out that two years in an Upper Secondary School somewhere abroad was a very long time to spend away from home.

– What if you never come back, she said, with a quivering voice.

Dad didn't say anything for a very long time, but then he cleared his throat and shot me a funny glance from under his eyebrows.

– I think you should consider it. I have a feeling that if you apply for this scholarship, you might actually get it.

My own thoughts were exactly the opposite. I had so much respect for our bulky headmaster and his friendly wife that I didn't want to let them down. So, I thought if I just sent the papers off, I could forget all about it.

On Thursday my Dad took the large envelope with all its contents to the Main Post Office in Rauma, I for my part was totally absorbed in a romantic and exciting novel about the life of a young Finnish Carelian woman.

I had borrowed the book from my friend Aino and it was written by a popular Finnish author who seemed to know an awful lot about history. In my imagination I was co-existing with Pirita in the Novgorod of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and I had no room in my mind for conquering the world in modern-day England.

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In March we had exams. The other exams I quite enjoyed, finding them easy enough, but the advanced mathematics course that I took in the Upper Secondary School gave me trouble and I couldn't take excellent grades for granted. I managed to get a niner (on a scale from four to ten), possibly in honour of my sixteenth birthday.

Then one day, quite unexpectedly, the mail arrived with an official- looking envelope with my name printed on it. Kati hadn't been able to curb her curiosity, she had opened the letter. I grassed her up to my parents as I thought she had committed nothing short of a crime.

– She's eleven, and she won't do it again, said my Dad with an air of finality. - Get hold of yourself and tell us what's in it.

It was a letter inviting me to an interview in Helsinki with the Finnish Cultural Foundation, located in Bulevardi, an address that was familiar to me only through the Finnish version of Monopoly.

Dad drove me to Helsinki the day before the big day. The drive from Rauma to Helsinki in our car took almost four hours. Of course I had been to Helsinki before: there had been a summer trip to Korkeasaari Zoo and school trips to the amusement park Linnanmäki as well as to the opera. I didn't know what to expect, so I didn't feel nervous in the slightest and it didn't even occur to me to prepare myself in any way. Dad encouraged me to be myself, and not to worry about the outcome of the interview, whether negative or positive. Jali had been very pleased and told me that I would do just fine, which I doubted as I couldn't help worrying about my West Coast accent, which I was sure I wouldn't be able to hide in such a nerve-wrecking situation.

We stopped to have coffee and doughnuts at Lahnajärvi and I dropped a greasy doughnut on my pants. Dad gave me an exasperated look and obviously thought that "being myself" just might not be quite enough, after all.

Dad left me with some old acquaintances in Helsinki and returned to Rauma. Uncle Toivo would take me to the Cultural Foundation in the morning, he was on pension and had the time.

Toivo, nicknamed Topi in our family, came with me in the morning as we took the tram to the city centre. I had never sat on a tram before, or at least I didn't remember having ever done so even if I had done it at the time when they still had trams in Turku in my childhood. All the way into the centre, as we sat there

in the crowded carriage, Topi interviewed me in English. I felt rather embarrassed even though it looked like nobody was paying any attention to us. People kept staring out of the windows, presumably worrying about their workday or trying to convince themselves that they hadn't left the stove on. I was quite taken aback to notice that Topi could speak English. My Dad didn't speak any foreign languages, and my Mum would never even have dreamed about trying to say something in Swedish or German (let alone Latin), although she had taken them in her matriculation examination. She had never studied English at school. But Topi had been a civil servant, and civil servants at these modern times were expected to have language skills.

When we walked in, we very soon found out that the interview would take the whole day. Topi promised to come for me at five pm. There we were, sitting in the lobby of the Cultural Foundation: seven boys and five girls. Some of us looked quite cool and at ease, others greenish pale, but we all eyed each other with mild admiration, checking out the competition. Out of the twelve of us, two boys and one girl would be picked out and sent to that School with a two year scholarship, that much we knew. (Unless the same thing happened as in the 1960 Miss Finland Pageant, where they nominated the previous year's Miss Finland for another term as all the contestants for 1960 were too hideous! I had read this in *Apu Magazine* and the thought made me secretly shake with laughter. "Hanna", I said to myself

reproachfully, “you’re in luck as this isn’t a beauty contest”). The rules of the Scholarship Foundation specifically stated that two boys with Finnish as their mother tongue be sent to the Atlantic College every year, with a scholarship to cover the costs of the two year period, at the end of which they would take their matriculation examination there. The fate of the third scholarship had not been articulated so clearly, but for the sake of equality, a girl was well positioned to have a go at it.

My interview in English was carried out by a friendly lady, and we started by making some small talk about the weather for a while. Topi’s last minute prep was dead on target, and I made a mental apology to him for being so embarrassed at the time.

We also had a medical check. One after the other we were called out and taken behind closed doors. At some point we were offered coffee and small sandwiches as well as Domino biscuits. We made feeble attempts at conversation, talking mostly about school, but most of the time the atmosphere was constrained and awkward. We were, of course, competing against each other, but being so young, the most important battle took place deep down in our hearts. Do I really want this?

My final true test was in the afternoon as I sat at the long table in front of the panel consisting mostly of the venerable old gentlemen of the Cultural Foundation. At the head of the table sat L.Arvi P. Poijärvi, whose

mere name made my hands shake as I was holding my cup of coffee.

I guess they tried to lighten the mood by starting with an easy question:

– So, Hannamari, what’s your favourite food? asked the dark haired elegant lady who was the only female member of the panel.

– I like all kinds of food, for example fried fish and mashed potatoes. When we had domestic science lessons at school and we got to choose what we would make, I made ground liver burgers and mash, but I burned the potatoes and the kitchen smelled awful.

I was recalling the previous spring and describing the situation as truthfully as possible until I suddenly realized it had nothing to do with getting the scholarship. At least not in the way that would be desirable. I shut up and I think I closed my eyes, too, feeling ashamed. The interview nevertheless continued in a sober fashion.

– What do you plan to do after school, young lady from Rauma?

I gave them the answer I thought my parents would appreciate:

– I have planned to apply to study m.mh.edicine... in Turku.

I tried to speak clearly as my interviewers seemed to be a rather grey-haired lot, but hard as I tried, I couldn’t hide my accent, let alone stop my voice from quivering. I also noticed that my voice creaked in an unpleasant way when I tried to speak standard Finnish. One of the



gentlemen told me that one of the earlier scholarship holders was already studying to become a doctor.

– Do you know that we only send top students to the College? (Huh? No kidding.)

– The very first person we sent was Pentti Kouri, and we are very proud of him. (I made soft agreeing sounds. Pentti Who?)

– Why do you think you would do well in a place like that?

– I'm interested in studying and meeting new people. And I want to be involved in international activities. I have several pen friends abroad, in Europe and in the USA, I couldn't help showing off.

The panelists were smiling, some of them in a friendly manner, others looking slightly bored. One of the latter ones was a top student from previous years, Mikko, who had studied in my school some years back.

– In your application you mention that you like to read books, including science fiction. Which scifi book did you read? (Here we go, of course they had to pick on that! I only put it in my application for the heck of it.)

– A-a-ctually I haven't had the time to read any science fiction yet, but I would like to, I had to confess as I felt the red colour creeping up my cheeks. I sighed. (My headmaster would be so disappointed.)

I couldn't help feeling a bit annoyed about this habit of mine of blushing and giving away my feelings. The panel went quiet, and I was about to leave.

– You're into music, I heard a calm voice from the head of the table. – What can you tell to foreigners about Finnish music and composers?

A Finnish teenage girl Hanna finds herself studying at an international boarding school in Wales at the time when the only contact home was an occasional letter. She shares her room and her entire life with the artistic Elena, rich and dazzling Justine and warm-hearted Sarah. The four girls constantly get into trouble with the Housemaster Mr. Williams as they like nothing better than pulling a prank.

The book is based on the author's real life experiences at Atlantic College in the 1970's.



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