

Dedicated to my three children, Riikka, Laura and Janne

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RETURNING TO THE VALLEY OF THE VANANTAKA RIVER

Prologue

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Epilogue

PROLOGUE

They say it's the hottest midsummer eve morning ever recorded. No hail, no snow, no rain, no sleet. But heat.

It was the Bible school graduation day. I would not graduate, though, because I had only completed seven quarters out of the required eight for finishing the second year. Once I cracked my ankle bone and once I flew to Australia and once I skipped a quarter or two for no reason whatsoever. But I wanted to go and celebrate together with my friends who were graduating on that gorgeous midsummer morning, whether from year one, year two or year three of the scheduled school program.

The place was buzzing with students dressed in different color gowns, depending on which year they were graduating from. I looked at the young girls in their ironed gowns, blue like the midsummer night sky which would hardly die away at all in June in these latitudes. A year earlier I had been wearing a blue cloak like that myself and felt funny and happy and hilarious all the same, being twice their age, or thrice. Such pretty butterflies they were, blue and red and black, the most advanced ones wearing black. They were seated according to their color codes, ready to receive their diplomas and step forward for being photographed and applauded. Suddenly I saw my friend among the red cap graduates, among the ones that were graduating from the second year. This is not possible. This is not right. She has completed only seven quarters just like me, and therefore, definitively misses one. Yet there she sat, looking just as happy and careless and innocent in her little red riding hood costume as any lassie on the way to the grandmother who has flu. I was so upset. I was so mad.

Altogether amazed. Then Sofia stood up in her black outfit and four corner cap and shared about Matthew 6 and the little birds who do not gather, do not sow and reap but just fly around and thrive, enjoying the flowers whose sole assignment it is, likewise, to prosper and bloom and blossom and send forth their fantastic fragrance, never bothering whether they should wear blue or scarlet or black or plum. Not even Solomon in all his splendor displayed the like perfection and glory. So why get upset. My friend was wearing red, the color and cap of the students who had finished the second year, and though I struggled to overcome my aggravation and anger, the scarlet costume of that hummingbird and the roses that matched the color of the cloak just went on burning in my bosom like a bar of iron heated in a

Babylonian furnace for the friends of Daniel. How would I ever recover from the shock of running across this exotic fowl at the graduation celebration on June 21?

What a scorching seven quarter certificate and diploma I was handed that day, a crimson color metaphor and chart suggesting that a quarter or two more in the school of character would hardly jeopardize the pilgrimage of this elderly saint, staggering towards a city the gates of which are said to be made of one singly pearl each.

A Midsummer Night's Dream. I went walking in the hot evening, met four people who were all drunk and among who three wanted to pray with me. Would they be accepted simply based on my convictions, based on my moody midsummer night mission? Days would diminish from now on and I did not even get to graduate from the second year, let alone the third. In the rhododendron park all the blossoms had died away and I picked a tiny baby shoe from the sandy ground. A pink Cinderella slipper, leather. I left the moccasin on the same wooden bench where I once found my orange mitten, on a cold mid-winter afternoon a year or two earlier. Somebody had rescued it. A mitten, then, a moccasin, now. But the blow and pain of spotting my friend among the row of red cloak graduates instead of the blue would not ease, would not cease. She had been one quarter short the year before and after finishing four more quarters she must have been one quarter short once again. Pure mathematics. I looked for her among the patches of blue robe students and bluebell graduates and then I suddenly saw her sitting among clusters of red cloaks and red caps and I shunned. She does not belong to that flower bed of crimson tulips, not her. Why. She misses the same quarter as I, though years apart. But she looks so happy. She looks so happy in her cherry color gown. There must be a mistake, I thought, and felt that I did not love her anymore. Could not love her anymore. Her robe was the wrong color. Her cloak was the color of wine, red juicy wine from the vineyards and slopes of Switzerland, or California, and this though she had only completed seven quarters from among the required eight.

Indeed, there was some sort of mistake or misunderstanding, a special arrangement applied to her circumstances and former academic achievements, even a two-year Bible school completed elsewhere in town, but my graduation celebration was wrecked. I sat in my caramel color blouse and orange skirt and felt like Jael in the Old Testament. Where is my hammer. Where is the tent of meeting. I even went to the school office to complain and question about the justification of the color of her robe, which was a dumb thing to do of course and only showed how hurt and wounded I was. And childish.

It was not until at home that I remembered what Jesus said to Peter who complained about John's deviating destiny compared to his own. How about John? Will he not be martyred, as well? Will he not suffer loss, too? None of your business, Jesus instructed Peter. None of your business. He has his path, you have yours. So, most likely there was not anything wrong with the graduation ceremony at all, I concluded, defiant, gloomy, throwing my orange skirt on the bed and hanging the pink blouse in the closet, next to the ninety-nine others. The fault was all mine, I told myself, and so was the offense, and the response, and my turning to the school office with objection and exasperation. The good thing about it, though, was that out of the frustration, out of the loss and anger and sense of injustice being done to me, I grabbed my pen and started to write.

PART 1

I FROM THE HILL OF THE HE GOAT

CHAPTER 1

I always loved to write. Ever since I was a plump little first grader, and a second grader, I loved to write. My first story was about a run-away girl who shipwrecked somewhere close to the Estonian coastline and built a hut in the woods. It was an infantile adaptation of Defoe's classic of course, and many were the mushrooms and berries that this Alice in the wonderland had to eat before she built her second raft and shipwrecked again and decided to wait till the ocean would freeze and she could cross the gulf on foot, walking on water. Which she did. How happy her folks back home were to see her again and receive her back as a celebrated champion. Never again would she run away and never again would they be mean to her no more.

The title of the very first story by me that was academically evaluated, ever, and written when I was ten, was called *A Raindrop relates*. Except that I wrote it in my own tongue, of course. *Sadepisara kertoo*. The young candidates, wrapped in whatever color gowns they listed, had to write an essay on a given topic, and the outcome would compile fifty per cent of the points of the entrance examination to the grammar school. How fun it was to write about the glistening drop of rain, glued to a mountain ash after a fresh midsummer night shower. Such a creative storyteller the raindrop was, too, since it shared the adventure of a teddy bear who likewise hung on the tree, thrust there by an angry girl whose bedroom window happened to be right above the said mountain ash, or rowan tree, depending on the color of the clusters of berries that the service tree produced, whether orange or carnelian.

However, the jury did not like the story about the unfortunate teddy bear which had suffered such unmerited cruelty by the girl living in a red brick building upon a hill both hilarious and high. They said the young writer had completely missed the purpose of the paper and the parameter of the topic. Why. It should have been an analysis of the circulation of water, a chemically or environmentally minded account on how rainwater falls upon the mountains, flows down to the oceans and is sucked back to the atmosphere and made into clouds of moisture and further downfall of rain and sleet and snow and blizzards. The little girl with her two braided pigtails got miserable points from her story. Next to nothing. No harm done, she said to herself, and biting her crimson color lips prepared for the second half of the entrance examination which was mathematics. No problem, she thought. I can count. My grandfather is a famous mathematician. I can count.

But it would not be so. Not at all. The problem to be solved by the young applicant was dramatically against everything she thought was proper, fair and pleasant to the soul. It was about the amount of barbed wire that would be needed to shut a certain sheepfold inside the confined area of so and so many square meters of grassland. Never, she thought. No way. In Sunday school they said that the sheep ran free upon the mountain slopes, and should one of them get lost, Jesus would leave the 99 and go for the one missing. Was not the story about the sheep pen such. So, the calculations ran away from her ten-year-old brain like the one lost lamb, and the poles around the wired fence, so and so many meters away from each other, started changing places, getting stuck and acquiring shapes and colors that would never submit to the laws of mathematics and settle down to be counted. Like the pink elephants in Disney's Dumbo, the elements of the equation had a mind of their own, and nothing was to be done about it. How can you measure mess or make calculations about chaos? The points that I gathered from the test were next to nil. Naught. Nevertheless, they accepted me in the school, perhaps because my older brother, a year prior, had managed in everything with outstanding points. I got 23 points, and if it was out of a hundred, my reception in the institute was a sign and a wonder.

I still went on loving writing and reading and made sure all the readable material in the local library building found its way to the little bedroom above the mountain ash which is no more. My appetite was insatiable. Sometimes the teacher also made me read aloud my essays, standing in front of the class, and I enjoyed it tremendously. When I then graduated from college at the age of eighteen, I did much better than when I first entered that educational institute not far away from the river and the hill where we lived. Much better. The title of my essay, then, was *Art and moral values* and they gave me 95 points out of a hundred.

Around that time there were serious famines in Africa and Vietnam war in Asia, and I firmly believed it was my providential purpose and portion to save the world, one way or another. So, I found myself at the university, in the department of forestry and agriculture, studying chemistry and physics which never were my favorite subjects at all. On the contrary. But what if I graduated as an expert on nutrition and worldwide food production and eventually solved the problem of starvation and lack on planet earth? Would not the toil and labor be worth it, then? Well, chemistry I managed, just about, for the first six months or at least until the Christmas break, but physics I failed. I flunked. The calculations were just too complex, and the applications,

appalling. This is not my cup of tea, I thought, and was by and by transformed into a student of English philology and aesthetics.

I loved the Anglo-Saxon tongue. I loved Middle-English, Milton, Shakespeare, American literature. Poetry. But before I continue my story, I want to share something more about my early years upon the Hill of the He goat where I grew up.

CHAPTER 2

I was born very skinny, so skinny that my father told my mother never to bring home anything so pathetic anymore. She is too skinny, bony like a plucked chicken, he said, indirectly suggesting that the mansion on the island where they lived at the time was worthy of a more respectable looking baby girl than that. Mom did as she was told and her next baby, a boy, weighed twice as much as I.

I, however, took no time gaining weight, and judging by the pictures taken on the island the summer following, I was really plump at six months old, plump, bald, and brown like a chocolate cake. Obviously, I loved the sea and the sun and the wind and the waves and therefore, made progress, weight-wise, amazingly speedily, and in a matter of months became round like a beach ball. In the mid nineteen hundreds sun tan lotions had not been invented yet, or so it seems, and babies were placed in direct sunlight both deliberately and frequently, to guarantee sufficient intake of vitamin D. Mom was a doctor of medicine and really particular about vitamin D, so much so that by the time we lived upon the elevation between a river and a railroad, we were fed white vitamin enriched chocolate from the drug store in the neighboring suburb, the suburb where I thought all the gypsies in the world lived.

During the dark season we were seated before a lamp which we called Alpine lamp, wearing funny rattling sunglasses over our eyes, like cups joined together with a rubber band, one cup for each eye, and eating cookies that stuck in the teeth and the roof of the mouth. Mom set the time. The ceremony was solemn and serious, and the lamp smelled like burning aluminum while our mouths were filled with cookies. One cookie per one set of sunshine. Then, a sudden solar eclipse.

The Hill of the He goat, much like all the other hills and valleys in the country after the war, was remarkably fertile, and there were children everywhere. We had a huge sledge which we called *Vesikelkka*, and it was so big that all the existing offspring of the hill could jump on it and dash down the hill, either in the direction of the school or in the opposite direction where the local library was. No cars found their way to the magic mountain, except my father 's beetle, the buggy of which the first version was blue and the next, black. How proud I was of the second version since the window at the back was bigger by far and not split in the middle anymore. The vehicle with the split rear window my father had sold to a man who lived with the Communists on the other side of our gooseberry bushes. And how embarrassed

A love story, a song, a testimony of a woman's journey from childhood to adulthood, from the riverbanks of her earliest memories back to the hill and the lowlands where she first grew up in the north.

"Returning to the Valley of the Vanantaka River" is an autobiographical account about the challenges and victories she encounters on her way to personal freedom. The book will both move and amuse, it will make you laugh and it will make you cry. Gentle humor softens the author's at times relentless questioning about the nature of reality and the worth and value of human beings in an ever-changing world.

