

ONE-LEGGED
WHOLE-MINDED
HALF-GAY



T. H. HUKKA

ONE-LEGGED,
WHOLE-MINDED,
HALF-GAY

*For all
who want to exist
and live
even though
the life situation seems
colourless, black,
and it feels like you're all the time
at the edge of the abyss,
holding your breath.
Breathe freely,
because there is no abyss,
and open your eyes to the colours,
which are hiding
in the white dots.*

T. H. Hukka

One-legged, Whole-minded, Half-gay

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Original edition: "Jalkapuolimieliipuolipuolihomojuttu" © 2021
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English translation: © 2026 T. H. Hukka

Illustration and cover design: T. H. Hukka

Publisher: BoD · Books on Demand, Mannerheimintie 12 B,
00100 Helsinki, bod@bod.fi

Printing house: Libri Plureos GmbH, Friedensallee 273, 22763
Hamburg, Germany

ISBN: 978-952-80-7592-9

Preface to the English version

When I originally wrote this story, the term "non-binary" was not yet widely used in Finland. Yet there was some discussion about "gender identity" in society, and some transgender people even managed to get into "gender reassignment treatment", as it was called at the time.

In Finland, the situation has changed since then in a positive direction, generally, but unfortunately there is even persecution going on against trans people around the world at the moment, and non-binary people are not legally recognized in many countries yet. That's why I feel that the topic of this story is still relevant, even more so in other parts of the world than in my home country, and I decided to translate this story into English, even though I didn't have a professional translator to help me. I tried my best to bring out the message of the story, despite any grammatical or word errors or clumsiness of expression.

I often had to search for words, which were unfamiliar to me, from internet, and often the AI suggested expressions for me, from which I tried to choose the most suitable one. In addition, I took advantage of the correction reading tool, so that there wouldn't be a disturbing number of spelling mistakes in the text. However, I didn't do this translation totally with AI. If there are word errors in this translation that make the content obscure, it's due to my own lack of ability as a translator. I humbly and self-ironically admit this. As I said to myself and my loved ones; I'm not doing this to win any literary prize, but to get the message of the content to spread to a wider audience. I just hope that the imperfection of the translation doesn't hinder my goal too much.

The characters in the original story live in Eastern Finland and their way of speaking contains nuances of the North Karelian dialect. That's how I speak, too. It would be impossible to translate that peculiar dialect into any other language, or to reproduce the expressive

power of the language I use myself with the vocabulary of another language. The Finnish language is expressive and rich, and I couldn't always find words in English that match the words I would have liked to use. And of course, I don't speak English well enough to play with words and expressions in the way I do when writing in Finnish.

So, I've had to settle for the fact that the characters in the story speak mostly some kind of standard language and not any special dialect or slang. Maybe you can imagine them living in some imaginary northern European country where most of the people speak some kind of English and teenagers study in upper secondary education from the age of about sixteen.

I hope that the thoughts described by the narrator of the story and the conversations of the characters, despite their linguistic simplicity and “inauthenticity”, speak to the reader.

The story is about the right to be who you are, to be loved and to love, as you are, in this world of prejudice-filled, fearful people. It's the right of all of us, and with this book I wish it especially for all queer, genderqueer and neurodivergent people, and people with disabilities or mental health problems.

T. H. Hukka, a non-binary creature from the periphery

Chapter 1

It was August, and I was sitting there on the same bench again. Two years ago, I had been sitting there, too, starting upper secondary school. I had been full of determination and a sense of purpose. I had known that I wanted to be a biologist, a wolf researcher and a nature activist, and maybe even a scientist. I had been physically fit, mentally balanced, and intelligent enough to someday achieve what I wanted. And a year ago, I was sitting there starting my second year of that school. I had still been determined, mentally balanced, in good shape... and normal.

Now I don't know what I want anymore, because I don't want to want the impossible. I'm full of uncertainty and a vague feeling that my life has no meaning. Nothing I do matters. I don't know if I'll ever have the energy to study biology or anything else, especially not at the university level. My head is dull, slowed down, stuck. Things don't stick in my mind as well as before. I don't know if I would ever survive in the wilderness as a researcher or even as a hiker. I don't know if I'll ever be able to absorb significant doses of scientific knowledge again. The activism in me has been discouraged. All that's left is the obligation to survive in the here and now, no enthusiasm whatsoever to take on extra challenges. On the contrary. Challenges have become problems. Keeping mental balance has become too much of a challenge, insurmountable problem. It's a daily struggle for survival with a feeling that I'll never win it, but I'm still alive.

However, my mind has already been derailed once, and I'm afraid it will happen again. I don't want to feel that kind of panic ever again that I'm so worried that I can't influence myself and my actions at all, and I have to be calmed down with the help of other people and some central nervous system depressants. My mind is still balancing as if on the edge of an invisible abyss, and it's unfair that I don't feel

like I can get off that edge. I can't get further from the edge, and I don't even understand why I can't. Why am I still on the edge? Why I'm in danger of falling at every moment if I stagger even a little? As if that abyss were a giant magnet and I was a piece of iron, and moving further away would require more energy than I will ever have again, at least not alone.

Physically, I'm at least in good shape in some way, because I have to train. It was a health necessity, not a joy or a meaningful hobby. I must train towards physical normality, knowing that I will never, completely, achieve it anymore.

I'm not normal anymore. I don't have a whole left leg anymore. I have just a residual stump below the knee joint. I'm missing a piece of my leg; more than half of the lower leg. So, I'm missing the left foot. Below the damned stump there is a mechanical extension, which tries to replace what I am missing. It's a device that needs to be attached to the residual limb and covered with clothes to make me look normal. And I still don't look like that. I am conspicuously disabled.

I can't walk in such a way that my gait doesn't reveal the abnormality of my foot, missing foot, my imperfection, my deficiency. And I'm still afraid that the prosthesis won't last; that it will betray me at a moment that I can't predict. And that's shameful, pathetically helpless and embarrassing. That's why I still want to use a crutch for support. Maybe it has become more of a mental support than a physical one. I also use it to express that others don't have to consider me as a normal person. That crutch already tells others from tens of meters away that I am disabled. I don't want to pretend to be completely normal when I'm not. Unlike in the past, nowadays I hate causing stress or confusion to other people.

I don't want my disability to come as a shock when someone accidentally touches a device that is supposedly my left leg. I don't want some bystander to be startled if the leg stump twisted off the prosthetic cup, or if that inhumane device breaks down in the middle of my walk for one reason or another, and I fall over in front of everyone. That would be really pathetic. Some would think that is just contemptible. Who wants to be pathetic and despicable? So, I'd rather not be seen and not heard, at all. At times, I think that I'd rather not exist at all; that I wouldn't feel anything, not even that I'm alive.

That wish comes over me, especially when my phantom limb is in pain, and there is no way I can ease that phantom pain. I feel like nothing but pain, I am alive, but I suffer; I am, even if I don't want to be, because existence is suffering.

That morning, the lower corridor of the school was still empty and quiet. I was there too early, because due to my disability, I had come so early that I could use some time, if necessary, to fall and stumble on the stairs with my cursed crutch or get stuck in cramped vestibules between those heavily swinging doors that open in different directions. And maybe I also wanted to be in time so that I could calm down on my own before others arrived, and especially to avoid the situation where others stare at me when I arrive there as a disabled person.

But even though I had arranged myself well in advance to be in good position, a safe observation point in the corridor, I still started to get anxious as the clock approached eight o'clock. At least some of that group would know me, even though they were a year younger. They had started upper secondary school the previous autumn. But my autumn term had been interrupted in the middle of the term. And in a small town, almost everyone knew each other, at least by sight, and knew each other's public affairs, and some things that weren't meant to be public. Maybe some acquaintances would ask about my big brother and my missing leg. And I'd have to answer them at least something appropriate and pretend to be calm and cool. That is, I should pretend to be mentally normal, even though I wasn't, and even though I was physically conspicuously deficient...

For some strange reason, my psyche also seems to be imperfect, as if there was a hole in my psyche bigger than my missing leg. It feels like the fact that a piece of your body is missing makes you psychologically more than just a little imperfect. What is normal and intact is only a fraction, while that part which is missing grows into a disproportionately large part of you. That's probably why I feel more disabled than normal, even though most of my body is still normal, in percentage terms. Maybe it's not logical, but it's a feeling, and emotions don't always follow logic. At least those feelings that you aren't even really aware of, don't follow logic. And therefore, they

get to influence insidiously, causing irrational thoughts and actions. And emotions have always been more or less difficult for me, sometimes downright scary. And in this particular life situation, I'd rather feel nothing than feel everything that the human nervous system and endocrine system develops, as if it had a sadistic will of its own...

At the end of the corridor, the door of the vestibule opens, and a person I've never seen before, not even the previous autumn, enters through the door. So, that person can't be one of those who started upper secondary school a year ago. Maybe that guy is just starting to study here and will walk past me and go in front of some other class, in other words, where other beginners would gather. In that case, I wouldn't even have to take note of that person's existence, because there was no general norm that would force us to greet students from another teaching group; or if there was, I didn't follow norms like that. But on the other hand, maybe that person has moved to the town recently and will be in the same group as me, in which case I'd have a social obligation to take note of the guy. Maybe that person would stop where I am and ask me something, and I'd have to look at that person. I wouldn't want to take contact with anyone. But in fact, I have already looked at that person out of the corner of my eye, unintentionally.

That person wore faded greenish, worn-out, camo cargo pants, a dark grey T-shirt and a moss-green hoodie. The hair captured my attention for longer than I usually stared at people. Those were multi-coloured, longish hair with small braids, some of which were tied to the top of the head in a kind of bun, in which they flailed here and there like grain cobs in the wind. There were a lot of leather cords and some wooden jewellery hanging around the neck, and there were several unusual jewelleryes of different colours on wrists. That creature's expression was seriously pensive, a little cautious, and the posture was a little stooped, even though that person was almost my height. That posture evoked to my mind an image of a lone wolf in unfamiliar territory. But the territory was neither mine. I wouldn't attack. At most, I would observe that stranger, for one reason or another.

I usually don't even look at people in a way that they could think that I wanted to talk to them about anything, let alone that imagine that I'm suggesting something to get to know them or even chatting about something. I don't engage in any chatter, unless I have an obligation to be polite. It's been a really long time since I've looked at someone and thought something positive about them or even judged someone's appearance in a way whether they would give of any aesthetic pleasure to me, or I've thought about someone's personality from the point of view of whether they could be some kind of friend to me.

Back then, sometime before my life took a rock, when I was still normal, I had some kind of girlfriend. She was more of a friend than a dating buddy, but everyone assumed she was my girlfriend because we spent so much time together. But she distanced herself from me as I went through the very process which developed for me an incomplete identity, a deadly insidious depression, and a threatening, all-consuming sense of meaninglessness. Gradually, I drove her away with my reticence and bitterness, and she found the right boyfriend, I mean normal, whole and unbroken one. I'm not bitter towards her. I'm bitter mainly towards myself because I lost the only person in my life who was like a friend to me. And I don't even have a dog.

I pretend to be used to being alone in my own misery, in my tragedy, because of course no one could understand all the things I have to suffer. I'd just have to accept that no one can ever share my inner desert with its torturous conditions. But still, from time to time I imagine that maybe someone could at least be compassionate, even if they couldn't understand. Maybe someone could still show me personal attention and interest, even if they couldn't get in touch with what it's like to feel pain on a limb that doesn't even exist anymore...

But the person who walked down the aisle approaching my whereabouts at that very moment was somehow different from anyone I'd seen before. At first glance I assumed that person wasn't a girl, but not a stereotypical boy either. That person was something else, different from the standard girls or boys. Someone could have mistaken person like that for an unusual tall girl, at least based on stereotypical assumptions, because of long, deliberately styled hair, a lot of

jewellery, eye makeup, and a beautiful shape of face with not very strong jaw.

But I strongly assumed that this person wasn't a girl, even though he didn't look like a stereotypical boy neither, but somehow androgynous. I was hardly aware that for one reason or another, inside my mind I wished that he was "biologically" male. And maybe that's why his face, his hair, all his jewellery and his especially made-up eyes meant something to me. Of course, he'd have looked quite peculiar as a girl, too, but presumably as a boy, he perhaps broke the stereotype of some kind of normality even more strongly than as a girl. And that was welcome in my mindset. I didn't need any ordinary person to observe. I was abnormal, too, but I hadn't been able to choose my abnormality myself.

However, I wasn't going to create any personal interest towards that creature, because that would have felt too reckless. I didn't want to get too interested. I didn't want to get too excited by looking at him too curiously or analytically. But the peculiarity in his appearance really caught my attention. It was as if I've seen something that awakens my interest in at least something after a long time. If I had seen a wild wolf, I'd have been attuned in the same way. But in that moment, when that unknown creature approached along the corridor with slightly uncertain steps, I couldn't show my emotions, reveal my reaction. I had to act as if I hadn't reacted or existed at all. I didn't want to attract attention. I wanted to be invisible, including my missing leg, and pretend that he didn't exist either.

A few feet away from me, he slowed his steps, glanced at the classroom door, seemed to notice what was written on the classroom door, and then searched for a place to settle. I tried not to look at him directly, but I noticed that I was starting to get uncomfortable. I guess he wasn't going to say anything to me, so I wouldn't say either. He looked at me with a quick and alert analysis, noticing my clothes, my face, and my crutch. Then his gaze swept over my non-existent leg, that part which was replaced by the combination of metal and plastic. It felt like he could see the prosthesis through my trousers. He continued slowly past me but sat down on the same bench only a short distance from me, quite near my disabled leg. My prosthesis was only half a meter away from his camo pants. I was able to

imagine what it would feel like to feel his leg if my leg had still existed. And I started to feel pain in my phantom limb.

I tried to forget my missing leg. I didn't want to activate the neural networks associated with it by thinking about it, if doing that caused pain. I looked somewhere on the floor, but I still sensed his presence. Something like that happens maybe only once in a lifetime. At least anything like that hadn't happened to me before. It was as if I felt his existence in every cell of my body, or as if he had been a wild beast that made me alert, but not out of fear, but out of extreme concentration, as if in the face of a miracle, never experienced before. And at the same time, everything in me was screaming that I don't deserve to be even looked at by him. He deviates upwards, and that's too much for me, who deviates downwards...

When he moved suddenly, I almost startled. I started digging out my phone to get my attention away from him. I nervously dug the pocket of my hoodie and accidentally nudged the crutch that was leaning against the edge of the bench. It began to slide off the edge of the bench and eventually fell to the floor near his dark green, rather torn sneakers. That noise was almost as embarrassing as a fart in an empty concert space. He stared at my crutch on the floor for a moment, glanced at me a little reservedly, and bent down to raise the crutch towards me.

"Thanks," I said stiffly, as a result of an extreme mental struggle, and put the crutch firmly laying against the bench between us, as some kind of ridiculous boundary fence. *Stay on that side; I'll stay on mine.* He didn't say anything. He just turned his gaze to his legs and began to dig something out of the thigh pocket of his worn trousers. I assumed that he would take out his phone, but it was a small notebook with a pen attached. I could see with a side eye that the flap of the thigh pocket was really frayed and worn. I started fumbling with my phone. The touchscreen didn't like my sweaty fingers, and I wasn't able to change the news page. Still, I pretended to read that page so that I wouldn't have to get contact with him. I don't think he was interested in knowing more about me, my crutch, or my non-existent leg. And I wouldn't tell anything about those things very easily. But he seemed to make some notes in his little notebook before tucking it back into his thigh pocket and started leaning against

the wall with his eyes closed, as if listening to the conversation inside his head...

I don't want to talk about what has happened to me. Whenever someone asks me something about my leg, I feel both shame and sadness. But I don't want to let grief take over; I swallow it into my stomach and shift my attention to other things. I've never cried because my missing leg, at least not when I'm aware and awake. And I haven't cried because my brother either. If I ever started crying, I might cry for the rest of my life, slowly choking on my crying. Shedding tears evokes the impression that you are somehow withering, bleeding until you dry. And I don't want to die slowly if both death and life are just suffering...

Some girls started to show up in pairs or even groups of three. I did remember seeing some of them before, that is, in that school one year ago, and in the small social circles in our small town, in which I had never been very active, though. One of the girls was my former classmate's little sister, and she greeted me in passing, probably kindly. Then more boys came in small groups. The noise level increased as everyone told their own "news" and said all kinds of other things that sounded irrelevant or even absurd to me. Only I and the stranger sitting near me were silent.

Then I noticed a small and lanky boy with a more unusual clothing walking by and settling down in a safe place, between the coat rack and the window. I remembered seeing him in passing in some corner of the corridor the previous autumn, too. He looked a little like Frodo Baggins, visualized by the film industry, but with glasses. So, his face was pretty cute, but the glasses and a stiff expression made him the kind of clichéd ridiculous little professor-looking guy that was always belittled and ridiculed in stories.

I remember some people laughing at him sometimes; I had heard he had some amusing or tiresome habits, which is why he was called "Let-me-point-out-Mahoney". It was somehow interesting to see him live. Maybe he'd be amusing and bring some change to the usual dull lessons. There had been no one special or different in my original study group. All of them had been so ordinary that I had felt a bit of a freak even as a balanced introvert...

I was startled when someone stopped in front of me and spoke to me directly.

"Hi Johnny! You're back to civilization too," Jesse said, at least pretending to be nice and brisk. He was the little brother of my big brother's friend, in other words, the kind of guy who could have been imagined to be my friend, based on some logic. He was the kind of athletic, hockey-playing guy who doesn't have anything weak, looking on the surface. He probably knew about my leg, that is, about the non-existent one. At least he knew about the fate of my big brother. And yet he laughed there, merrily, as if it were normal and harmless for someone to be missing a leg and for someone to die at the age of 20.

"Yep. I guess I wouldn't be able to avoid it anymore," I said. From the corner of my eye, I saw that the creature sitting next to me moved a little and glanced at me, and the image of his face and sharp eyes remained on my retinas.

"How about your leg?" Jesse asked. I should have guessed that he wouldn't be particularly polite. "You seem to have to use a crutch, still?"

"Well, it's useful... Otherwise I can lose my balance too easily," I said quite evasively. I didn't want to give any explanation of the structure of the leg prosthesis or how the "residual limb" and the mechanical device attached to each other. And I didn't want to tell him that the leg stump didn't always settle properly in the cup of the prosthesis, and that walking could cause awful water bells on the skin; or how that poorly tied thing could sometimes start to loosen while walking, or how painful it was if you had to stand for long periods of time, and the stump of leg started to hurt...

"Do you have to retake the courses of the whole second year with our group?" Jesse asked.

"Well, not everything. I did complete some courses in an online last spring, while I was in rehabilitation," I explained a little vaguely. At the same time, some strange boy, dressed in kind of stylish way, came to stand next to Jesse and started staring at the person sitting next to me.

"Hi, who are you?" he asked him in quite over-excited voice, at which point I made a quick diagnosis hypothesis of hypomania or

ADHD. "Those girls said that you weren't in this group last year, so I guess you're new too, just like me..."

"My name is Ilya Wolf, and I wasn't here last year, so, from some point of view, I guess I'm new," the person next to me said a little stiffly and slowly. The voice was low and clear, and the tone was a little ironic. At first, I thought he was joking. How could his surname be Wolf? Had he identified with his surname so perfectly? Or had he changed his last name, to make it fit him perfectly?

"Oh, so we're both newcomers! I'm Ricky River. I moved here in this summer from the southeast of the eastern death zone," the boy said with a grin, and I noticed that he must have some makeup in his eyes. "Funny hair, and a pretty impressive war outfit! Not quite the usual style for a girl, or a boy neither... But I don't think you are a girl, or identify as a girl, because I can't see the straps of the bra! So, what was your name? I heard something like Iina, or Lilya..."

"That's Ilya, which is a form of the name Elijah, who was known to have been a male prophet, because it would probably have been mentioned separately in the Old Testament if he had been a female prophet", Ilya Wolf explained, and his tone of voice sounded almost as if he was explaining something to the slightly absent-minded old man; something that that old man did not necessarily need to know, but perhaps he wanted to explain out of sympathy that the old man wouldn't be so bored. "The culture of that time in that part of the world was quite patriarchal..."

"Well, maybe it was, if it was some ancient time," Ricky River said and grinned. "But really, a lot of people might think at first glance that you're a girl when you have that kind of style, and it can lead to some embarrassing incidents..."

"So, should I be something I don't want to be, that is, a stereotypical boy, so that others don't have to be embarrassed? Or should I put on some pads and wear a bra to look like a girl, so that others don't have to experience unpleasant shame of not being able to categorize someone like me into the right box? Am I responsible if other people's thinking is blind or black and white?" Ilya Wolf asked, still in the same tone. Jesse laughed and looked at me as if he wanted me to laugh at that speech, too. I guess he thought that Ilya was a bit ridiculous. But I didn't laugh; that speech didn't even make me smile, but it made me anxious, or nervous...

JOHNNY LOST HIS BROTHER AND HIS LEFT LEG IN A CAR CRASH. HE TRIES TO REHABILITATE AND CONTINUE HIS UNFINISHED STUDIES, EVEN THOUGH THE TRAUMA STILL HAUNTS HIS MIND, AND HE SEES AN ABYSS OF MEANINGLESSNESS IN FRONT OF HIM. WHEN JOHNNY MEETS PECULIAR, NORM-QUESTIONING ILYA, THE TENSION BETWEEN THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF LIFE AND INTENTIONAL EXISTENCE BECOMES PROVOCATIVELY GLARING. ILYA BLASTS THE COLOURS BACK INTO THE BLACK-AND-GREY WORLD OF JOHNNY, AND JOHNNY CAN'T HELP FALLING IN LOVE WITH THAT CREATURE, WHO SEEMS TO ANNOY MANY OTHERS, BOTH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS.

HOW DOES THE SEEMINGLY CIVILIZED SCHOOL COMMUNITY - OR THE REST OF THE WORLD - SEE THEM TWO? WHAT IS THE POSITION OF A PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE, INTROVERTED, GENDER-QUEER, DISSIDENT, NEURODIVERGENT, OR PERSON HAVING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OR FUNCTIONAL LIMITATIONS IN A WORLD BUILT ON THE TERMS OF NORMATIVE PEOPLE? AND IF LOVE IS A VITAL MEDICINE, WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO LIMIT ITS SHARING?

"He has somehow placed himself above others, unintentionally, and at some point, he will probably be knocked down from that position. And I have a horrible hunch that I have to watch it from the sidelines."

"I forget my missing leg and the fact that I'm a completely incomplete person anyway; a mentally damaged, panic-disordered and purposeless person who can't be normal, even if the environment pressures him to pretend to be. I want to forget everything else and just be in love with Ilya, even if that's half-gay love and someone thinks it's a sin and disgusting or undesirable."

"If he lets me near him, I want to lie like a three-legged dog next to him, so that he can cry against my fur and stroke me. I don't want to harass him by approaching him, but I want to be present, available if he needs me. I want to love him so quietly and carefully that he dares to accept that love."

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