



THE  
**SAUNA ELF**

AKI MÄKIAHO

# the Sauna Elf

## Kill your darlings

Greetings, my dearest and purest readers around the world. From a dark basement apartment in New York to a sunlit beach in Auckland, from a crowded Tube station in London to the silent courtyards of Himalayan monasteries—and finally, even to film producers seated at heavy oak tables in Hollywood—I have stories for you. Dark and macabre visions. But first, you must understand my strengths and weaknesses—that I am a Finnish elf. An elf. I communicate with the beasts of the forest more easily than I translate my own Nordic language into English. So forgive me if my words sound rough and untamed, dirty and raw. They are not as sharp as the gutting knife at my rope belt. Still—you must understand me. And if you do not, stay away from the sauna. For your own sake.

- The Sauna Elf,  
Time and place unknown

Aki Mäkiaho

the Sauna Elf

From the Finnish edition rewritten in English  
by Aki Mäkiaho

Cover & Illustrations by Nalle Mielonen

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## Preface

This was supposed to be a movie, a folklore fantasy horror from Finland, but it never got made. Simply put, I was left alone with this, and this solitude has now lasted exactly twenty years. (Streamers and fireworks.)

I wrote the first short film on the subject in 2004 (The fourth chapter: “*The Bloodbath*”), when I was a young, amateur film enthusiast. I revisited the script in film school in 2006, and I wrote the first full-length script in 2014 (The first chapter: “*A Beautiful Day*” is the prologue from this). The fifth chapter, “*The Kekri Goat*” also received script funding from the Finnish Film Foundation, but Finnish film industry didn’t understand this vision either, so here we are—I have this book to offer you.

So, the stories in this book are overflowing with elements of *The Sauna Elf* movie that doesn’t yet exist—many ideas and cinematic visions gathered over the years. Although the scenes move more slowly on the page than on the screen, I hope some fleeting moments come alive in your imagination, offering glimpses of the film. Whether those moments are good or bad doesn’t matter to me; what’s more important is that they feel interesting—that they evoke emotions and thoughts—experiences.

- Aki Mäkiäho,  
Aug 26, 2024 in Helsinki, Finland

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Excerpt from the first Finnish Bible:

**"the Elf ruled many fates,  
as the Devil led many astray."**

- The bishop Mikael Agricola,  
Anno Domini 1551

# the first chapter

“A Beautiful Day”



“This is a spiritual product of sorts, if this has to fit into some category, but for example this isn’t like the Bible or the Quran. No one believes in the stories of this book.”

- The Sauna Elf,  
Time and place unknown

Sauna guest books are often dull and messy to read. Just like visitor books. There are years, dates, weekdays, scribbles, well-wishes, shame, agony, pain—various entries scattered across centuries, from here and there, whenever and wherever. Hideous chicken scratch and, at times, such minuscule and cramped cursive that not even an all-seeing elf could decipher it. Worst of all, suddenly—nothing but emptiness.

Empty pages. Empty, empty, empty pages one after another, emptiness.

People haven't picked up a pen in ages. They have their smartphones now, and it seems that those devices provide everything a healthy body and mind could ever need. The internet, social media—things I don't understand in the slightest, but those must be magnificent, pure places since people spend so much time there, so much that they no longer have time to heat up the sauna. Relics like me don't use smartphones, and since I have these blank, untouched pages lie before me, I've decided to empty a few of my thoughts onto them. Few things are as pure as a refined thought, written down for all to see.

I am old and worn. The passing days have begun to blend together, becoming harder to grasp with each passing year. I apologize if times and places become unclear in my stories. They are what they are—let's not care about them. I only wish to speak out of the meaning of purity, and what dirt, filth and spiritual decay can bring forth. I feel this is important. This may be your salvation.

I have observed my surroundings and spied on people for a long time, for centuries. I have watched and overseen the affairs, the sacred rituals of the world, wherever and whenever they unfolded. But for some time now, I have remained hidden, out of sight. You cannot see me unless I choose to be seen, yet you may have heard of me. At least, there are still

mentions of me in fairy tales, though no one believes in those anymore, not even children. Once, *'in the Year of Our Lord 1551'* I appeared on the first pages of the Bible, and even the Church believed in me. *'The elf ruled many fates, as the devil led many astray.'* Here—in Finland—The Holy Scripture compared me to the devil himself. Branded me a servant of Satan. The people quickly learned to fear me, to turn against me. And it did not help that heretics were being burned at the stake. Thus, the Church brought their own sin-washer into my place. Well, I didn't mind. I never sought fame, so I willingly faded into the shadows, away from human affairs. Today, I am nothing but air to you. At most, you have glimpsed me as steam rising above the sauna stove or mist lurking beneath the sauna benches. Maybe some of you can still remember that I can take physical, carnal form. That happens rarely, only when my filters clog, when the filth of the world clouds my mind and... I appear, and...

I am no storyteller. I am The Sauna Elf, spirit of sauna—the incarnation of dirt, filth and spiritual decay. And I have decided to fill these empty pages with memoirs; stories I have witnessed with my own eyes. Believe them or not, it makes no difference. But after this, the next time you see mist hovering over a lake in the early morning hours, you will remember me. You may still refuse to believe, for such things defy reason, but now, a crack has formed in your thoughts. And it will trouble you. Because now you understand, don't you, that there is more to this world than what you see. I am here. Watching. I am the feeling of being followed. The fleeting shadow at the edge of your vision when you turn your head. I spy and I remain hidden, yet I am everywhere, in all places. I see you, but few have ever seen me. The unfortunate ones who have met me did not live to tell the tale. The dead tell no stories. That's why I must tell mine by myself. I can no longer

bear this revulsion within me. The filth, all the corruption and the spiritual decay among people seems only to grow with each passing year. Soon, I will be nothing but a butcher. People must find more time for the sauna. On the warm benches of sauna, peace of mind and purity come effortlessly. Regular purification would ease the burden for all of us. So bathe, come to sauna, my good fellow people.

I have met lots of troubled people, witnessed too many filthy things, and faced an unfathomable amount of violence. Now, I will tell you some of these events as best I can, hoping that my stories might bring a touch of purity to this polluted world. I will begin with how I ended up here, where I am now—filling these empty pages of this Sauna Book.

The present day. Somewhere in Finland, unpredictably far, yet surprisingly close. It all depends on you, where you are and how you perceive it. Did I remember to warn you, that in my world, here in the spiritual world, time and place blur together into an indistinguishable porridge. The present day, in any case. This happened yesterday. Or perhaps the day before. Not many suns have passed since, that much is certain.

I had once again drifted for hours in the night mist, lingering until the early morning dew. This often happens when no one comes to the sauna to bathe, and I am left idle. Eventually, I stirred awake as dust upon the road and whirled along as a cloud of dirt, following Mirjami into the old and tiny Rasivaara village. Mirjami has a fine little sauna, built by her father, standing at the edge of a field, nestled in the forest's embrace. Over the years, it has witnessed many sorrows and joys, but for a long time now, it has served only as a place for bathing. Mirjami is old and lonely, a kind and gentle lady. She has often remembered me, cooking porridge in my honor. Belief in beings like me has been passed down through her

family for generations. And I fear Mirjami may have been the last who truly believed in me. My kind—the elves.

That day the sun shone bright and heavy all morning, cast its own steam over the land, beating down from an almost cloudless sky. Only a few wisps of vapor scratched the perfect blue dome above. Mirjami didn't seem to enjoy the stifling heat of the sun, which was strange. I have learned that people usually relish the steam when it is hot and heavy. I haven't used my sense of touch in a long time. I see no use for it. Taste and smell go hand in hand, useful when I'm dealing with animals, but I rarely bother to use those senses either. Hearing and sight—those are my most important tools. I keep them sharp, even though I have only one good eye left. The other was lost in the Great Fire of Turku on the fourth of September, 1827. I remember that day very well. Nearly the entire city burned to the ground. Countless saunas went with it, and with them, all their sauna books. Many Sauna elves were left without a home that day. Since then, I have had only little patience for cursing and beer steins in the sauna.

For some reason, people have been granted the same senses as elves, but unlike us, they use them recklessly. People and their daily walks. They wander all around, observing surroundings with their senses wide open, making strange observations and then shouting them at one another. 'Good morning, Väinö. A beautiful day today,' Mirjami remarked when she met the old man from the neighboring farm by the roadside. A peculiar way to look up at the sky and declare the day's fate in advance. Of course, by opening our eyes and looking around, we see things—and quite often, we see things that others do not. It's a miraculous thought if you truly stop to think about it. But since miracles happen outside the bounds of your understanding, perhaps it is best not to dwell on them. It is easier to simply look and believe what you see.

Experiences drawn from direct perception are far simpler to accept. So, when Mirjami gazed at the sky, she had no way of knowing what kind of day awaited her. She merely wished for a beautiful day—and received whatever was meant to come.

So, the sun shone brightly, and the warmth lingered. A new day lay ahead for Mirjami, and I knew exactly how she felt. There is something familiar, something safe, in being utterly unaware of what the day may bring. The world reveals itself to us exactly as it is. I have come to appreciate that thought. ‘A beautiful day.’ Perhaps Mirjami was partly right. Perhaps, if one looks deep enough, even in ugliness, there is something beautiful to be found. To me, this day was ugly. Unspeakably ugly. But then again, maybe it’s just me. I am ugly. I’m filthy. My skin is stained with soot and smoke, marred by the scars of old burns. My long, tangled hair, blackened by ash, falls over my ruined eye. My fingers are long and thin, their joints thick, their tips ending in sharp claws, rending claws, like those of a beast. My body is weak and withered, gaunt and skeletal, tall as haystack pole. It is better this way—that I manifest only as steam or smoke. As dust, or mist. I am a monster. I should not take form. I should not make myself flesh, like a human. But sometimes, I cannot help it. ‘...*And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us...*’ A cough broke my thought, followed by a chuckle. That quote, it always gets me. Now, where was I? Where were we?

Ah, yes, we were on our way to the village—Mirjami’s ‘Beautiful day,’ wasn’t that it? I still remember the events of that day as if they happened just yesterday. Wait... was it yesterday?

In any case, the rye field basked in the scorching sun, bathed in light and heat. Beyond the field, a dense coniferous forest loomed in the distance, its heavy lower branches

sagging as if gasping for air, casting a grim presence. Cutting through the landscape was an old, lifeless road, its edges cracked and overgrown with weeds. Along this road, Mirjami trudged forward, leaning on her rolling walker. The hot air shimmered above the fractured asphalt, which was split and crumbling, bursting with dry grass and stubborn roots. The grass at the roadside had withered into a brittle yellow, and in the dried-out ditch lay the carcass of a hare, nothing but skin and bone. Its eye sockets were hollow, black voids, impossible to ignore. Even without eyes, it stared. A dark, hollow, eyeless stare. But it wasn't just the empty gaze that caught my attention, it was the thin, sharp bones protruding from the edges of its eye sockets, piercing through the shriveled skin and decayed flesh. The sight was revolting... and yet, somehow, fascinating. The rancid stench of rotting fur and putrid meat had drawn a swarm of flies, their offspring writhing in a thick, seething mass. Tiny, white maggots pushed their glistening heads up from the decaying pulp, squirming like—like a quietly boiling porridge. A human might feel their skin crawl at such a sight. I, on the other hand, felt an urge to breathe in deep. I enjoy the scent of death sometimes. The sweet aroma of fireweed blossoms blended with the sickly stench of decomposing flesh, accompanied by the ceaseless drone of corpse flies. It was a rich, layered scent, filling the hollows of my keen nose, seeping into my smoke-filled lungs, making me forget, if only for a moment, where I was. When I came to, Mirjami was gone. Death had once again wrapped me in its embrace, making me lose track of everything else. But I did not chastise myself for it. Over the centuries, I have learned to allow myself time. So, with no regrets, I left the hare's remains to the cycle of life and rose as dust from the roadside ditch, lifting myself above it all. From my new vantage point, I spotted Mirjami ahead on the road

and resumed my quiet pursuit.

I apologize if my thoughts sometimes stray and wander into details. But this is how it all happened, just as I have written it here. We, the elves, the spirits of houses have unlimited access to details, and I see no reason to leave anything out. There are still plenty of empty pages left, and my intention is to leave behind a complete and clear picture of these events.

So, it was a sunny summer day. Before me lay a field, with a dark forest looming beyond it, and cutting through it all was an old, worn-out road. Let's forget Mirjami's 'beautiful day'—this story has nothing to do with that. A pure day, let's call it that. In the end, it became pure, but we'll get to that later.

By the roadside that cuts through the fields stands a small, pale wooden building, a village shop that has served its customers for decades. The shifting seasons have caused its light-colored paint to peel and flake away. The building looks rough and worn. The house elf has done its best, believe me when I say that, but houses simply age, and there are no protective spells that can keep things forever new and gleaming. Just think about our seasons, four relentless trials, each more brutal than the last. Autumn's biting winds and the torrential rains they bring. Winter's frozen drifts and bone-chilling frosts. Spring's endless dampness, the ceaseless slush and flowing melt. And finally, summer's sun, weeks upon weeks of searing heat and piercing light. And yet there it still stood, the village shop. Its peeling paint deserved respect. The shop has fought for its existence for a long time, and despite everything, yet, it was still in service. It hadn't been easy for shopkeeper Timonen. The customers, the people, had moved to the city in search of a better life, returning to the countryside only to purify themselves. To recharge their spiritual reserves. And nothing good had come of it. In the city, people become

so polluted that the collision between rural tranquility and urban chaos is—Life in these two worlds is just too different. Cities are filled with all kinds of filth, which, for some reason, people seem to consume eagerly. I don't quite understand it. I don't even want to think about it, yet I find myself wondering about it more often than I should.

In front of the village shop, there were a few round wooden tables, which had rotted over the years to the point of being almost unusable. Around these fragile tables, three abandoned plastic garden chairs stood, all faded nearly colorless. At the base of one chair sat an empty glass pickle jar, which had been re-purposed for a new, rather prominent duty as an ashtray. Despite this, cigarette butts were scattered everywhere across the yard. People who consume tar and smoke are filthy—they don't seem to care much for themselves or their surroundings. Do you realize that a cigarette butt takes twenty years to decompose? Twenty years. They belong in the trash, not in nature.

At the base of the store's stone foundation, buried beneath dust and sand, lay a 'Hartwall Jaffa' sun umbrella. I still remember when it was first put up. Back then, this shop was the heart of the village, the center of all events and gatherings. There were balloons, and children running around the store, laughing and drinking Jaffa-soda. Adults sat under this very same umbrella, seeking shade from the sun, gossiping about the village affairs. And this wasn't even that long ago, a few decades, maybe three. Perhaps four? But now, the village shop has withered, just like the countryside itself. Looks's like it's dying right before my eyes. This might be gone soon. And I will miss it.

Mirjami approached the store at her own unhurried pace, without any sense of rush. As always, she wore a scarf to shield her head. When visiting the village, she opted for her

Finnish horror icon!

# THE SAUNA ELF

Booze, cursing, axe murders, and skinned corpses—  
The Finnish sauna has a very dark and evil history. For  
centuries, sauna-goers have met the most horrifying  
fates, and throughout local folklore, all blame has fallen  
on the Sauna Elf—some kind of supernatural spirit once  
believed to be the guardian of the sauna and its visitors,  
never a bloodthirsty monster.

Now, the Sauna Elf finally breaks his silence, purifies  
his conscience—and his nearly nonexistent reputation.  
Years of solitude in the shadows have not dulled the  
sharpness of his stories—on the contrary, today the  
Sauna Elf's tales cut deeper than ever.

Believe it or not—that's up to you. But monsters do  
exist. And where else would they be, if not among us?



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