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1

Kimmo Joentaa was alone with her when she went to sleep.

He sat beside her bed in the darkened room, held her hand, and tried to feel her pulse. When he lost it – when he also ceased to hear her breathing softly in and out – he held his own breath and bent over her without moving, so as to regain contact. He relaxed, slumping a little in his chair, when his fingers once more detected the faint throbbing beneath her skin.

He kept looking at the clock because he thought it was over. Without wondering why, he had resolved to note the time of her death. The idea had occurred to him some days ago, while he was sitting on the bench outside her room, staring at the snow-white door beyond which she lay. Rintanen, the physician in charge, had taken him aside before going in to see her, armed with some powerful medication and an encouraging smile, and told him it could be over very soon. Any time now.

He no longer left her. He took his meals beside her bed and spent the nights in a restless doze from which he awoke with a start every minute, afraid of not being with her during the final seconds of her life.

His sleep was an entanglement of grey dreams.

In the days preceding her death she began to tell stories he didn't understand. She told him about images she could see, about a red horse she was riding, and about her travels in the realms of her imagination. Speaking more to herself than to him, she gazed through his eyes into nothingness. Once she asked who he was and what she should call him.

“Kimmo”, he said, and her lips mouthed the name.

He stroked her hand, listened to her, smiled whenever she smiled, and forbade himself to weep in her presence. Once or twice she asked if he could see her riding the red horse, and he nodded.

In response to his inquiry, Rintanen had explained that these hallucinations were side effects of the medication.

She was in no pain, he said.

Her death occurred at night, three days after Rintanen told him her condition had worsened. The room was dark. He could feel her hand and sense rather than see her eyes and lips. On the point of dozing off, he was jolted awake by a sudden fear that the interval between her breaths would never end. He did what he had often done: held his breath, bent over her, and remained quite still. He waited for her faint, shallow breathing, for the throb of her feeble pulse against his fingers, but this time there was nothing.

He began to stroke her arm, bending down still further until his cheek brushed her lips. Slowly, he caressed her chill face and rested his head on her lap. Then he sat up and looked at the clock.

It was fourteen minutes past three, and she had gone to sleep.

The thought of the moment of her death and of the minutes thereafter had often exercised his mind and haunted him against his will, and he had striven to shake it off. Half consciously, he had believed, hoped, that her final breath would bring his own life to a standstill. He had sometimes envisioned that he would weep as he had never wept before. That was a comforting thought, for in his mind's eye the tears had overlaid his grief and might even have slowly consumed it.

Now that the moment had come, he gave no thought to his preconceived ideas of how it would be. He stroked her hand without being aware of it. His life hadn't come to a standstill and he wasn't weeping. His eyes, his mouth, his lips – all were quite dry. Later, he couldn't recall having thought of anything at all during the minutes that elapsed before the night nurse came in and he told her that Sanna was dead.

The night nurse turned the light on, went over to her bed, felt her pulse, and gave him a practised look of commiseration. He evaded it and saw Sanna, whose face he had earlier sensed in the darkness, glaringly illuminated. For a moment he thought she was only asleep.

The nurse went out without speaking to him and returned a few minutes later with Rintanen, whose sympathy seemed genuine. It was Rintanen who had enabled him, in defiance of hospital regulations, to remain with Sanna day and night. He made a mental note to thank him sometime.

Rintanen, too, verified what had already been ascertained. He gave an almost imperceptible nod and stood there for a moment, then gently brushed Sanna's shoulder with his fingertips – a gesture that lodged in Joentaa's memory.

"She really has gone to sleep," he said, and Joentaa knew what he meant. Her face betrayed no pain.

"Would you like to stay with her for a while?" Rintanen asked. Joentaa nodded, although he wasn't sure he wanted to. He tried to analyse his thoughts while the doctor went out into the corridor with the night nurse. He felt he was skating on thin ice. Rintanen and the night nurse were talking outside in the corridor. He couldn't catch what they said, but he knew it was about Sanna and what was to be done with her. With her dead body.

Sanna doesn't belong to me any more, he thought.

Looking at her, he felt he could easily have withstood the gaze of her closed eyes. He tried to absorb the fact that she would never look at him again, that he was losing her altogether. He tried to breathe in the lines of her face. After a while, when he sensed that it was no use, he turned away.

His relief at feeling nothing gave way to a fear of being unable to weep, a vague fear that grief would erode him from within before he knew it.

Abruptly, on impulse, he stood up. He lifted her body and clasped it to him, kissed her lips, her neck, gently bit her throat, her shoulders. Then he laid her down and covered her over.

He turned out the light, left the room without looking back, and strode swiftly along the corridor. Once in the car he started to think. He sensed that something lay ahead and knew it would be something beyond his ken. He dreaded it but was waiting for it, yearning for it. He wanted to be at home when it burst upon him.

He drove in the direction of Angelniemi, parked in the driveway, and walked down to the lake that glittered among the dark trees. The rickety landing stage gave under his weight, and he felt as if he were being dragged down into the black water.

He had planned to install a new landing stage in the summer, but she'd said she liked everything the way it was. He recalled her words and the warmth in her voice. She had been sitting where he was standing now. He saw again her smile, her pale face, and felt the fear that had taken his breath away when he looked at her.

He had reached his destination, he knew. Removing his shoes, he immersed his feet in the water. He inhaled the fresh breeze and noted with relief that the chill of the water was spreading upwards from his legs. He waited for the freezing sensation to permeate his body. Then he sank down, lay flat on his back, and closed his eyes. He saw her astride a red horse with her long, fair hair streaming out behind. He waited for the horse to break into a gallop, waited for her to laugh and shout something to him, waited until she rode swiftly towards him, happy, calling out ... Then, at last, he stretched out his arms to her and embraced the pain, the deep, stabbing pain, that would never leave him again.

2

The piano tuner waited until he felt that all was quiet, then struck a note and inhaled the harsh, discordant sound. Shutting his eyes, he saw it stand out bright yellow against the black background of his thoughts. A yellow circle, a dazzling full moon that dwindled and disappeared as the note receded into the womb of silence.

He opened his eyes and looked up into the face of Mrs Ojaranta, who had brought him a coffee and asked if he was getting on all right. He nodded and did his best to smile.

Floating in the cup she handed him was a dazzling yellow moon.

He hoped that Mrs Ojaranta would leave him alone, but she sat down and started talking. She asked what he thought of the piano, told him it was a quarter of a century old and inherited from her parents.

She had told him the same thing the day before.

He saw her words trickle slowly to the floor.

It was a good piano, he said, a very good one, and she nodded and smiled, content with his answer. She herself wasn't musical, she said, but her sister played extremely well and would be pleased the next time she came to stay.

He sipped his coffee, enjoying the heat, the pain, on his tongue. He took a big mouthful, hoping to choke on the full moon, but he gulped it down.

The sun was shining through the french windows that led to the terrace, he could see specks of dust swirling above the keyboard. He forbore to tell Mrs Ojaranta that her instrument was past tuning. What a glorious summer it was, she said. Looking into her eyes, he thought he detected a yearning for perpetual warmth.

Outside, the pale blue sky overlooked a green lawn.

Mrs Ojaranta smiled, rose, and wished him success. He watched her until she disappeared from his field of vision, then struck the note again, gently this time, and waited for the vibrations of the discordant sound to fade away to nothing.

He tried to imagine what it was like, submerging oneself in no-man's-land, but it was no use. He sat there for some minutes, then got up and went over to the french windows, which were open. Mrs Ojaranta was watering some flowers in the garden. Her practised movements had a fluid, casual quality.

He felt sure she wasn't thinking.

She bent down and pulled some weeds from the damp soil. He watched her working for a while. She was wearing a white bikini over her pale skin. He inhaled the image, shut his eyes, opened them, and saw her die.

He saw a rapid succession of images in which she burned to death in crisp chiaroscuro and glaring colours.

The sun was red and orange and very hot.

He turned and retreated to the shadowy part of the room, which he found agreeably cool. Then he started walking. He drifted slowly down the long passage into the big, bright bedroom with its wide wooden bed, white sheets, white blankets and pillows, soft and cold. Gingerly, he ran his hands over them.

Hanging on the wall in the passage was a painting he liked, an ill-defined landscape in which everything merged: a lake with a mountain, the sky with the moon.

He looked at the picture for a long time.

Then he went downstairs to the cellar. He distinctly felt the onset of cold and darkness. The washing machine was working in the laundry and some clothes were hanging on the line. Water was dripping on the floor.

He drew the moist, muggy air into his lungs.

The sauna, which was scrupulously clean, smelt of damp wood and shower gel. It was still warm in there, and a red towel was lying on the upper bench. He pictured Mrs Ojaranta stretched out on it a few minutes earlier.

Beside the sauna he found a large wine cellar. He resisted the impulse to smash a bottle and swallow it – wine, broken glass and all.

He went back upstairs. His tread became heavy and the moon that was devouring his thoughts grew bigger and more sculptural.

Some keys were hanging from a board in the hall. He removed several of them and looked without haste for the one to the front door. He soon found the key and put it in his pocket.

He inhaled the scent of power.

Running his fingers over the backs of the books in the elegantly furnished living room, he came across a shiny, new, almost mint edition of the *Kalevala* epic. He saw Mrs Ojaranta through the open french windows. She was standing in the sunshine with her back to him.

He took the book from the shelf, leafed deliberately through the 49th Song, and read how Ilmarinen, the divine smith, had forged a new sun, a golden moon and a silver sun ...

He replaced the book on the shelf, looked outside, and caught Mrs. Ojaranta's eye. She was smiling at him. "You're welcome," she called. She came back into the shadowy room, mopping her brow.

He saw the beads of sweat on her cheeks.

"I've finished," he said mechanically, and her face brightened still more. She went over to the piano and struck a note. It sounded much better, much clearer, she said. He nodded, happy in the knowledge that the note was just as out of tune as ever. She said he'd done a good job and he thanked her.

He felt the shadow over them sink lower, unable to see more than the outlines of her face.

The fear was very imminent now.

Mrs Ojaranta gave him some money. He said goodbye and reluctantly made his way outside. The road ahead was melting before his eyes, but beside him it was grey and hard. He trod carefully until he was sure he wouldn't sink. He walked over to his car in the lukewarm breeze and put the purloined key in the glove compartment. The key felt cold and small, and he was afraid its magic had already been extinguished. He resolved to forget it until tonight – to forget it as completely as if it didn't exist.

It turned cool while he was driving. The sun looked pale red, wine red, the colour he liked least, his signal that the tide of fear was nearing its zenith.

He pulled up in a parking area. Seated at a wooden table were some holidaymakers, a young couple with two small children. They were talking in a language he didn't understand. They were eating and drinking and he saw them die. The wine red image turned blue and grey and cold as ice. He concentrated hard, although he strove not to watch the children's short-lived death throes.

The image faded after a minute or two. The children kicked a plastic ball around, the couple packed up the remains of their meal.

He sat back and closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep for a long time and hoped that his wish would be fulfilled.

He knew now that he wasn't himself, and the thought soothed him. He started to gain a clear mental picture of the next few hours and sensed that the knowledge of the key in the glove compartment was lending him strength.

Confident now, he felt that all was normal, all was right and inevitable.

Just before he fell asleep he was relieved to note the advent of the unconsciousness that would deaden his fear before he conquered it during the night.

3

Kimmo Joentaa was lying on the landing stage. He stretched out his arms and legs and tried not to move, tried to do nothing and be nothing.

Dawn broke at some point. He observed its changing colours for the first time in his life. Black became grey and grey became pale grey, dark blue and pale blue in turn. It grew lighter, quickly and seamlessly, and although he felt a compulsion to watch closely, he missed the moment when the threshold between dark and light was crossed.

It was a fine, cold morning.

When the spectacle ended he thought how much Sanna would have enjoyed lying here beside him. Some children in a red rowing boat were paddling out across the lake from the neighbouring property on his right. He gazed after them until the image became blurred and their exuberant cries faded.

He shut his eyes and saw Sanna sitting, laughing, aboard a grey rowing boat on grey water. He tried to picture the boat as red and the water as blue, but it was no use. The more he tried, the paler the image became. After a while it vanished altogether and he fell asleep just as he was thinking he would never be able to sleep again.

He slept badly, forever hovering near the surface, and was awakened by something cold on his face. He sat up with a start and let out an instinctive cry. The three boys in the red rowing boat were sitting nearby, staring at him wide-eyed. Was everything all right, one of them asked. Joentaa nodded and apologized.

“I must have fallen asleep,” he said.

“We thought something might be wrong,” said Roope, the son of the young woman who lived in the house next door.

“The way you were lying ... It looked funny somehow.”

“I’m fine,” said Joentaa. He got to his feet. “Still, thanks for checking up on me.” He took off his jacket, which was creased and dusty. “School holidays?” he asked for something to say.

“Another two weeks,” one of the boys replied.

Joentaa nodded, turned away, and climbed the slope to his car. The key was in the ignition. He took it out and stumbled up the three steps to his front door. He noticed while unlocking it that the day was very hot. He had obviously slept for quite a while. In the kitchen he looked at the clock. It was eleven-fifteen. The plates in the sink were green with mould because he’d spent the past week almost entirely at the hospital, returning home only to change his clothes.

On one occasion Sanna had asked him to bring her some old snapshots. Photos of Lahti, where they'd met six years ago while watching a cross-country ski race. He'd hardly recognized himself in them, and she laughed when he got worked up over his shoulder-length hair and blue peaked cap. He looked absurd, he said, but she told him she'd particularly liked his hair that way. "Who knows, maybe I wouldn't have taken you on without that hair, not to mention the cap." He remembered how she'd smiled and squeezed his hand. The next day she started to hallucinate, more and more often asking who he was and where she was.

He filled the sink with hot water, dunked the plates in it, and proceeded to open every window in the house. Lying on the glass-topped table in the living room was the fashion magazine Sanna had been reading that last day. Their bed was unmade. The bedclothes were trailing on the floor.

He recalled the night she'd woken him and said she thought she ought to go to the hospital because the pain had become unbearable. She was on the verge of tears, he could tell, but she didn't weep, just forced herself to smile, and he suddenly knew for sure that she would die before long – that the doctors were right and her case was hopeless.

During the drive to the hospital she'd sat quietly beside him, choking back the pain.

He'd felt he was driving into a total void.

In the living room he opened the doors to the terrace, perched on the arm of the sofa, and reflected that the void was really there now, final and all-embracing. He sat there for a while, then went to the kitchen and ran himself a glass of water. As he raised it to his lips he noticed that his hands were trembling. He put the glass down, laid his hands flat on the table, and braced the muscles and sinews to subdue the tremor.

Through the kitchen window he caught sight of Pasi and Liisa Laaksonen, the elderly couple who lived nearby. They were walking down to the lake, as they did every day at this hour. Pasi was carrying his fishing rod over his shoulder, Liisa the pale brown basket for the fish her husband regularly yanked from the water with astonishing ease. They saw him standing at the window and waved. He didn't respond.

He looked down and watched the beads of air bursting in the tumbler. His stomach was slowly pervaded by a numb sensation that expanded until his entire body felt anaesthetized.

After a while he went to the telephone in the living room and dialled the number of Merja and Jussi Sihvonon, Sanna's parents. He stopped short before keying in the last digit, put the receiver down, and drew a deep breath.

Sanna's parents had visited her the day before her death, promising to return the following weekend. He recalled Merja's loving, weary expression as she looked at her daughter and Jussi's futile attempts to be cheerful. They lived near Helsinki, some two hours' drive from Turku. It had puzzled Joentaa at first, their failure to take time off in recent weeks and spend it all with their daughter. Then it gradually dawned on him that they were either unable or unwilling to grasp how ill Sanna was.

Jussi Sihvonen, in particular, had refused from the outset to accept that her illness was an established fact. At first he persisted in speaking of a faulty diagnosis, criticizing the doctors and whole public health system in turn. It was inconceivable that Sanna had Hodgkin's disease – indeed, he said, it was a statistical impossibility. Only men developed that disease, he'd made inquiries. Later on, when Sanna's condition deteriorated and the effects of chemotherapy rendered the disease visible, he was all enforced jollity, whereas Merja held Sanna's hand and talked to her encouragingly with a lethargic smile. Joentaa had more than once been annoyed with Sanna's father, but now, when he thought of Merja and Jussi, of their horror and their hopeless attempts to cope with the disaster, all he felt was profound sadness.

He paused for a moment, then dialled again. His stomach contracted when he heard Merja's hoarse, tired voice at the other end of the line.

"Kimmo here," he said.

"Kimmo, I'm glad you called," she said quietly. "How is she?"

"Merja ... It's over ... She fell asleep last night." He had meant to utter the words calmly and distinctly, but his voice broke halfway through. Several seconds went by. Merja said nothing, and the words he'd just spoken resonated in his head.

"She wasn't in any pain," he said when the silence dragged on.

"But we meant to come this weekend, you know we did," cried Merja. And, while he was groping for something anodyne and comforting to say, she started to wail and burst into tears. Joentaa heard Jussi's voice, faint at first, then right in his ear.

"What's wrong, Kimmo?" he demanded feverishly, and Joentaa repeated what he'd said to Merja. Again his voice broke, and again the unreal-sounding words re-echoed like waves breaking in his head. Jussi remained silent, but Joentaa seemed to sense his dismay even at that distance.

Sanna's mother was sobbing convulsively in the background. "You must see to Merja now," Joentaa said, but Jussi's silence persisted.

"Last night ..." he said after a while, very slowly. "Last night, you said ..."

"Just after three o'clock last night," Joentaa replied.

"This is bad news," Jussi said, more to himself than to him. "Very bad news ..."

"You must see to Merja now," Joentaa repeated. "I'll call you again this evening."

"Please do, Kimmo," said Jussi, but Joentaa still felt he wasn't taking anything in and didn't seem to have grasped what had happened.

"Till tonight, Jussi," he said. Sanna's father made no reply, so he cautiously hung up. Gazing through the open french windows, he heard children's distant shouts and laughter and the sound of splashing.

Perhaps it was the three boys in the rowing boat, who would long since have forgotten their morning encounter with him and his curious behaviour. He tried to imagine how Merja and Jussi Sihvonen would cope with the shock and hoped that Jussi would have the presence of mind to summon a doctor for Merja. He briefly considered calling them again but dismissed the idea. It relieved him to have got the call over so quickly.

He went out on to the terrace and leant against the sunbed on which Sanna had for months spent her afternoons cocooned in woollen blankets. She had insisted on her right to sit outside, even in April, and indignantly brushed aside his objection that it was too cold by simply proclaiming it springtime. It had remained cold, one of the coldest summers he could remember, and she'd died in the night that preceded the first really warm summer's day.

He recalled the moment when the nurse turned on the light and he saw Sanna's face. She'd looked just as she had on the many nights he'd watched her while she slept.

Despite himself, he began to imagine that she really had been asleep, that she'd awakened long ago and wondered where he was. He knew it was a mistaken idea – sensed that it was dangerous and tried to shake it off, but he failed. The notion tormented him and simultaneously alleviated the dull ache.

He straightened up, went to get his car key and drove to the hospital.

During the drive he had a vision of Sanna smiling at him when he opened the door to her room. The image had almost faded by the time he reached the hospital and got out of the car, but he strove to preserve it as he entered the massive white building and took the lift to the second floor. He made swiftly for the room in which Sanna had lain, but her bed was now occupied by an old woman who looked at him inquiringly when he burst in. He turned and walked back along the corridor, asked a helpful young male nurse for Rintanen, and was informed that the doctor had a day off.

"I'm looking for my wife," he said. "Sanna Joentaa. She was in Room 21 until yesterday."

The nurse looked disconcerted. "I was, er, under the impression that she died during the night," he said.

"I'm aware of that," Joentaa replied curtly. "I want to know where she is. I'd like to see her."

"I don't know if ... if that's possible," said the young man, looking around helplessly. "I'll ask. Just a moment." He turned and walked off in the direction of the nurses' room. Joentaa watched him go. Before long he was approached by a sturdy-looking nurse not unlike the one who had stood beside Sanna's bed during the night and shown no emotion. She looked him straight in the eye.

"Your wife's in cold storage," she said bluntly. "It isn't customary, but you may see her if you wish."

"I'd like to," he said.

She gave him a searching look, then signalled to him to follow with a jerk of the head. They took the lift to the basement. Joentaa stared at the wall as they glided downwards. The nurse strode briskly on ahead. The room into which she conducted him was smaller than he'd expected.

Sanna was lying on a gurney against the wall, her body covered with a pale green sheet. The nurse went over to the gurney and glanced at him before she lifted the sheet.

He endured the sight for only a moment. Sanna's face looked bloated and discoloured. It wasn't her face, but he recognized her nonetheless.

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