

Seekers

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On the day his father died he sat on the right side of the chapel. The doors had to be closed and locked to prevent the snow storm from breaking in. His mother just cried. The people just stared. His brother got lost at some twisted corner of his mind, fists clenched at each side, as if holding onto the last wave of anger.

He didn't grieve. The body inside the coffin was just too unfamiliar. The air was just too thick. Thick like wax drops on the kitchen table. Thick like mourning is thick: burdensome yet perishable.

Relatives soon gathered on the creaking wooden seats, and the air seemed to grow scarce. This wasn't surprising. If he had a thing to do with it, he would have made the roof taller. The windows would have been real windows, not just painted glass. The door would have been left ajar, and the snow let in, so that the white flakes would cover the stone floor and everyone could lie down, moving arms up and down, legs inward and outward. If he had a thing to do with it, he would have had these angels made, so that the room would be full of real angels.

What he didn't know then, on that snowy night at nine years old, was that no room can fit the right amount of death.

"Äiti," he tugged at the black cuffs of his mother's shirt. "Äiti, can I go play outside?"

"Outside? No, Petsamo."

"But here is so upsetting, Äiti."

The lady wailed and held a handkerchief tight to her nose. The head went up and down, but whether it was approval or uncontrolled sadness, Petsamo couldn't tell.

"Stay away from the river."

The door creaked under his leather gloves and kept anguish trapped inside. The boy started making his way to the forest, where the gossip of snow under his feet was the only noise along with the distant humming of birds.

The river was his favorite place. If he had a thing to do with it, he would have turned it into one of those natural reserves. That way people from all over the world would come, and wouldn't chop down trees to build fires or put out fires to hide from Russians. And then again he would also want his house to be remembered and untouched by time. And his father's grave. And then maybe it isn't worth keeping so many memories if you intend to create new ones. So then the river would be better left alone.

The water was near and audible. He knew the riverbed wasn't far away because the trees had changed. What now surrounded him were leafless, crooked wooden carcasses ashamed of being out there naked in plain daylight.

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He reached the meeting point: a straight, greyish branch that stuck out of the soil from which two pine cones still hanged.

“Murmansk!” he called out loud, his tongue tickling under the flavor of foreign sounds. There was a vague hush followed by the sound of tiny feet floating on snow; then, he was welcomed by rosy cheeks and warm eyes under a hand-knitted hat.

Murmansk didn’t speak Finnish, and he lived across the river. The tiny boy had pointed to the other side, then himself. “Murmansk,” he had said. Petsamo understood. Since that day, they would meet every afternoon and put themselves to business. They had now grown too old to find amusement in imaginary gunfights, but had found another diversion instead. Petsamo was deadly good at it, mostly since Murmansk often gave up way too fast. And so he chose this game over and over again.

The Finnish boy gave himself two little taps on the chest. This meant “I’ll hide, you’ll count”; and while the outsider went “один, два, три ...” he gazed round the tree cemetery to find shelter.

Hush, hush, hush. The snow gave way under his feet. He would glide from side to side and try to smooth his footsteps into whiteness. The trees were so thin, climbing wasn’t an option. While slithering seemed feasible enough, he soon came across a cavity about half a meter deep.

Petsamo jumped in. The earth around him was moist and longed-for by his winter clothing. The spot offered a clear view of Murmansk’s back and the two angel-like pine cones pending from the branch.

The counter retrieved his red-cold hands from his eyes and his voice vanished. It was the beginning of silence. Deafening silence, as if Murmansk had never counted at all. As if the notion of voice was just the outcome of a too-good-to-be-true dream. As if sound had never existed.

Murmansk’s presence surrounded him, zig-zagged, advanced, got lost, got found. His feet played an opus of back and forths: tiptoeing, steam-breathing, relenting, weakening. He lost sight of him.

Petsamo waited.

His father’s face came to him, now immaculate and distant. Like one of those natural reserves he had heard about, but never visited. He dove further into his cave. Did his father have one of his own by know? Was that actually resting? He guessed that people don’t jump into holes and rest. People jump into holes and have a bad time.

Then it dawned on him. A piercing sound in the distance. The sound of metal, the echo, the silence. One pine lay on the floor. And then steps, and men in boots. Three of them, four of them, maybe five.

He froze. Living in a war zone, this wasn’t uncommon. But by now, his hiding spot remained unseen. He wouldn’t risk losing this game. Murmansk would come and find him.

And so Petsamo waited.

Metal like that had ended his father too. There had been a large wound on the side of his chest. The bullet had hit the right side and dug through. At which point had it stopped going in and started going out? Petsamo couldn’t tell. He thought it rather odd that humans could fall apart but never back together.

The sun had gone now, and the chills were starting to get him. It was icy cold, and his hands trembled. The roaring sound took him by surprise again. The trees shook with him until the explosion ceased.

Now he could sense them. In uniform. In mourning. He couldn't see any distant shapes in the darkness, but he could almost feel the leather thinning the snow. Voices approached, passed right next to him, but he remained unnoticed. They couldn't take him if they didn't know he was there. They couldn't silence him if he was already silent.

Petsamo waited.

Hours went by. At some point he managed to keep himself from shivering and the noise died down. The sun was starting to rise. He knew Murmansk would come and find him. He counted on that. Was he hiding now? Was he seeking? Petsamo couldn't tell. He just waited.

It was the steps that woke him up. He tried to move, but couldn't. He tried to take a deep breath, but couldn't. His hand stuck out of the snow, and he motioned as if to unbury himself from the white mass. He did.

As soon as he sat, he recognized the well-known figure standing a few meters away. Both pine cones now lay on the floor, and Murmansk faced the river. What a relief it was to see him standing. What a relief to know he had been seeking.

"You lost," said Petsamo.

Murmansk turned to smile at him, his chest now dusk-colored and dry over the wound. He didn't shake either.

"You too."