Short Story

Left Behind

by Katariina Mauranen

Alone in the dark, I let my hand grasp the blankets on the empty side of the bed. I let myself sigh that long, broken sigh I've been holding back all day. The questions come, all of them; the questions I can't allow in the daylight. Where is he? Safe or in danger? Will I ever see him again? Is he even… No, not that question. Tears well up, rising to my throat, breaths come short and shallow. I hold his pillow to my chest, fighting the tears, but one or two roll onto the linen where the initials of my first name and his surname are coupled together forever. I think of the children and know I must be strong, I must not cry.

"Feodor, where are you?" I whisper into the pillow.

I think of him as he was, long ago, so handsome with his dark, wavy hair, those piercing blue eyes. I was the envy of all my friends.

"Natalia," he promised, "if you marry me, I will build you a new sauna with my own hands." He talked about a new cowshed, and how we would always have bells on our sleigh. And I believed him, blushing to the roots of my hair. How lucky I was!

That first night in this house, I was nervous. The scent of his body, its textures and shapes so unfamiliar in its nakedness, and yet his voice, his eyes, were the same voice and the same piercing blue eyes. Afterwards, I could barely sleep with him next to me in the strange bed. And now I can't sleep without him.

He built the sauna in the first summer of our marriage, racing against my growing belly. Its timbers were still golden yellow and the porch unfinished when my time came, but I did not want to give birth in his father's old sauna.

"I want our son to be born in our sauna," I said.

And so Feodor carried the water in, and Mother complained about the missing stairs, but Olena was born in my own sauna. The only disappointment was that she wasn't the son I had promised. It was only when Issakka was born a year later that I felt I had done what was expected of me, and produced a son. By then, the new sauna had been extravagantly painted in red soil, and the old grey sauna pulled down to make way for the cowshed. It remains my most treasured wedding gift, the building that makes this place my home. It's where my children were born, and where we sit together every week in the dark, intense heat.

Twelve times I gave birth in my sauna, and twice prepared the body of my child to be laid to rest. When the Good Lord took Issakka four years ago, Feodor was inconsolable and wanted another child. I knew nothing could take away the pain of losing our pride and joy. But we had Pauli anyway. And then the revolution came, and the war. Now he's away fighting and doesn't know we've lost Veera, too.

"Why did you have to go?" I whisper.

He talked about Karelia, about freedom, about independence for our nation. I pleaded. What does it matter? Surely the Communists won't be that different from the Tsar? Karelia to me is our village, the neighbouring villages, the graves of our ancestors, our shared faith. Independence or joining Finland, what difference does it make? What I want is what he promised: the sauna, the cowshed and the bells on the sleigh. Not this war we can't win, not my husband in some prison camp. The tears rock me to a fitful sleep.

I check on the porridge I have left to cook overnight in the bread oven. Pauli fusses and clings to my skirts. I'm wearing my Sunday petticoats under a weekday dress, to save time when changing after breakfast. Just as well: Pauli wipes his nose on my hem. He's coughing a little but doesn't seem too ill to go to church. That's a relief. I don't want to miss the liturgy, especially during Lent. I cut him a thick piece of dark bread to get him to sit quietly while I make breakfast.

The other little boys are playing with the wooden horses Feodor made them, and the noise and exuberance levels are getting a bit too high for a Sunday morning. Or perhaps it's the badly slept night weighing on my nerves. I wish one of the older girls would come and look after the little ones, but they are all in the sheds doing their chores.

Sofia comes in from feeding the chickens. The little boys look up hopefully, but she shakes her head and laughs.

"It's Lent, remember? Even if they start laying we can't have any."

Jermei screws up his face, but then the boys go on with their game. Sofia says one of the chickens is beginning to look weak. I'm about to ask her to set the table and mind the boys, when one of them hits the other, and in the wailing and confusion Sofia escapes to the girls' attic. The next daughter to come into the big main room will have to do it.

I glance outside where Olena is walking with a lantern across the pitch-black yard to the new cowshed. I still call it the new cowshed, though Feodor built it sixteen years ago, the year Simana was born. Mother thought it was odd to build a separate building for a cowshed but there was no space to extend the house without losing the well. And later, when we needed a bigger room for the boys, we could convert the old pigsty. The girls like to tease them about it.

I hear voices and stomping feet from the porch. The older boys have been to check on the traps, and are getting the snow off their boots. Sounds like Lyyti is back from feeding the pigs, too.

"Nothing in the traps this morning," Simana says as he steps in.

"Lyyti was on the grain store roof!" Her younger brother shouts.

I shake my head: it's still dark. And she's getting too old for this game of clambering on rooftops to watch the big road. We call it that because it goes all the way to Lieksa, which is in Finland now, a different country. I sigh as I think of Feodor fighting for a Karelia that has

already been cleaved in two.

“Please set the table,” I say to Lyyti as the boys go off to clean up.

“Who wants to do the spoons?” she calls to her little brothers and is surrounded by eager helpers. At least they’re not fighting, I think, as they squeal and laugh, clattering the spoons and bowls. A smell drifts from the oven — the porridge is still there. I must get it out quick, before it burns.

When breakfast is finished, and Olena has got the porridge out of Jermei’s hair where his brother struck him with a spoon, and Sofia has put as many extra ribbons in her hair as she dares, and the two middle boys have been stopped from fighting, and Simana has lost his patience at least twice, we are ready for church. The sky is fading into an inky blue outside, and I glance anxiously at the silver pocket watch that once belonged to Feodor’s father. He always kept the time in the house, and no one dared be late.

“It gets light early now,” Olena says to reassure me. “It’s March next week.” She’s right of course, and with Simana pulling the three youngest boys in a toboggan, we make it with plenty of time to spare.

I leave Olena to look after the little boys while I go tidy up the graves. I often do this when I need a quiet moment alone with Mother, Grandmother, or Issakka. As I enter the graveyard, I see Maija, my youngest girl, kneeling in the snow at her sister’s grave, talking to her. It strikes me how different my children are in grief. Inseparable as they were in life, Simana never visits Issakka’s grave. I catch a few words of what Maija is saying, talking about the games they used to play together, about looking after both their dolls, about the sick hen. I try not to listen. I busy myself picking twigs off a grave belonging to Feodor’s family. Some have frozen into the crust that forms on the deep snow after sunny days at this time of year. Clumps of icy snow cling to the twigs as I toss them aside, and I realise I have neglected this grave the last few weeks. I wipe snow off the headstone, which has no surname, only the first name of Feodor’s great-great-grandmother, Outi, the origin of his family name. I know her story well. She buried three husbands, and was known to be a formidable woman, fierce

and independent. Once she chased drunken soldiers off her property to protect her children and elderly mother.

When I turn away from Outi’s grave, Maija has stood up. I go over to her and lay my hand on her slight shoulder. She buries her face into my woollen coat, just below my chest. I hold her, and read the achingly familiar names on the gravestone:

Outinen

Issakka, 1904–1917

Veera, 1911–1920

These graves are dearer to me than even the graves of my parents, my brother, or the graves I have known since childhood. Maija’s sobs remind me that these are not only my dead, they are the companions of my living children.

The familiar scent of incense and candles soothes me as I take my place among the congregation. I find calm and strength in those around me who share my faith. But each time we gather here the congregation seems sparser, as more families flee the fighting. The men’s side of the church looks particularly thin, with so many either fighting or fleeing. On the women’s side we stand closer together, those of us left behind seeking solace in each other. I smile at my sister as she walks in with her four daughters, and search for other familiar faces for reassurance that they are still here. I see Feodor’s sister with her children at the front, my neighbours too far to talk, the blacksmith’s wife and daughter over there. But there are families I look for in vain, my cousin among them, and every missing face makes me feel more uneasy. The thought of soldiers frightens me, but the thought of leaving home and everything that’s dear frightens me more. I pray for those who have left, and hope that I may stay.

The church doors close, and Father Leo starts chanting. The altar boys light candles and incense, assisting in the service. They could be my boys if we still had a horse and could get to church more often. I say a silent prayer for a safe return for my husband and all those

fighting, and an end to the war.

Half way through the service Pauli comes to me, coughing, and I pick him up. He is getting heavy, but his hair still has that baby scent. A friend he has been playing with comes to see him but Pauli clings to me. I pat the other little boy's head and he runs off again. As I watch him go, I see Feodor's nephew, Vasili, standing on the men's side, his eyes darting towards Sofia. He turns to face the front when he sees me watching. I've never much liked him, and since he brought the news of Feodor being taken, I like him even less. I know it's not his fault, but I can't help it. Vasili's father escaped the Russians but Feodor's horse fell and he was surrounded. And now the boy is playing his old tricks with Sofia. I can't allow it, she's only fourteen and they're first cousins. But how can I stop it with her father away? I glance at Sofia with her ridiculous ribbons showing from under her scarf.

Pauli has fallen asleep on my shoulder, and doesn't stir as we file out of the church at the end of the service. As always, small groups form outside, and I see Olena standing with the blacksmith's son with her eyes aglow.

My sister, my neighbour Leena, and a few other women I know are standing together. The talk is of another family who have left for Finland.

"They say it's safe there," says one of the women. "My husband is thinking about it, but his parents are old. His mother can barely walk."

"My husband believes the Communists will bring a better future," my sister says. "But what use is that for us if we don't live to see it?"

"Do you really think it's that bad?" Leena asks. Her husband is Russian, and they have had no hassle.

"What about you, Natalia?" someone asks.

"I can't leave," I say. "How will my husband ever find me?" I think of my sauna, the graves of my children and our ancestors, about Olena and the blacksmith's son. But my voice

sounds more confident than I feel. One gets used to living with the fear.

“Sometimes,” my sister says, her voice cracking a little, “my home feels like a prison. I can’t leave, and I don’t know when they might come.”

A few of the others nod.

“My cousin near Petrozavodsk,” says one of the women, “wrote to me that the soldiers had come, demanding all her bread and flour. She had given them everything. Her neighbour had tried to hold some back, and the soldiers had come the next day and taken her thirteen-year-old daughter.”

We all wince, shake our heads, shift from one foot to the other. We have all heard these stories, of violated women, of burnt houses, of slaughtered cattle. We all think, “What would I do?” but none of us really know.

I lie awake in the dark again. A sliver of moonlight comes through the curtains and falls on the side of the bed with the clean, untouched sheets I wash again each laundry day. I have already prayed for him tonight, but I pray again. I have learned to manage the house with only my eldest children for support, but with every month that passes without Feodor, our lives become a little more complicated. My sons can’t be altar boys because we can’t drive to church without our horses. I don’t command the authority to chase cousin Vasili away from Sofia. And yet I also can’t let Olena marry the blacksmith’s son. She doesn’t say it, but I know she wants to. She will be nineteen in September; the same age I was when I married Feodor. She knows she must wait for her father’s consent. My heart aches for my brave, patient girl.

I think of what the other women were saying after church. About leaving and running for safety. Feodor would find us, I am sure of that. But to leave his ancestral home, our children’s graves? Would I have the strength? I think of Outi fighting off soldiers on her own. I find the thought of such strength in a woman both admirable and a little frightening. But if soldiers were coming to my home… I think of my daughters, of Simana, and the little boys. Could I do what she did? What choice would I have? I cower under the blankets, fear gripping my heart.

I stand at the kitchen window kneading bread dough. A pot of porridge is in the oven for lunch. I watch a drop of melting snow make its way down an icicle above the window, slowing down and freezing on the tip. They are getting longer every day. Spring is on its way. The children are throwing snowballs at the icicles, and I see Pauli standing too close, where an icicle could hit him. I'm about to shout from the window when his sister pulls him out of harm's way. Just then I see someone coming on horseback.

It's Vasili, and my heart sinks, thinking of Sofia. He rides straight into the yard, shouting something, and the children scatter. Is this your idea of a joke? I think, wiping my hands on my apron as I rush to the door.

"Soldiers!" he shouts without getting down from his horse. "They're setting houses on fire in the next village! They're on their way!"

Then he rides on. Soon after, Leena from next door comes running. Our houses are the only ones at this end, just outside the village by the new road. I'm still standing in the yard, trying to comprehend, unable to stop the rushing images of bayonets and boots trampling through the house, my daughters being dragged away by their hair, and everything in flames. The children have gathered around me, their faces pale and serious. Someone has fetched Simana from the woods.

"What will you do?" Leena asks.

I think of the graves, of Issakka and Veera, of Feodor and the sauna. But the images of soldiers and fire are too strong. I see the fear in my children's eyes, and think of Outi defending her home. I pray for her strength, and know that the brave thing I must do is to take my family to safety.

Leena will stay. She hopes her husband's Russian roots will spare them. She gives me directions to her relatives in Finland.

"Take the animals," I say. "Send word to my sister. And if Feodor should come…"

She nods. My throat feels tight as we embrace.

“Simana, get the sleigh,” I say. My voice sounds alien to me.

Olena and I run through the house gathering food, clothes, the most important things. There isn’t room for much. The sleigh is just big enough to take the whole family to church with two of the boys standing on the runners behind. With no horses, we will have to pull it ourselves. The children scramble for their dearest toys. I put the family Bible and photo album into a box, together with an icon of Mary and Jesus, and a lace cross, made by Feodor’s mother. Olena brings the hot porridge pot wrapped in my best apron: we’ll eat it on the way. Simana starts lifting his siblings in. The jolly red Feodor painted the sleigh now contrasts grimly with the purpose of our journey, and I worry it will make us even more conspicuous. With no husband and no horses it’s already obvious we are the fleeing family of a fighter.

“Wait!” Maija cries, “Where’s Jermei?”

Many voices suddenly call my second youngest. I feel cold, then hot. I try to keep the panic out of my voice when I speak.

“Everyone, spread out to find him.”

I run though the house again, while the others search the surroundings. I see his favourite white wooden horse on the floor, the one Feodor made, with real horsehair mane. Jermei must have been outside for some time. I grab the horse and rush out. My children call his name over and over. The minutes tick by and I imagine the soldiers getting closer. Then a triumphant cry from the roof:

“There he is!”

I call the names of my children, not realising I have also called Veera. My voice fades into a whisper halfway through Issakka’s name. They all come running. Lyyti had climbed on the roof and spotted Jermei tobogganing down the hill behind the house. I hold him tight to my

chest before lifting him into the sleigh. He will not part with his toboggan, and we tie it behind the sleigh. It's all he has now, I realise. That and the horse. He didn't get to choose.

"Is everyone ready?" My voice falters.

I pick up my sleigh shaft, and nod to Simana. He has taken the horses' harnesses to make it easier to pull. The bells are still on, there's no time to take them off. Their sound is melancholic. I catch a last glimpse of the house, the cowshed, the sauna. The home I may never see again.

"Let's go," I say.

The sleigh is heavy and moves slowly in the deep snow of the yard, but with everyone heaving, we get it to the road. It moves more easily there, where other sleighs and hooves have cleared the snow away. Our sleigh has spent the winter in the shed. We turn towards Finland and safety. Olena glances back towards the village one more time with tears in her eyes. On Sunday, the blacksmith's son will look for her in vain. If the church still stands, I think. I try not to think of Feodor.

"It's about fifty kilometres to the border," Simana says.

"Leena's relatives live about five kilometres on the Finnish side. We should try to get there for the night," I say. It's a long way.

And so it begins. Next to me, Simana says very little. I see the solemnity and determination on his face, the expression he wore when at twelve years old he carried his brother's coffin. I hear Pauli coughing and crying, and feel the change in weight as Lyyti climbs in to soothe him. The harness is heavy and keeps slipping and chafing until I find a way to hold it steady. It smells of horses, and I remember their gentle eyes and soft muzzles. The sun melts the surface of the snow, making the sleigh slide easily and our feet slip. It will be worse when it freezes at night.

Alone in the dark, I wake up from a restless sleep in this strange house. My body aches from pulling the sleigh. All day we struggled on, Simana, Olena, and I taking turns pulling, the older children pushing, stopping only briefly to rest, eating on our feet. Twice, when the little boys got restless, I let them run behind the sleigh. I was anxious about losing them, and it was a relief when they got tired and climbed back in. I am not alone here after all: one of the little boys has climbed in with me in this narrow bed. Pauli sometimes does that, but there is no baby scent in the curly hair. I recognise Jermei. Tears well up when I remember how he was nearly left behind. I want to hold him, but I worry about waking him, so I try to discern the features of his face in the dark. I see something white on his little chest: the toy horse.

A tear rolls down my face when I think of the life we have left behind. The life we had before Feodor left, before this awful war. Home, friends, neighbours, family, the dead we have left behind. The life Olena could have had with the blacksmith's son. Then I think with gratitude of the hospitality of our hosts, who took in a stranger and her ten children who arrived in the middle of the night with nowhere to go and nothing to their name but what they could pull in a sleigh. We are now refugees, and must depend on the charity of strangers. But we are safe. I think of soldiers, of burning villages, and I can't help but pull Jermei closer. I have all my living children with me. Feodor will find us. The Good Lord will show us the way, and we will start again. Though in a strange bed and a strange house, I feel safer than I have in weeks, and I fall asleep again.

Loosely based on the true story of the author's great-grandmother.

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