SHORT STORY

# The Last Child

by Lars Love Philipson



"Alone" by Vanesa Erjavec

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*In loving memory of my father, Henrik Philipson (1953-2025).*

“We can’t keep it in the house,” the father said. “He’s gone. Let go!”

But the mother turned away. Her red face compressed, only to be torn apart when the father jerked the dead boy out of her grip. The child’s knitted gray sweater got pulled halfway off, hiding his empty face and revealing a pale, swollen stomach. With some effort, the father pushed the front door open. The mother slapped and clawed at his tall back, but could not stop him from placing the penultimate child in the snow, in the dark, under the kitchen window.

“We’ll bury him in the spring,” the father said. Then he looked at the one remaining child, the oldest, who stood with his back against the wall, passively witnessing the scene.This boy’s face was also hollow, and his skin the same ashen shade.

The mother sat by the kitchen table, hiding her face in her hands, tears falling between her fingers. The last child put a hand on her shaking shoulder. The father poked the fire and added more fuel, of which there was not much left. It would not last through the winter. All they had in abundance was silence and snow, which covered, among everything else, seven wooden crosses near the edge of the forest.

That night, the boy lay wide awake in the bed he no longer shared with anyone. Underneath the layers of clothes and blankets, he slid a finger up and down his protruding ribcage, as if playing a soundless instrument, while listening to his parents’ muffled argument through the wall.

“Don’t you dare touch him!” the mother cried out, at one point.

Before drifting off to sleep, the boy contemplated the fact that the eighth cross was the last one he would ever have to carve. Because if life had taught him anything, it was that death only came to those not big and strong enough to resist it.

When he entered the kitchen in the morning and looked out the window, he was reminded of lingonberries in milk. Deep tracks formed erratic circles around the yard and disappeared into the woods. Spread out in the middle of the chaos were the remains of a small, knitted gray sweater. The snow kept on falling. The father drew the curtains.

“It’ll be gone soon,” he said, while the mother’s cries resounded from behind the parents’ bedroom door.



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It had been a long winter that had followed another year of poor harvests. The livestock were all dead by now, and the family had nothing left to eat except flour made of bark and a few rotten potatoes. The father got dressed in layers upon layers of all the clothes in his possession to go out hunting. Through the window, the boy watched his bear-like figure, carrying a rifle on one shoulder, trudge through the deep snow and disappear between the firs.

The father returned empty-handed a few days later. He had gotten lost in the snowstorm.

“I could hear them,” he said, his voice reduced to an unsteady whisper, “I didn’t see them but I heard them at night.”

He undressed and lay down on the floor by the open fire. The mother and the boy built a pile of blankets on top of him, but he wouldn’t stop shaking, his teeth kept on chattering.

The father remained by the fire for days. One morning, dark toes stuck out from under the blankets. They reminded the boy of the plums that, a long time ago it seemed, had grown on the trees behind the house.

“Go to your room,” the mother instructed him, “close the door, and cover your ears.”

The boy did as he was told, but the father’s screams still penetrated walls and flesh and bone.

Then it got quiet. The boy gently opened the door. Through the crack, he saw the mother holding the dull hatchet they normally used to chop firewood. A leg was propped up on a kitchen chair. A foot with toes the color of plums dangled in the air. A pool of blood spread across the floor and ran down between the floorboards. The mother raised the hatchet. The boy shut his eyes and closed the door.

The father’s body was heavy, even with one of his big feet missing, and even though he seemed to have shrunk in other ways too. The mother grabbed the father by his wrists, her fingers unable to reach all the way around. The boy picked up the one remaining foot. He tried not to look down at where the other one had been. Together, they managed to push the front door open wide enough for the boy to squeeze through. He began shoveling away the snow with his hands, which soon went numb inside his thick wool mittens. All the while more snow blew sideways onto his face, stinging like a thousand nails.

Then they half carried, half dragged the body out and left it under the kitchen window, angling the legs so that the still attached foot would not block the door. The boy wanted to stay outside just a while longer. He wanted to touch the father’s face in the dark and hold his hand one last time. But the mother had already begun to cover the corpse with snow, to hide it from nighttime visitors. She had put the severed foot in a now blood-soaked kitchen towel,



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which she flung out toward the forest before they went back inside.

They sat in silence by the fire. At their feet, there was a sprawling, pool-sized stain that had been thoroughly scrubbed but still remained prominent. The father's hunting clothes hung ghostly over empty kitchen chairs. The hatchet lay in the empty wood basket. The boy wrapped himself in the blood-spattered blankets that had been left on the floor. He was frozen to the bone. He wanted to lie down in the fireplace, among the last remaining firewood, and stay there until it was all over.

"We'll be alright," he said, his voice trembling.

The mother sat on the chair marked by the hatchet, embracing herself, rocking back and forth a little, staring red-eyed into the flames. She had blood on her dress, cheek, and hands.

"Yes," she mumbled, without looking at him. "We'll make do."

Later, the mother lay down next to the boy in his bed. She stroked his hair and sang an unmelodious song, her voice coming from someplace far away. He turned his back to her, curled up in the fetal position, and pushed his elbows into his stomach, trying to combat the hunger pangs. The mother eventually stopped singing. The wind circling the house whistled through the cracks around the window. The boy could not sleep but pretended to, practicing for the long night ahead.

The mother's hand moved slowly downward from his hair to his shoulder. It continued across his upper chest. In a half embrace, the hand stopped between the collarbones. It crept up to his neck, the thumb on one side, the fingers on the other. Feeling a faint pulse, the mother tightened the grip somewhat, as if trying to catch it.

Then she sat up, walked out of the room, and quietly closed the door. Out there, a dying glow lingered in the fireplace. With the help of instinct more than anything else, she found her way to the kitchen table and got dressed in all the father's clothes, including his bulky overcoat and fur hat.

She blindly felt for the hatchet in the wood basket. In the morning she would turn all but two of the chairs into firewood, and make the boy breakfast. She forced the front door open with a strength born out of necessity. The howling wind slammed it shut behind her.



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