

# Mikael Niemi

## Popular Music from Vittula

A NOVEL



“. . . haunting and glorious.” — Nathaniel Rich, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

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## Popular Music from Vittula

“A blissfully eccentric, fiction-enhanced memoir.... Niemi tells his stories with stoic wit and dusting of magic realism, as if the extreme climate knocks the senses off kilter. (Or perhaps it’s the vodka.) His prose buzzes with wonder, fearlessness, and ecstatic ignorance: the sensations of youth. Each chapter is an epic in miniature.”

—Hugo Lindgren, *The New York Times Magazine*

“[An] entrancing first novel.... In Laurie Thompson’s deft translation, the novel is shared through with vivid and often funny depictions of daily life in an exotic corner of the world. I can’t think of many recent novels that have better captured the intricacies of social life in a rural community.”

—Richard McGill Murphy, *The New York Times Book Review*

“[H]aunting and glorious ... Niemi’s finest achievement is to have created a world poised between an adult’s fantastic memories of childhood and a child’s naïve dreams of his future. Graceless sentiments like disillusionment or regret are never allowed to trespass upon Pajala’s icy rivers and twilight woods. The future remains a frantic hallucination, while the past is absurd and wondrous.”

—Nathaniel Rich, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“[*Popular Music from Vittula* is] the natural successor to *The Catcher in the Rye*—assuming Holden Caulfield grew up just above the Arctic Circle.... It’s a singular anthropologic dispatch from a permanently frozen Lake Wobegon, and a tribute to the power of international pop culture as sensitive to local home culture as Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*. We can only imagine the punch of the original Swedish text; Laurie Thompson’s zinging English translation is its own kind of rock & roll heaven. A”

—Lisa Schwarzbaum, Editor’s Choice, *Entertainment Weekly*

“*Popular Music from Vittula* is a tale of boyhood friendship elastic enough to include numerous digressions, some fantastical, some so precise in their sociological observation ... that an anthropologist could make good use of them.... In British translator Laurie Thompson’s hands, Niemi’s language is a constant, fresh poetic surprise.... Even the alphabet—‘a scarred army of sticks and half-moons’—comes strangely alive in this marvelous book.”

—Michael Upchurch, *The Seattle Times*

“Mikael Niemi comes from Pajala, Sweden, the scene—perhaps even the main character—of his remarkable book.... The book is filled with eccentric, grotesque, even unsavory characters, but Niemi shows large tolerance, kindly spirit and even clear pleasure in the odd neighbors. They are human, too.”

—Bill Holm, *Star Tribune*

“A beautiful, poignant, often very funny novel about growing up in a remote area. Niemi writes with real poetry as he strings together the culturally rich vignettes of Matti

experiences, snapshots of childhood that are at the same time intensely personal and universal ... all rendered pure and convincingly as a young boy's perceptions. Niemi also seasons the book well with the mysticism of childhood that suffuses the usually hidden psychological space where the transformation from child to youth occurs. An exquisite beautiful novel, artfully translated."

—Paula Luedkte, *Booklist*

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Popular  
Music  
*from*  
Vittula

a novel

MIKAEL NIEMI

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY  
LAURIE THOMPSON

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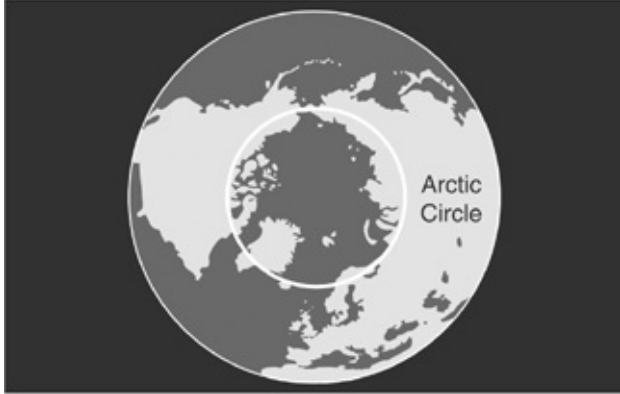
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## PROLOGUE

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*The narrator wakes up, starts his climb and finds himself in a fix in the Thorong La Pass, whereupon the story can commence*

It was a freezing cold night in the cramped wooden hut. When my travel alarm started peeping I sat up with a start, unlaced the top of my sleeping bag and reached out into the pitch-black cold. My fingers groped around on the rough wooden floor, through all the splinters and grains of sand and the naked draft from the gaps in the floorboards until they found the cold plastic of the clock and the off-button.

I lay there motionless for a while, semi-conscious, clinging on to a log with one arm trailing in the sea. Silence. Cold. Short panting breaths in the thin air. Still lingering in my body was an ache, as if I'd spent the whole night with muscles tensed.

It was then, at that very moment, that I realized I was dead.

The experience was difficult to describe. It was as if my body had been emptied. I had been turned into stone, an incredibly big, bleak meteorite. Embedded deep down in a cavity was something strange, something long, thin and soft, organic. A corpse. It wasn't mine. In the stone, I was merely embracing the body as it grew ever colder, encompassing it like a colossal, tightly closed granite sarcophagus.

This feeling lasted two seconds, three at most.

Then I switched on my flashlight. The alarm clock display showed zero and zero. For one awful moment I had the feeling that time had ceased to exist, that it could no longer be measured. Then it dawned on me that I must have set the clock to zero when I was fumbling for the off-button. My wristwatch said twenty past four in the morning. All around the breathing hole of my sleeping bag was a thin layer of frost. The temperature was below freezing, even though I was indoors. I braced myself against the cold, wriggled out of my sleeping bag, fully clothed, and forced my feet into my icy walking boots. Somewhat uneasily I packed my empty notebook into my rucksack. Nothing today either. No draft, not even a single note.

Up with the metal catch on the door and out into the night. The starry sky stretched away into infinity. A crescent moon was bobbing on the horizon like a rowing boat, and the jagged outlines of the Himalayan giants loomed dimly on all sides like spiky shadows. The starlight was so strong that it drenched the ground—sharp, white spray from a colossal shower head. I maneuvered into my rucksack, and even that little effort left me panting for breath. The lack of oxygen sent tiny spots dancing before my eyes. A rasping cough scraped through my throat, grating bellows, 14,450 feet above sea level. I could just make out the path running steeply up the stony mountainside before disappearing into the darkness. Slowly, ever so slowly, I started climbing.

\* \* \*



The Thorong La Pass, Mount Annapurna in Nepal. Seventeen thousand seven hundred sixty five feet above sea level. I've conquered it. Up there at last! My relief is so great, I flop down on my back and lie gasping for breath. Lactic acid is making my leg muscles ache, my head throbbing, I'm in the early stages of altitude sickness. Daylight is worryingly blotchy. A sudden gust of wind is a warning that nastier weather is on the way. The cold bites into my cheeks, and I can see a handful of hikers quickly shouldering their backpacks and starting their descent to Muktinath.

I'm left all alone. Can't bring myself to leave, not yet. I sit up, still gasping for breath. Lean back against the cairn with its fluttering Tibetan prayer flags. The pass is made up of stones, a sterile expanse of gravel with no vegetation. Mountain peaks loom up on all sides, rough black façades dotted with heavenly white glaciers.

Gusts of wind fling the first snowflakes into my anorak. Not good. If the path gets buried in snow, it can be dangerous. I look back over my shoulder: no sign of any other hikers. I'd better get back down quickly.

But not just yet. I'm standing at the highest point I've ever been in my life. Must bid farewell first. Must thank somebody. A sudden urge takes possession of me, and I kneel down beside the cairn. Feel a bit silly, but another look around confirms that I'm on my own. I bend quickly forward, like a Muslim with my bottom in the air, lower my head, and mumble a prayer of gratitude. I notice an iron plate engraved with Tibetan writing, a text I am unable to understand but one that exudes solemnity, spirituality, and I bend further down to kiss the text.

At that very moment a memory comes back to me. A vertiginous pit down into my childhood. A tube through time down which someone is shouting out a warning, but it's too late.

I'm stuck fast.

My damp lips are frozen onto a Tibetan prayer plaque. And when I try to loosen my lips by wetting them with my tongue, that sticks fast as well.

Every single child from the far north of Sweden has no doubt been in the same plight. On a freezing cold winter's day, a railing, a lamp post, a piece of iron coated in hoar frost. My own memory is suddenly crystal clear. I'm five years old, and my lips are frozen onto the keyhole of our front door in Pajala. My first reaction one of vast astonishment. A keyhole that can be touched without more ado by a mitten or even a bare finger. But now it's a devilish trap. I try to yell, but that's not easy when your tongue is stuck fast to the metal. I struggle with my arms, trying to tear myself loose by force, but the pain compels me to give up. The cold makes my tongue numb, my mouth is filled with the taste of blood. I kick against the door in desperation, and emit an agonized:

"Aaahhh, aaahhh ..."

Then Mum appears. She's carrying a bowl of warm water, she pours it over the keyhole and my lips thaw out and I'm freed. Bits of skin are still sticking to the metal, and I resolve never to do that again.

"Aaahhh, aaahhh," I groan as the snow starts lashing into me. Nobody can hear me. If there are any hikers on their way up, they'll no doubt turn back now. My bottom is sticking in the air, the wind is whipping up and making it colder by the minute. My mouth is starting to go numb. I pull off my gloves and try to warm myself loose with my hands, panting away.

with my hot breath. But it's all in vain. The metal absorbs the heat but remains icy cold. I try to lift up the iron plaque, to wrench it loose, but it's firmly anchored and doesn't shift an inch. My back is covered in cold sweat. The wind worms its way inside my anorak collar and I start shivering. Low clouds are gathering and enveloping the pass in mist. Dangerous. Bloody dangerous. I'm getting more and more scared. I'm going to die here. I'll never last the night frozen onto a Tibetan prayer plaque.

There's only one possibility left: I must wrench myself free.

The very thought makes me feel sick, but I have no choice. Just a little tug first, as a test. I can feel the pain right back to the root of my tongue. One ... two ... *now* ...

Red. Blood. And pain so extreme I have to beat my head against the iron. It's impossible. My mouth is stuck just as firmly as before. My whole face would fall apart if I tugged and harder.

A knife. If only I had a knife. I feel for my backpack with my foot, but it's several feet away. Fear is churning my stomach, my bladder feels about to burst. I unzip my fly and get ready to pee on all fours, like a cow.

Then I pause. Feel for the mug that's hanging from my belt. Fill it full of pee, then pour the contents over my mouth. The urine trickles over my lips, starts the thawing process, and a few seconds later I'm free.

I've pissed myself free.

I stand up. My prayers are over. My tongue and lips are stiff and tender, but I can move them again. At last I can start my story.

*In which Pajala enters the modern age, music comes into being, and two little boys set out, traveling light*

It was the beginning of the sixties when paved roads came to our part of Pajala. I was five at the time and could hear the noise as they approached. A column of what looked like tanks came crawling past our house, digging and scratching at the pot-holed dirt road. It was early summer. Men in overalls marched around bow-legged, spitting out wads of snuff, wielding crowbars, and muttering away in Finnish while housewives peered out from behind the curtains. It was incredibly exciting for a little kid. I clung to the fence, peeping out between the rails, and breathed in the diesel fumes oozing out of those armored monsters. They prodded and poked into the winding village road as if it were an old carcass. A mud road with lots and lots of holes that used to fill with rain, a pock-marked surface that turned butter-soft every spring when the thaw came, and in summer was salted like a minced meat loaf to prevent dust flying around. The dirt road was old-fashioned. It belonged to a bygone age, the one our parents had been born into but were now determined to put behind them once and for all.

Our district was known locally in Finnish as *Vittulajänkkä*, which means something like Cuntsmire. It's not clear how the name originated, but it probably has to do with the great number of babies being born here. There were five children in some of the houses, sometimes even more, and the name became a sort of crude tribute to female fertility. *Vittulajänkkä*—or *Vittula*, as it's sometimes shortened—was populated by villagers who grew up during the hardship years of the thirties. Thanks to hard work and a booming economy, they worked their way up the ladder and managed to borrow money to buy a house of their own. Sweden was flourishing, the economy was expanding, and even Tornedalen in the far north was being swept along with the tide. Progress had been so astonishingly fast that people still felt poverty-stricken even though they were now rich. They occasionally worried that it might all be taken away from them again. Housewives trembled behind their home-made curtains whenever they thought about how well-off they were. A whole house for themselves and their offspring! They'd been able to afford new clothes, and the children didn't need to wear hand-me-downs and patches. They'd even acquired a car. And now the dirt road was about to disappear under a layer of oily-black asphalt. Poverty would be clothed in a black leather jacket. What was being laid was the future, as smooth as a shaven cheek. Children would ride along it on their new bikes, heading for welfare and a degree in engineering.

The bulldozers bellowed and roared. Gravel poured out of the heavy trucks. Enormous steamrollers compressed the hard core with such incomprehensible force that I wanted to stick my five-year-old foot underneath to test them. I threw big stones in front of the steamroller, then ran out to look for them when it had rumbled past, but there was no sign of the stones. They'd disappeared, pure magic. It was uncanny and fascinating. I lay my hand on

the flattened-out surface. It felt strangely cold. How could coarse gravel become as smooth as a newly pressed sheet? I threw out a fork taken from the kitchen drawer, and then my plastic spade, and both of them disappeared without a trace. Even today I'm not sure whether they are still concealed there in the hard core, or if they did in fact dissolve in some magical way.

\* \* \*

It was around this time that my elder sister bought her first record player. I sneaked into her room when she was away at school. It was on her desk, a piece of technical wizardry made of black plastic, a shiny little box with a transparent lid concealing remarkable knobs and buttons. Scattered all around it were curlers, tubes of lipstick, and aerosol cans. Everything was modern, unnecessary luxuries, a sign of our new riches heralding a future of waste and welfare. A lacquered box contained photographs of film stars and cinema tickets. Sis collected them, and had fat bundles from Wilhelmsson's cinema, each one with the name of the film, a list of its leading actors, and grades out of ten written on the back.

She'd placed the only single she owned on a plastic contraption that looked like a plate rack. I'd been made to cross my heart and promise never even to breathe on it. Now, my fingers tingling, I picked it up and stroked the shiny cover depicting a handsome young man playing a guitar. He had a dark lock of hair dangling down over his forehead, and was smiling straight at me. Ever so painstakingly I slid out the black vinyl. I carefully lifted the lid of the record player. Tried to remember how Sis had done it, and lowered the record onto the turntable. Fitted the hole of the EP over the central pin. And, so full of expectation that I'd broken into a sweat, I switched it on.

The turntable gave a little jerk, then started spinning. The tension was unbearable. I repressed the urge to run away. With my awkward, stumpy, boy's fingers I took hold of the snake, the rigid black pick-up arm with its poisonous fang, as big as a toothpick. Then I lowered it onto the spinning plastic.

There was a crackling, like pork frying. I just knew something had broken. I'd ruined the record, it would be impossible to play it ever again.

*BAM-BAM ... BAM-BAM ...*

No, here it came! Brash chords! And then Elvis's frantic voice.

I was petrified. Forgot to swallow, didn't notice I was salivating. I felt dizzy, my head was spinning, I forgot to breathe.

This was the future. This was what it sounded like. Music like the bellowing of the roaring building machines, a neverending clatter, a commotion that roared away toward the crimson sunrise on the far horizon.

I leaned forward and looked out the window. Smoke was rising from a tipper truck, the wheels were starting the final surfacing. But what the truck was spewing forth was not black, shiny leather asphalt. It was oil-bound gravel. Grey, lumpy, ugly, bloody oil-bound gravel.

That was the surface on which we inhabitants of Pajala would be bicycling into the future.

\* \* \*

When all the machines had finally gone away I started going for cautious little walks around the neighborhood. The world grew with every step I took. The newly surfaced road led

other newly surfaced roads, the gardens stretched away like leafy parks with giant dogs standing guard, barking at me and rattling their running chains. The further I walked, the more there was to see. The world never seemed to end, it just went on and on, and I felt so dizzy I was almost sick when it dawned on me that you could go on walking for ever. In the end I picked up courage and went over to Dad, who was busy washing our new Volvo:

“How big is the world?”

“It’s enormous,” he said.

“But it must stop somewhere, surely?”

“In China.”

That was a straightforward answer that made me feel a bit better. If you walked far enough, you’d eventually come to an end. And that end was in the realm of the slitty-eyed ching-chong people on the other side of the globe.

It was summer and roasting hot. The front of my shirt was stained by drops from the ice pop I was licking. I left our garden, left my safe little world. I occasionally looked back over my shoulder, worried about getting lost.

I walked as far as the playground, which was really an old hayfield that had survived in the middle of the village. The local authority had installed some swings, and I sat down on the narrow seat. Started heaving enthusiastically on the chains to build up speed.

The next moment I realized I was being watched. There was a boy sitting on the slide. Right at the top, as if he were about to come down. But he was waiting, as motionless as a hawk, watching me with wide-open eyes.

I was on my guard. There was something worrying about the boy. He can’t have been sitting up there when I arrived, it was as if he’d materialized out of thin air. I tried to ignore him, and forced the swing up so dizzyingly high that the chains started to feel slack in my hands. I made no sound and closed my eyes, and could feel my stomach churning as I hurtled down in a curve faster and faster toward the ground, then up toward the sky on the other side.

When I opened my eyes again he was sitting in the sandbox. As if he’d flown there on outstretched wings: I hadn’t heard a thing. He was still watching me intently, although he was half-turned away from me.

I allowed the swing to come slowly to a stop, then I jumped down onto the grass, did a forward roll, and lay on my back on the ground. Stared up at the sky. Clouds were rolling over the river in patches of white. They were like big, woolly sheep lying asleep in the wind. When I closed my eyes I could see little creatures scuttling about on the insides of my eyelids. Small black dots creeping over a red membrane. When I shut my eyes tighter I could see little violet-colored fellows in my stomach, clambering over one another and tracing patterns. So there were animals inside me as well, a whole new world to explore in there. I felt giddy as it dawned on me that the world was made up of masses of pockets, each of them enclosing the previous one. No matter how many layers you penetrated, there were more and more still to come.

I opened my eyes and gave a start. I was astonished to see the boy lying beside me. He was stretched out on his back right next to me, so close that I could feel the warmth of his body. His face was strangely small. His head was a normal size, but his features had been crammed into far too small a space. Like a doll’s face glued onto a large, brown, leather football. He

hair had been snipped unevenly at home, and a scab was working its way loose on his forehead. His face was turned toward me. He was screwing up one eye, the upper one that was catching the sun. The other was lying in the grass and wide open, with an enormous pupil in which I could see my own reflection.

“What’s your name?” I wondered aloud.

He didn’t answer. Didn’t move.

“*Mikäs sinun nimi on?*” I repeated the question in Finnish.

Now he opened his mouth. It wasn’t a smile, but you could see his teeth. They were yellow, coated with bits of old food. He stuck his little finger into his nostril—the other were too big to fit in. I did the same. We each dug out a booger. He stuck his into his mouth and swallowed. I hesitated. Quick as a flash he scraped mine off my finger and swallowed that as well.

I realized he wanted to be my friend.

We sat up in the grass, and I had an urge to impress the boy in return.

“You can go wherever you like, you know!”

He was listening attentively, but I wasn’t sure if he’d understood.

“Even as far as China,” I added.

To show that I was serious I started walking toward the road. Confidently, with an unaffected, pompous air of self-assurance that concealed my nervousness. He followed me. We walked as far as the yellow-painted vicarage. There was a bus parked on the road outside, no doubt it had brought some tourists to see the Laestadius House. We bowed our heads in acknowledgment of the Bible-thumping evangelist who once lived there. The bus doors had been left open because of the heat, but there was no sign of the driver. I grabbed the boy and pulled him over to the steps, and we climbed aboard. There were suitcases and jackets lying on the seats, which smelled a bit damp. We sat right at the back and crouched down behind the seats. Before long some old ladies got in and sat down, panting and sweating. They were speaking a language with a lot of waterfall sounds, and gulping down big swigs of lemonade straight from the bottle. Several more retirees eventually came to join them, and then the driver turned up, pausing outside to insert a wad of snuff into his mouth. Then we set off.

Wide-eyed and silent, we watched the countryside flash past. We soon left Pajala behind and breezed off into the wilds. Nothing but trees, trees without end. Old-fashioned telephoning poles with porcelain insulators and wires sagging in the heat.

We’d gone several miles before anybody noticed us. I happened to bump against the seat in front, and a lady with pincushion cheeks turned around. I smiled expectantly. She smiled back, rummaged around in her handbag, and then offered us a sweet from an unusual cloth-like bag. She said something I didn’t understand. Then she pointed at the driver and asked:

“*Papa?*”

I nodded, my smile frozen.

“*Habt ihr Hunger?*” she asked.

Before we knew where we were she’d thrust a cheese roll into each of our hands.

After a long and shaky bus ride we pulled up in a large parking lot. Everybody got out, including me and my friend. In front of us was a big concrete building with a flat roof and tall, high, spiky, metal aerials. Beyond it, behind a wire fence, were some propeller-driven airplanes. The bus driver opened a hatch and started pulling out bags and suitcases. The night

lady had far too much luggage and seemed to be under a lot of strain. Beads of sweat were forming under the brim of her hat, and she started making nasty smacking noises, sucking her teeth. My friend and I gave her a hand as a way of saying thank-you for the sandwiches and we lugged her heavy cases into the building. The flock of retirees crowded round a desk jabbering away loudly, and started to produce no end of papers and documents. A woman in a uniform tried patiently to keep them in order. Then we passed through the gate as a group and made our way toward the aircraft.

It was going to be my first ever flight. We both felt a bit like fish out of water, but a nice brown-eyed lady with gold heart-shaped earrings helped us fasten our seat-belts. My friend landed a window seat, and we grew increasingly excited as we watched the shiny propellers start spinning, faster and faster, until they disappeared altogether in a round, invisible whirl.

Then we started moving. I was forced back into my seat, could feel the wheels bumping and then the slight jerk as we left the ground. My friend was pointing out of the window, fascinated. We were flying! There was the world down below us. People, buildings, and cars shrunk to the size of toys, so small we could have popped them into our pockets. And then we were swallowed up by clouds, white on the outside but grey inside, like porridge. We emerged from the clouds and kept on climbing until the aircraft reached the sky's roof and started soaring forward so slowly we hardly knew we were moving.

The nice stewardess brought us some juice, which was just as well, as we were very thirsty. And when we needed a pee she ushered us into a tiny little room and we took turns to get our willies out. We peed into a hole, and I imagined it falling down to the ground in a yellow drizzle.

Then we each got a book and some crayons. I drew two airplanes crashing into each other. My friend leaned his jaggedly cropped head further and further back and soon dozed off with his mouth wide open. The plane window misted over as he breathed.

We eventually landed. All the passengers pushed and shoved their way out, and in the *mélée* we lost the old lady. I asked a man in a peaked cap if this was China. He shook his head and pointed us in the direction of an endless corridor, where people were hurrying to and fro with their bags. We walked down it, and I had to ask politely several times before we came across some people with slitty eyes. I reckoned they must be going to China, and so we sat next to them and waited patiently.

After a while a man in a dark blue uniform came over to us and started asking questions. We were going to be in trouble, you could see it in his eyes. So I smiled shyly and pretended not to understand what he was saying.

"Dad," I mumbled, pointing vaguely into the distance.

"Wait here," he said, and strode off purposefully.

The moment he'd gone we moved to another bench. We soon discovered a black-haired Chinese girl in knee-length socks who was playing with a sort of plastic puzzle. It seemed to be fun. She laid the pieces out on the floor and showed us how you could make a tree, or a helicopter, or whatever you liked. She talked a lot and waved her thin arms around, and I think she said her name was Li. She sometimes pointed to a bench where an elderly fellow with stern eyes was reading a newspaper, next to an older girl with raven hair. I gathered she was the girl's sister. She was eating a messy red fruit, and kept wiping her mouth with a lacquered edged napkin. When I went over to her she gave me a guarded look, then offered me some

pieces that had been neatly cut with a fruit knife. It tasted so sweet that I started to get butterflies in my stomach: I'd never tasted anything so good in my life, and I prodded my friend into trying some as well. He was ecstatic, his eyes half-closed. As a sort of thank-you, he suddenly produced a matchbox, opened it, and let the Chinese girl have a look.

Inside was a large, shimmering green beetle. Big sister tried to feed it a little piece of fruit but then it flew off. Buzzing softly, it flew over all the slitty-eyed people in their seats, circled two ladies with long pins in their hair who gazed up in astonishment, swerved around a mountain of suitcases with some carelessly wrapped reindeer antlers on top, and headed down the corridor just under the florescent lights, the same way we had come in. My friend looked sad, but I tried to console him with the thought that it was no doubt going back home to Pajala.

At that very moment there was an announcement over the loudspeakers, and everybody started moving. We packed the puzzle into the girl's bag of toys and passed through the gate in the midst of the jostling crowd. This aircraft was much bigger than the previous one. Instead of propellers this one had big drums on the wings that made a whistling sound when they started up. The noise grew and grew until it was a deafening roar, and after we'd taken off it reduced to a booming rumble.

We got to Frankfurt. And if my silent traveling companion hadn't all of a sudden needed to relieve himself and started doing his number twos under a table, we would certainly, we would quite definitely, without a shadow of a doubt, we would have gotten to China.



*About living and dead faith, how nuts and bolts give rise to violence, and a remarkable incident in Pajala church*

I started seeing quite a lot of my taciturn friend, and before long I went home with him for the first time. His parents turned out to be Laestadians, members of the revivalist movement started by Lars Levi Laestadius a long time ago in Karesuando. He was only a little man, but his sermons were red-hot and peppered, when he attacked strong drink and debauchery, with almost as many curses as the sinners used. He spoke with such force that the reverberations are still rumbling on even today.

Faith is not enough for a Laestadian. It's not just a question of being baptized or confessing your sins or putting money in the collection plate. Your faith has to be a living faith. An old Laestadian preacher was once asked how he would describe this living faith. He considered for quite a while, then answered thoughtfully that it was like spending the whole of your life walking uphill.

The whole of your life walking uphill. It's not easy to imagine that. You're ambling casually along a narrow, winding country road in Tornedalen, like the one from Pajala to Muodoslompolo. It's early summer and everything is fresh and green. The road passes through a forest of weather-beaten pines, and there's a smell of mud and sun from the bog pools. Capercaillies are eating gravel in the ditches, then take off with wings flapping loudly and disappear into the undergrowth.

Soon you come to the first hill. You notice that you're starting to climb and you can feel your calf muscles getting tense. But you don't give it a second thought, it's only a gentle slope after all. When you reach the top, quite soon, the road will level out again and the forest will be flat and dry on each side, with fluffy white reindeer moss in among the soaring tree trunks.

But you keep on climbing. The hill goes on longer than you thought it would. Your legs grow tired, you slow down and you look more and more impatiently for the crest, which has to come at any moment now, surely.

But it never does come. The road just keeps on going up and up. The forest is the same as before, with stretches of bog and brushwood and here and there an ugly clear-felled patch. But it's still uphill. It's as if somebody has broken off the whole landscape and propped it up on one edge. Lifted up the far end and stuck something underneath it, just to annoy you. And you start to suspect that it will keep on going uphill for the rest of the day. And the next day as well.

You keep on climbing stubbornly. The days gradually turn into weeks. Your legs start to feel like lead, and you keep wondering who it was who thought he'd be smart and prop up the landscape on one end. It's been pretty skillfully done, you have to admit that, grudgingly. But surely it will level out once you get past Parkajoki, there are limits after all. And you

come to Parkajoki, but the road is still going uphill and so you think it will be Kitkiöjoki.

And the weeks turn into months. You work your way through them one stride at a time. And the snow starts falling. And it melts, and falls again. And between Kitkiöjoki and Kitkiöjärvi you're pretty close to giving up. Your legs are like jelly, your hip joints ache, and your last reserves of energy are practically used up.

But you stop for a while to get your breath back, then keep battling on. Muodoslompola can't be far away now. Occasionally you come across somebody going in the other direction—that's inevitable. Somebody skipping along merrily on the way to Pajala. Some of them even have bikes. Sitting on their seats without needing to pedal, freewheeling all the way down. That does raise your doubts, you have to admit that. You have to fight a few inner battles.

Your strides get shorter and shorter. And the years pass. And now you must be nearly there, very nearly there. And it snows again, that's how it should be. You peer through the snow flurries, and you think you might be able to see something. You think it might be getting a bit lighter just over there. The forest thins out, opens up. You can make out houses among the trees. It's the village! It's Muodoslompola! And in mid-stride, one last short and shaky stride ...

At the funeral the preacher bellows on about how you died in the living faith. No doubt about it. You died in the living faith, *sie kuolit elävässä uskossa*. You got to Muodoslompola—we all witnessed it, and now at long last you are sitting on God the Father's golden luggage carrier, freewheeling down the eternal slope accompanied by fanfares of angels.

\* \* \*

The kid turned out to have a name: his mother called him Niila. Both his parents were strict Christians. Although their house was teeming with kids, there was a dreary, church-like silence wherever you went. Niila had two elder brothers and two younger sisters, and there was another child kicking away in his mother's stomach. And as every child was a gift from God, there would be even more as time went by.

It was unreal for so many young children to be so quiet. They didn't have many toys—most of what they did have were made of rough wood by their elder brothers, and unpainted. The kids just sat there playing with them, as silent as fish. It wasn't only because they had been brought up in a religious way. It was something you found in other Tornedalen families—they'd simply stopped talking. Possibly because they were shy, possibly because they were angry. Possibly because they found talking unnecessary. The parents only opened their mouths when they were eating; at other times they would nod or point when they wanted something, and the children took after them.

I also kept quiet whenever I went to visit Niila. Children have an instinctive feel for that sort of thing. I took my shoes off and left them on the mat in the hall and tip-toed into the kitchen with head bowed and shoulders slightly hunched. I was greeted by a mass of silent eyes, from the rocking chair, from under the table, from by the pot cupboard. Looks that stared, then turned away, sneaked off around the kitchen walls and over the wooden floor but kept coming back to me. I stared back as hard as I could. The face of the youngest girl puckered up with fear, you could see her milk teeth gleaming in her gaping mouth, and tears started to flow. She was sobbing, but even her sobs were silent. Her cheek muscles trembled and she clung to her mother's beskirted leg with her chubby little hands. Mum was wearing

headscarf even though she was indoors, and had her arms plunged up to the elbows in the mixing bowl. She was kneading vigorously, flour swirled up and was turned into gold dust by a sunbeam. She pretended not to notice that I was there, and Niila took that as a sign of approval. He led me over to a settee where his two elder brothers were exchanging nuts and bolts. Or perhaps it was some sort of game, involving a complicated pattern of shifting nuts and bolts around various compartments in a box. The brothers were growing increasingly annoyed with each other, and without speaking tried to wrench bolts from the other's hand. A nut fell onto the floor and Niila snapped it up. Quick as a flash the eldest brother grabbed him by the hand and squeezed until Niila was in so much pain he could hardly breathe, and was forced to drop the nut into the transparent plastic box. Whereupon the other brother turned it upside down. A clatter of steel as the contents rolled all over the wooden floor.

For one brief moment everything stood still. Every eye in the kitchen homed in on the brothers like rays of the sun through a magnifying glass. It was like when a film gets stuck on a projector, blackens over, goes crinkly, and then turns white. I could feel the hatred even though I couldn't understand it. The brothers lashed out and grabbed each other's shirt from the neck. Biceps bulging, they exerted the force of industrial magnets and the gap between them closed inexorably. All the time they stared at each other, coal-black pupils, two mirrors face to face with the distance between them expanding to infinity.

Then their mum threw the dishtowel. It flew across the kitchen trailing a thin wisp of flour behind it, a comet with a tail that squelched into the elder son's forehead and stuck there. She eyed them threateningly, slowly wiping the dough from her hands. She had no desire to spend the whole evening sewing on shirt buttons. Reluctantly, the brothers let go. Then they stood up and left through the kitchen door.

Mum retrieved the dishtowel that had fallen to the floor, rinsed her hands, and went back to her kneading. Niila picked up all the nuts and bolts, put them in the plastic box, and stuck the box in his pocket with a self-satisfied expression on his face. Then he glanced furtively out of the kitchen window.

The two brothers were standing in the middle of the path. Trading punches in rapid succession. Heavy punches jerking their crew-cut skulls around like turnips in a hopper. Biff. Bash. No shouting, no taunts. Biff after biff on those low foreheads, on those potato noses, bash after bash on those red cabbage ears. The elder brother had a longer reach, the younger one had to slot in his blows. Blood poured from both their noses. It dripped down, splashed about, their knuckles were red. But still they kept going. Biff. Bash. Biff. Bash.

We were given juice and cinnamon buns straight out of the oven, so hot that we had to keep what we bit off between our teeth for a while before we could chew it. Then Niila started playing with the nuts and bolts. He emptied them out onto the sofa, his fingers were trembling, and I realized he'd been longing to do this for ages. He sorted them out into the various compartments in the plastic box, then tipped them out, mixed them up and started again. I tried to help him but I could see he was annoyed, so after a while I left to go home. He didn't even look up.

The brothers were still at it outside. The gravel had been kicked around by their feet to form a circular rampart. Still the same frenzied punches, the same silent hatred, but the movements were slower now, weariness was creeping in. Their shirts were soaked in sweat. Their faces were grey behind all the blood, powdered lightly with dust.

Then I noticed they had changed. They weren't really boys any more. Their jaws had swollen up, their canines were sticking out from between their swollen lips. Their legs were shorter and more massive, like the thighs of a bear, and so big their trousers were splitting the seams. Their fingernails had turned black and grown into claws. And then I realized it wasn't dust on their faces, it was hair. They were growing a pelt, dark hair spreading over their fresh, boyish faces, down over their necks and inside their shirts.

I wanted to shout a warning. Rashly took a step toward them.

They stopped immediately. Turned to face me. Crouched slightly, sniffed my scent. And then I saw their hunger. They were starving. They were desperate to eat, craved meat.

I stepped back. An icy chill ran down my spine. They growled. Started advancing shoulder to shoulder, two vigilant beasts of prey. They sped up. Stepped outside their gravel circles. Dug in their claws then pounced.

A dark cloud loomed over me.

My scream was stifled. Terror, whimpering, the squeaking of a stuck piglet.

*Ding. Ding dong.*

Church bells.

The holy church bells. *Ding dong. Ding dong.* A white-clad being cycled into the courtyard, shimmering figure ringing his bell in a cloud of floury light. He braked without a word. Grasped the beasts with his enormous fists, lifted them by the scruff of their necks, and banged their turnip-heads together so hard that sparks flew.

"Dad," they gasped, "Dad, Dad ..."

The bright light faded, the father flung his sons to the ground, grabbed them by the ankles, one son in each hand, and dragged them backward and forward over the graves, smoothing out the surface with their front teeth until everything was nice and tidy again. And by the time he had finished, both brothers were crying their eyes out, sobbing, and they turned back into boys again. I raced home, galloping as fast as I could. In my pocket I had a bolt.

\* \* \*

Niila's dad was called Isak and came from a big Laestadian family. Even as a little boy he had been dragged along to prayer meetings in the smoke-filled hut where dark-suited smallholders and their wives in knotted headscarves sat bottom to bottom on the wooden benches. It was so cramped that their foreheads hit against the backs of those in front whenever they were possessed by the Holy Spirit and started rocking back and forth as they intoned prayers. Isak had sat there, hemmed in on every side, a delicate little boy among all those men and women being transformed before his very eyes. They started breathing more deeply, the air grew damp and fetid, their faces turned crimson, their glasses misted over, their noses started dripping as the two preachers sang louder and louder. Their words, those living words weaving the Truth thread by thread, images of evil, of perfidy, of sins that attempted to hide underground but were torn up by their hideous roots and shaken like worm-eaten turnips before the congregation. In the row in front was a little girl with braids, fair golden hair gleaming in the darkness, squashed in by grown-up bodies riddled with dread. She was motionless, pressing a doll to her heart as the storm raged over her head. It was horrific to see her mother and father weeping. Watching her grown-up relatives being transformed

crushed. Sitting there hunched up, feeling the fall-out dripping all over her and thinking: it's all my fault. It's my fault. If only I'd been a bit better behaved. Isak had clenched his boyish hands tightly together, and inside them it felt as if a swarm of insects were creeping around. And he thought: if I open my hands we'll all die. If I let them escape we're all finished.

And then one day, one Sunday after a few years had passed, he crawled out onto the thin nocturnal ice. Everything crumbled away, his defenses collapsed. He was thirteen and could feel Satan beginning to grow deep inside him. Filled with a fear that was greater than the fear of being beaten, greater than the urge for self-preservation, he'd stood up in the middle of the prayer meeting and, holding onto people's backs, he'd swayed back and forth before collapsing nose-first into the lap of Christ. Callused hands had been placed on his brow and his chest, it was a second baptism, that's the way it was done. He had unbuttoned his head and been drenched by the flood of his sins.

There was not a single dry eye in the congregation. They had witnessed a great event. The Almighty had issued a summons. The Lord had taken the boy with His very own hand, and then given him back.

Afterward, when he learned to walk for the second time, as he stood there on trembling legs, they had propped him up. His corpulent mother had hugged him in the name and blood of Jesus, and her tears flowed down over his own face.

Obviously, he was destined to become a preacher.

\* \* \*

Like most Laestadians Isak became a diligent worker. Felled trees and piled the trunks up on the frozen river during the winter, accompanied the logs down to the sawmills in the estuary when the ice melted in the spring, clearing jams on the way, and looked after the cows and potato fields on his parents' smallholding during the summer. Worked hard and made few demands, steered well clear of strong drink, gambling and Communism. That sometimes caused him a few problems with his lumberjack colleagues, but he took their mockery as a challenge to be overcome, and didn't say a word during the working week, merely reading books of sermons.

But on Sundays he would cleanse himself with saunas and prayers, and put on his white shirt and dark suit. During the prayer meetings he could cut loose at last, sail forth to attack filth and the Devil, brandish the Good Lord's two-edged sword, aim His law and gospel truth at all the world's sinners, the liars, lechers, hypocrites, the foulmouthed, boozers, wife-beaters, and Communists who flourished in the accursed valley of the River Torne like lice under a blanket.

His face was young, energetic, and smooth-shaven. Eyes deep-set. With consummate skill he grabbed the attention of his congregation, and was soon engaged to a fellow believer, a shy and well-polished Finnish girl from the Pello district, smelling of soap.

But when the children started to come, he was forsaken by God. One day there was nothing but silence. Nobody answered his pleas.

He was left with nothing but confusion, tottering on the edge of the abyss. Filled with sorrow. And festering malice. He started to sin, just to discover what it felt like. Minor little wicked acts, aimed at his nearest and dearest. When it dawned on him that he quite enjoyed it, he kept going. Worried members of his church tried to engage him in serious

conversations, but he put the Devil's curse on them. They turned their backs on him, and did not return.

But despite being abandoned, despite feeling hollow, he still regarded himself as a believer. He maintained the rituals, and brought up his children in accordance with the Scriptures. But he replaced the Good Lord with himself. And that was the worst form of Laestadianism, the nastiest, the most ruthless. Laestadianism without God.

\* \* \*

This was the frosty landscape in which Niila grew up. Like many children in a hostile environment, he learned how to survive by not being noticed. That was one of the things I observed the very first time we met in the playground: his ability to move without making sound. The chameleon-like way in which he seemed to take on the background color, making him practically invisible. He was typical of the self-effacing inhabitants of Tornedalen. You hunch yourself up in order to keep warm. Your flesh hardens, you get stiff shoulder muscles that start to ache when you reach middle age. You take shorter steps when you walk, you breathe less deeply and your skin turns slightly gray through lack of oxygen. The meek of Tornedalen never run away when attacked, because there's no point. They just huddle up and hope it will pass. In public assemblies they always sit at the back, something you can often observe at cultural events in Tornedalen: between the spotlights on stage and the audience the stalls are ten or more rows of empty seats, while the back rows are crammed full.

Niila had lots of little wounds on his forearms that never healed. I eventually realized that he used to scratch himself. It was unconscious, his filthy fingernails just made their own way there and dug themselves in. As soon as a scab formed, he would pick at it, prize it up, and break it loose, then flick it away with a snapping noise. Sometimes they would land on me, sometimes he just ate them with a faraway look on his face. I'm not sure which I found more disgusting. When we were at my place I tried to tell him off about it, but he just gaped at me with a look of uncomprehending surprise. And before long he was at it again.

Nevertheless, the oddest thing of all about Niila was that he never spoke. He was five years old after all. Sometimes he opened his mouth and seemed to be about to come out with something, you could hear the lump of phlegm inside his throat starting to move. There would be a sort of throat-clearing, a gob that seemed to be breaking loose. But then he would change his mind and look scared. He could understand what I said, that was obvious: there was nothing wrong with his head. But something had got stuck.

No doubt it was significant that his mother was from Finland. She had never been a talkative woman and came from a country that had been torn to shreds by civil war, the Winter War, and the Continuation War, while her well-fed neighbor to the west had been busy selling iron ore to the Germans and growing rich. She felt inferior. She wanted to give her children what she had never had. They would be real Swedes, and hence she wanted to teach them Swedish rather than her native Finnish. But as she knew practically no Swedish she kept quiet.

When Niila came around to our place we often sat in the kitchen because he liked the radio. My mum used to have the radio mumbling away in the background all day, something unknown in his house. It didn't much matter what was on, so we had a potpourri of pop music, *Woman's Hour*, *Down Your Way*, bell-ringing from Stockholm, language courses, and

church services. I never used to listen, it all went in one ear and out the other. But Niila seemed to be thrilled to bits just by the sound, the fact that it was never really quiet.

One afternoon I made a decision. I would teach Niila to talk. I caught his eye, pointed at myself and said:

“Matti.”

Then I pointed at him and waited. He also waited. I reached out and stuck my finger between his lips. He opened his mouth, but still didn't say anything. I started stroking his throat. It tickled, and he pushed my hand away.

“Niila!” I said, and tried to make him say it after me. “Niila, say Niila!”

He stared at me as if I were an idiot. I pointed at my crotch and said:

“Willy!”

He grinned, thought I was being rude. I pointed at my backside.

“Bum! Willy and bum!”

He nodded, then turned his attention back to the radio again. I pointed at his own backside and made a gesture to show something coming out of it. Then I looked at him questioningly. He cleared his throat. I went tense, waiting impatiently. But nothing happened. I was annoyed and wrestled him down to the floor.

“It's called poop! Say poop!”

He slowly extricated himself from my grip. Coughed and sort of bent his tongue around inside his mouth to loosen it up.

Then he said: “*Solfa.*”

I held my breath. That was the first time I'd ever heard his voice. It was deep for a boy, hoarse. Not very attractive.

“What did you say?”

“*Donu al mi akvon.*”

There it was again. I was flabbergasted. Niila spoke! He'd started talking, but I couldn't understand what he said.

He rose to his feet with great dignity, walked over to the sink and drank a glass of water. Then he went home.

Something very remarkable had taken place. In his state of dumbness, in his isolated fear, Niila had created a language of his own. Without conversing, he had invented words, begun to string them together and form sentences. Or wasn't it just him alone, perhaps? Could there be something deeper to it, embedded in the deepest peat layer at the back of his mind? An ancient language? An ancient memory, deep frozen but slowly starting to melt?

And before I knew where I was, our roles had been reversed. Instead of me teaching him how to talk, it was him teaching me. We would sit in the kitchen, Mum pottering around in the garden, the radio buzzing in the background.

“*Êi tio estas seêo,*” he said, pointing at a chair.

“*Êi tio estas seêo,*” I repeated after him.

“*Vi nomiêas Matti,*” he said, pointing at me.

“*Vi nomiêas Matti,*” I repeated, good as gold.

He shook his head.

“*Mi nomiêas!*”

I corrected myself.

*“Mi nomiğas Matti. Vi nomiğas Niila.”*

He clicked his tongue enthusiastically. There were rules in this language of his, it was ordered. You couldn't just babble on in any way you liked.

We began using it as our secret language, it grew into a space of our own where we could be all to ourselves. The kids from round about grew jealous and suspicious, but that only increased our pleasure. Mum and Dad got a bit worried and thought I was losing my power of speech, but when they phoned the doctor he said that children often invented fantasy languages, and it would soon pass.

But as far as Niila was concerned, the blockage in his throat had been cleared once and for all. Our make-believe language overcame his fear of talking, and it wasn't long before he started speaking Swedish and Finnish as well. He understood quite a lot already, of course, and had a big passive vocabulary. It just needed translating into sounds, and his mouth movements had to be practiced. But it proved to be more difficult than one might have thought. He sounded odd for ages, his palate had trouble with all the Swedish vowels and the Finnish diphthongs, and he was constantly dribbling. Eventually it became possible to understand more or less what he was saying, although he still preferred to stick to our secret language. That was where he felt most at home. When we spoke it he would relax, and his body movements were less awkward, more natural.

\* \* \*

One Sunday something unusual happened in Pajala. The church was full. It was a routine service, the clergyman taking it was Wilhelm Tawe as usual, and in normal circumstances there would have been plenty of room. But on this particular day it was full to overflowing.

The reason was that the inhabitants of Pajala were going to see their first real, live African.

There was so much interest that even Mum and Dad were induced to turn up, despite the fact that they very rarely went to church at all apart from on Christmas Eve. In the pew in front of us were Niila and his parents and all his brothers and sisters. Just once he turned around and peered at me over the back of the pew, but was immediately prodded quite hard by Isak. The congregation included office workers and lumberjacks, and even a few Communists, all whispering among themselves. It was obvious what they were talking about. They were wondering if he'd turn out to be really black, pitch black, like the jazz musicians on record sleeves. Or would he just be a sort of coffee-brown?

There was a ringing of bells and the vestry door opened. Wilhelm Tawe emerged, looking a little bit on edge behind his black-framed spectacles. And there behind him. Also in vestments. A glittering African mantel, oh, yes ...

Pitch black! Whispers spread swiftly among the Sunday School mistresses. No trace of brown, more a sort of bluish black. Trotting alongside the African was an old deaconess who had been a missionary for many years, thin as a rake and with skin like tanned leather. The men bowed in the direction of the altar and the woman curtsied. Then Tawe got the service under way by bidding all present welcome, especially the guest who had traveled all the way from the war-stricken Congo. Christian parishes there were in crying need of material assistance, and today's entire collection would be sent straight to the aid of our brothers and sisters in Africa.

Then the rituals commenced. But everybody just stared. They couldn't take their eyes off



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