

Piia Leino

**HEAVEN**

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for Anton

A child runs down from a boulder top,  
to where his mother stands,  
and says with bright eyes shining  
that he's just seen heaven's lands.

"What talk is this, my little one,  
of a place so far away?  
Where did you see heaven,  
Oh my golden boy?"

"I stood up on the ridge top there,  
and looked to the northeast,  
and far away was a purple heath,  
and pine trees in the mist,

And in the treetops I could see  
the gentle shining sun,  
and through it all a climbing road  
scattered with golden sand,

And then my heart began to ache,  
and tears began to flow,  
I don't know why it made me cry,  
but it was heaven, I know."

"No, my child, for heaven's house  
lies far beyond the sky,  
where crowns of gold and lamps aflame,  
surround God's throne on high."

No, it's there on the horizon,  
in the faraway forest mist,  
that's where the world of the blessed ones lies,  
that is the land of bliss.

Aleksis Kivi

PART 1

**GRAY**

When Akseli needs to rest his eyes, he watches the beggars.

There were four hundred to start with, a hundred along each side of Hakaniemi Square, but some of them may have died. They let the Siltasaari Street side of the square into the market hall first, then everyone else in clockwise order. The last row won't fit inside. They sleep on the square under faded orange market tents and green garbage bins tipped on their sides. One bin with a missing lid has a red-checked oilcloth thrown over it.

It's well into April, but the beggars still sit bundled in heavy clothes. There's a breeze blowing in from the sea. Even Akseli, who doesn't go outside, can feel it. The cold nips at his ankles through the floorboards, climbs like a sadness up his body and into his mind.

He stands in front of the window, raises his knee and twists to touch it with his elbow, returns to starting position, repeats the motion with the other knee. He's already tiring out, but he holds fast to the count, saying the numbers in his head so loudly he can almost hear them: eight... nine... ten.

The worker fitness exercises aren't pleasant, but they're mandatory. The price you pay for life in the flesh. According to the teachings of The Light, muscle is just the mind's modeling clay, and maintaining it is part of your job. The part about the mind's modeling clay is something a famous runner said more than a hundred years ago. The Flying Finn. Akseli can't recall his name at the moment, but anyway this Finn knew what Akseli knows: flesh is a burden that the mind drags along behind it.

Akseli switches exercises. He presses his fingertips against the cool floor and raises up on tiptoe toward the ceiling. The crunch of his back feels almost good. The beggars are still sitting when the first distant rumble begins. The guards are supposed to empty the square when there's a cloudburst, but they're still slouched against the wall of the market hall. They might be asleep. There are two guards, and the thought flashes across Akseli's mind that the people on the square could ambush them, take their weapons, kill them. But that obviously isn't going to happen. Who would bother to rebel anymore, and why? A wet gust rouses the guards and they straighten up and wave the ragamuffin crowd forward. The people start to stream into the hall and the rain patters against Akseli's window, but he barely notices. He keeps up his calisthenics at a steady rhythm, scattered thoughts flickering. There used to be thunderstorms only in the summer, he thinks. He's not sure. But he remembers lightning over his great-grandmother's oat field, remembers that it was an unusual thing, exciting. Now the sky breaks up regularly in a rainy season that lasts far more than half the year, and the city is used to being shaken by thunder.

Akseli is out of breath. The back of his head feels hollow. His blood can't keep up. He has to do it, though. Twenty repetitions of each exercise. If he's not fit for work, he won't be able to do his job, and if he doesn't do his job, the university won't pay him his five-hour daily trip to Heaven. Without Heaven there would be nothing but the bug-blackened walls and the dispatch that brings food once a week. Would he stare out the window and chew on his cricket porridge till the end of his days, or would he have the courage to open the window and jump into the void? Would jumping from here kill him instantly, or would he just lie on the ground until he bled dry?

Akseli folds a towel over the rough floorboards before starting his sit-ups. His bones can't take the floor. In the middle of his crunches a fly buzzes at his face and breaks his rhythm and he loses count, panics. He doesn't want to do a single crunch too many, or too few. He can just barely do the mandatory amount. He does a few more anxious curls and slumps to the floor. He sees a dead cockroach in the dust under the bed and remembers seeing it many times before.

When the tears start, Akseli realizes they have been just under the surface all the time. He could lay here on the floor for the rest of his life, curl up here with the cockroach, but in Heaven soft rain is waiting, and wind, and birds singing, and he isn't ready to give up yet. He wrenches himself upright and sits down in the chair, sweating. He picks up the glasses from the floor and puts them on. One more hour and a half, then another round of fitness, then Heaven. He can do it, if he just remembers where he left off.

Lady Gaga rises up out of a swimming pool wearing a one-shoulder leather suit and a strange helmet. She plays cards, twitches her hips in a beach chair, stares intently into the camera as if inviting Akseli to join a game that ended long ago. The velocity of the video is dizzying. The rhythm pounds, Lady Gaga's clothes change, she poses at the card table with an enormous dog, dances with a crowd of people, and it's all about her, about her slick surface and how Akseli rates her power of sexual attraction. Women's beauty was accentuated back then by scanty clothing, processed hair and face paint, and Lady Gaga has lots of all three.

Akseli has watched this file dozens of times. It still feels disagreeable, crammed to bursting. It tries to capture the viewer's interest in the fashion of its time, with great quantities of visual stimuli. It was only when the virtual worlds came and the files could appeal to all the senses and use biofeedback that the pace of the files slackened to a meditative level. A relaxing feeling of well-being in place of an agitating lust for pleasure. Akseli pulls a blanket over himself to ward off the chill in the room and tries to concentrate, but he can't get hold of his thoughts. He has been wearing the glasses for days, watching music videos, full-length movies, and silly short ones called porn. Sometimes the people in the videos go straight to the act, but usually they're focused on display; the women adorn themselves and the men test their strength in fight scenes. In some of the longer movies they have offspring, but there's not much discussion of their birth rate.

In the files from the turn of the millennium, there isn't the slightest reference to the future. People pour forth their desires or senseless jealousies. They're terribly energetic. Aside from sexual intercourse, the thing that seems to motivate them most is the possibility of acquiring possessions. For female characters, colorful shoes and dresses are actually more exciting than a potential mate. In one file, four women have sex with numerous men in New York City--before the wave, of course. But the greatest pleasure for them seems to be the uncomfortable-looking shoes in growth market display windows. The very sight of them makes the women squeal and clap their hands.

Akseli ought to start his report, but his head is foggy. It's impossible to imagine where such desire could be channeled nowadays. Would women reject Heaven and hit the town looking for clothes and shoes? Would they demand husbands, cream layer cakes and snow-white dresses? Would the men kill each other? What would he do? Would he want to mate, or kill, or go after power and risk his own life? Akseli thinks he knows one thing that would happen: he would leave his apartment. And if he would, so would other people. Vast numbers of people would flood into the streets--people who didn't have to be there. They would do something. But Akseli couldn't imagine what.

Iina steps out onto the cobblestones, startled by a warm spring breeze that carries the stink of rancid seawater, seagull soup, and garbage. There's also a whiff of smoke from the north part of town where open fires aren't banned. In the blocks occupied by The Light there's no need for fire because the electricity generally works without any outages and the garbage on the streets disappears somewhere.

The sky is deep blue like it was before the war, and yet very different. Utterly indifferent. Iina forces herself to concentrate on avoiding the cracks in the asphalt, placing her wooden shoes down carefully step by step, squeezing her fingers tight against the handle of her basket. The fear doesn't go away, but she keeps it under control, one step at a time. As always happens when she's outdoors, images flash across her mind and then disappear. A twisted body on the cobblestones. The stinking breath of a starving neighbor. A leather-clad victory parade. The worst images are the ones she didn't see but only imagined, over and over. Her father's last moments. Marius captured.

Everything at the market square is familiar. The food stalls near Cholera Slip, the flea market vendors set up next to the road. There are two guards on duty, both slouching, middle-aged men, their bayonets gleaming in the sunshine. Iina hates them out of habit, but there's no strength in her hate.

There are a few customers. A stooped woman is standing at the nearest stall, poking at the seagulls. The vendor has piled the birds on the table with their wings spread so they look like they're flying, perched on each other's backs. Iina imagines them piled up and up like a white layer cake that reaches to the sky, like some strange, genetically

modified creature too large to be a morsel for any predator. The gulls' red-rimmed eyes are open and still moist; unmistakably fresh. There was a time when Iina would have paid anything for just one gull, peeled the hide expertly from the flesh, cooked it quickly, and gnawed every string of meat from the bone. Now she doesn't have to. She just wants something easy to serve to Jalo, to fulfill her duty and be left alone.

Iina stops at the next stand and stares at the dark, round loaves of bread, but can't look the vendor in the eye. To open her mouth feels beyond her capacities.

"Cricket loaf?" the man asks.

Iina glances at him. He's so tanned that he looks foreign. He couldn't be, but the mere possibility is startling. It's a reminder that outside the city-state walls there almost certainly still are foreigners, and maybe also former Helsinkiites. Maybe even Mom, Mikki, and Marius.

The vendor sizes Iina up, concludes she has some means.

"Fifty marks a loaf. Do you want one?"

Iina shakes her head and retreats, frightened away by the high price. He can see right through her. Scarcity demands vigilance, shoulders tight and eyes peeled, but her madness is cotton wool that slows her movements and fogs her mind. Her years of dependence on Jalo have made her soft.

She can already feel a stab of longing for Heaven. If she were there, she would be alone, but with other people. In Heaven there is no shortage of anything, no need to go shopping and eye other people as if they were wallets of money. No need to hurry. No shoes that chafe.

"I'll be there soon," Iina tells herself. "I just have to finish these errands."

Iina stops at a mash stand and nods to the old vendor. The woman has a large wart on the side of her nose and furrows on either side of her mouth that look like they were cut with a knife. One pale eye is defective somehow, almost entirely white. Her appearance repels Iina, but the food smells of herbs and garlic and she's sure it would please Jalo. There are crickets, mealworms, onions, and carrots mixed into the oat grits. Iina eyes the mounds of mash looking for weevils, and doesn't see any.

"How much?"

"40 marks a box."

A shiver goes down Iina's spine as she realizes with a dreadful certainty that she forgot to bring a box but glances down at her basket anyway, which remains empty.

She should go home and get a box, but the thought of walking the length of Esplanadi and back again brings tears to her eyes. She doesn't want to make her way around the linden tree again, see the birch tree growing up through cracks in the asphalt, climb the stone steps up four floors, knowing that she has to take the same route back to the market, and then walk it again when she goes home.

"I need a container," she whispers.

The woman's mouth tightens, her fingers squeeze the edge of the table, and Iina senses her hatred, her certainty that Iina is a net pet, and a pathetic one. Her only job is to feed her master and not waste his money, and she can't even do that; she just dreams of the mind-numbing peace in Heaven, floating away to the rainforest, to Normandy, to Pompeii, to anywhere at any time, to all the most beautiful places that once were, or still are, somewhere far away.

The woman shakes her head and points to a stand a couple dozen meters away with a stack of boxes on the table. One eye looks over Iina's head at the sky, the other eye at the sea that once offered a bit of meat in every pot, back in the old days.

Iina chooses her container carefully, running her finger along the joints and checking it for flaws. She finally spends 150 marks for a birchwood box with an oval knot in the wood at the bottom, right in the center. She tries to convince herself that she'll go to Hakaniemi market one day and give the box to the beggars, but she knows she never will. There are dozens of boxes like it in the cupboard at home. When she and Jalo die, those boxes will still be there. When the building is torn down one day and that cupboard is crushed to a pile of rubble, the boxes will still be there under the rubble.

The woman takes the box from Iina with a sniff, but she fills it conscientiously right to the top, presses the lid on, and wipes the risotto off the bottom with a wrinkled thumb. Iina takes the box in both hands and puts it in her basket. When she looks up, the woman is staring straight at her, as if she actually doesn't hate her privileges, just wants to know.

When Iina gets home she takes a spoon out of the dish drying cupboard and eats a third of the cold mush straight from the box, licks the spoon, and puts it back in the cupboard. She leaves the rest on the table for Jalo. He'll come out this afternoon or evening, driven by hunger or to go to the toilet, and go right back to his room again. Iina sees him now and then in passing. They say hello, and the past flickers painfully for a moment. At the very beginning they used to try to eat together, but it was too weird and uncomfortable. Being with each other only reminded them of the people they had lost.

Iina goes to her own room, types the password in the file locker, and puts on her glasses, but doesn't bother to put on the suit. She burrows under the covers and looks at

the Alps, their white peaks etched against the sky, the green of their grass so deep it looks like you could eat it. She lies in a hammock listening to the clang of cowbells in the valley. The bright yellow sun tires her eyes, so she touches it with her fingertip and slides it toward the horizon. The sky explodes with color: orange, red, gold. She lowers the sun halfway below the horizon and the flaming colors soften to pink, and then layers of deep blue and star-speckled black. Then she leaves the sun to set at its own speed and closes her eyes, but she can't fall asleep.

A young man is thrusting his penis into an apple pie, but he tries to stop what he's doing when his father comes into the room. Akseli gets that this is supposed to make you laugh--but at whom? Is the funniest part the father's confusion, or the way the young man is taken by surprise, or just the idea of somebody masturbating into a pie? Akseli shifts positions, but his back still hurts. He has to get up.

He takes off his glasses and sets them on the bed, massages his temples. It's surprisingly bright in the room. He can clearly see the peeling paint on the walls, the jar of drooping herbs on the floor. He feels a sting of desire to be back behind the glasses and realizes suddenly that he doesn't just have a craving for Heaven, he craves the mindless movie world, too. The people in the videos all have only one goal, and they pursue it with such certainty that it's easy to forget it's all pointless.

Akseli walks to the window and looks up at the sky, a strange blue. The evening sun reveals years of streaks and dust on the window, and through them he sees the dark forms of the huddled beggars. The dwellings on the square, ancient orange tents and green garbage bins, glow weirdly in the spring light. In front of the market hall is a fallen steel contraption with broken neon letters and two stylized human figures. The old sign that used to be on the roof of the market hall. It's been laying there for years.

Akseli thinks about the young men in the movie. They seem rather silly, but that didn't diminish their desire to live. If they lived here in Helsinki they would no doubt pick up that sign—or they would if it might improve their luck with women. They would

build a bunch of rabbit traps and make furs from the rabbits, collect old plastic and invent some way to use it, make backyard gardens bloom. The men in the movies didn't seem smart enough to repair the broken buildings or put new asphalt on the roads, but they could surely learn, because they had a drive to get things done.

Akseli presses his fingers against the cool glass, looks at his hands. They're pale and smooth with thick white moons at the ends of his fingernails. They're soft hands, but broad, with strong fingers like men used to have. The sort of hands that know the feel of a woman's skin. Hands that build houses, and wring necks. He can't imagine having the courage to live back then.

"What kind of man am I?" he asks half aloud and is surprised at the sound of his voice. A human voice.

It's a question he can't answer. At the university he's a worker. In Heaven he doesn't need a definition of what he is. His mother demanded something undefined from him. But she's gone now. Akseli doesn't miss his mother's demands, but he sometimes misses her presence--the sound of her brushing her teeth, the noise from her stupid, old-fashioned computer, the click of the front door opening.

When his mother was alive, he just wanted to get away from her. The farther the cancer spread, the more she guilted him about the time he spent inside his glasses. The Light offered cheap glasses and Heaventime for good student performance, and Akseli wanted every minute. He devoured his studies. Heaven was happiness and studying was a necessary evil, but whichever one he was doing, his mother just saw him sunk behind his glasses.

"What kind of a life is that?" she would say. "You never even see the sun."

"Can you see the sun on that screen?" Akseli asked, pointing at her computer.

”At least I don’t look like an idiot at the computer. You’re a zombie.”

It was lucky his mother was already dead when the war started. He’s sure she would have complained about him hiding out, even though she hardly would have been happy to see him among the ranks of the government butchers. She voted nationalist because she hated the towel heads, but she didn’t particularly care for The Light, either. She knew a dead end when she saw it, and she seemed to enjoy the anxiety that she carried around her like an aura, sucking others into its orbit.

Akseli had feared a summons any day, but no summons came. He had dreams that there was a hard knock on the door and he knew they had come to get him, but he made himself wake up before the door opened. He bought his groceries on the web, and when they stopped coming he let a week go by before he dared to leave the apartment.

He knew that people were fleeing the city, but he didn’t know how to do such a decisive thing. He had always been impractical, always lived in the world of games and books. He was born at a time when that should have been enough.

Iina became a participant exactly five years ago, on the 14th of February, 2053. Her 21st birthday. She had wished for a miracle, for something to rescue her: for Marius to come back and get her out of the city, for the resistance to attack Helsinki, for sudden death. She wouldn't have known how to hope for Heaven. She had heard of it, but didn't yet know what it was.

She had been living at Jalo's house for three months and five days, and they hadn't yet given up trying to make themselves into a family. They ate together sometimes, exchanged a few words when they met, but intercourse was awkward for both of them, and the awkwardness seemed to just grow worse over time.

On the morning of her birthday raindrops ran down the window in slippery streams, jerking as their paths split and combined. Iina lay in bed trying to forget. Three years ago her mother and father and Mikki had brought her breakfast in bed and sung Happy Birthday. Marius had come over in the evening and eaten his oatcake with a spoon that looked ridiculously small in his big hand. When he left he squeezed the back of her neck like he used to when they were little, back when they used to chase each other around the house, fall into a corner and kick their feet to keep each other away.

Now all that was left was a cold room and the wind that snapped the limbs off the linden trees on Esplanadi. The bare branches looked like torn tufts of cloud. Some of the trees had already fallen in the storms, but the toughest ones were still standing. The market vendors had moved the trees out of the road so they could get their carts

through, but the fallen trunks still lay scattered around the park quietly rotting, home to death watch beetles and carpenter ants.

Iina told herself not to expect anything, but she expected something anyway, and nearly jumped when there was a knock on her bedroom door.

When the smell of coffee filled the room, it was almost too much. Jalo set a tray on the bedside table: a steaming, slightly chipped porcelain cup and a thick, pale slice of buttered bread. It was real coffee, imported coffee, rough against her tongue and soft on her palate, incredibly expensive. The bread looked like it was made from fine wheat flour. He must have bought it from some home bakery that morning, for her.

Then he set a large package on the bed, and Iina knew, though she didn't quite dare to believe it.

The package was made of a pale and gleaming cardboard so extravagant that it couldn't have come from anywhere but The Light. Iina ran her fingers over the surface of the box. It felt almost like plastic, with smooth, slightly rounded corners. She couldn't imagine how it was constructed, and suddenly she felt extremely afraid. There was no way she deserved this.

"Open it," Jalo said.

Iina looked at him, but he averted his eyes. She understood his tenseness. He had been stuck in this difficult world for a long time, where everything was spattered and muddled and intransigent and rain-soaked.

"Open it."

Iina lifted the lid and removed a layer of tissue paper, a thing so extravagant that it quite amazed her. Lovely paper made from real wood and who knows what chemicals,

just so she could pick it up and set it on the bed beside her. The fabric was white, smooth, luxuriously heavy. Smart fabric. It seemed obscene to even touch it.

She hesitated so long that Jalo finally picked up the suit and spread it on her lap.

"It's custom tailored to fit you."

"It's unbelievable. It's too much. Does it work?"

"Try it on."

Iina got up and pulled her nightgown over her head, left her underwear on, and carefully wriggled her feet into the pant legs. The suit accepted her, silky and murmuring, clinging tightly around her.

As she pulled the fabric up to her hips she felt a pleasant shudder. The bodice fit perfectly, as did the sleeves. Jalo helped her adjust her breasts so the suit wouldn't flatten them. His cold hands felt strange against her skin.

With the suit on, Iina already felt set free. The cold damp of the room was gone; the smart fabric breathed the optimal temperature against her body. It immediately felt like a part of her, like her real skin, which had for some cruel reason been ripped from her long ago.

"I'm scared," she said. "What if it doesn't work?"

"It has a warranty, of course."

"But I might have to wait."

"Yeah. Hopefully not."

Iina put on the glasses. She knew that everything was here. The old Helsinki. Rain forests. Waterfalls. New York before the wave.

At first she just sensed a brightness, then it melted and clarified into a flood of sensations. A meadow opened up in front of her, timothy grass gently swaying. To her

right was a grove of trees, and beyond them the land rose up to a hilltop. To her left she saw a lake sparkling in the sunshine. She felt the breeze on her bare arms. It was a real breeze, gentle, like summertime. The ground under her bare feet was a rough jumble of plants, but it felt just right. The silence wasn't the silence of her room; it was a flood of summer sound, each separate sound recognizable: the rustle of hidden insects, a mouse running through the grass, the faint sough of wind as it touched the leaves of the plants. It was the sound that distinguished summer from winter, and Iina realized for the first time that there was such a sound. The meadow smelled like warm grass.

She fell to her knees and savored the effortless way that the machine made thoughts real. The weeds felt rough under her knees, the ground soft, the two perfectly combined. She picked a bluebell, its blossom slightly battered. Next to it was a gleaming buttercup. Its thin, soft stem broke between her fingers. She threw the flowers on the ground and looked up at a depth of sky with one lone tatter of cloud floating slowly across it. The sun warmed her face and she closed her eyes to feel it.

She wanted to stay there, to tumble onto the grass and watch the swallows fly. And at the same time she wanted to go everywhere, to just look, to drop into different landscapes knowing that she could stay in a place, or change the place, and both options were equally good. But it wasn't really about places, it was about time, that time had stopped tormenting her.

To take off the glasses felt like tearing part of herself away, but she made herself do it. Jalo was already standing with his back to her, his hand on the door latch.

"Thank you," Iina whispered.

He turned.

"Is there anything wrong with it?"

"No, I just wanted to thank you."

"It's fully licensed. All the accounts are unlocked."

He turned to leave, but Iina had to ask.

"I just don't understand. Why me? When there are so many other people..."

"Why not? I can't rescue everyone, but I can rescue you."

"I guess so."

"Enjoy it."

The door closed and Iina put the glasses over her eyes again, found herself, and disappeared.

Akseli swiftly opens the long-defunct website and tries to hold in his mind what he wants to search for. History has a way of happening in long processes that advance to a certain point and then boil over. The Great Stagnation must have advanced by degrees, too, but when did people wake up and find themselves in it?

Akseli searches for an outcry, a panic, but he doesn't find one. Instead, people in the early 2000's seem to have been interested above all in economic growth. Article after article agonized over the recession, analyzed developments in the stock market. There was also a lot of talk about immigration well before the international migrations had even really begun.

Akseli browses through layers of useless articles until he sees a brief news item that uses the term climate change. So they did know. Another article is about a whale's stomach stuffed with plastic. Akseli reads through it, but doesn't see any mention of phthalates or anything else of interest.

He finally finds what he's looking for. A long article about Japan in the 2010's, where more than half of all young people said that they had no interest in sex. The boys were more likely to feel a lack of desire than the girls were. It said that for the first time in history, young people were more docile and conservative than their parents.

At the end of the page was a link to another article, which said that sperm counts across the Western world had plunged and men's testosterone levels had fallen. The suspected reason was phthalates and pesticides, but undisputed proof hadn't been

found, or businesses were hiding the research results. Men born in the 1970's had testosterone levels as low as the seventy-year-old men born in the 1920's, but this fact was met with apparent equanimity. There was no discussion of what effect a lack of testosterone might have on men, and not much curiosity about whether the decrease in sperm counts would continue.

"They weren't interested," Akseli concludes. "They cared more about money."

He browses forward toward the present, reads about waves of refugees, floods, walls. Science news seems to have disappeared entirely in the 2030's. Climate change was rarely mentioned as a reason for the migrations, but it became a reality whose causes were not contemplated.

In the 2040's the Finnish government started restricting access to foreign websites, and the tone of the news grew more strident. "Our courageous fatherland has finally achieved complete independence from the European Union," Prime minister Pihla Ketonen said. "The era of having our politics dictated by others is over" "From now on the business of our nation will be decided by us, the real Finns who have inhabited this land for centuries. Freedom means freedom from treaties and other international commitments that have fettered the welfare of our nation for decades."

It was around this time that nearly half of Akseli's classmates were moved to the other side of the building in the middle of the school year. Akseli and Ahmed still played together after school and sometimes went to the library, until Ahmed didn't return a book he'd borrowed with Akseli's library card, and said he had lost it. Akseli knew that he did it because of his race. He told his mother that he'd forgotten the book at school so she wouldn't say anything about him hanging around with Somalis. He had already decided to end the friendship.

Akseli realizes that his mind has wandered. His back aches and his butt feels numb. He takes off the glasses and tries to lead his mind back to the original question. It feels useless. What difference does it make if they did know? They didn't do enough to stop what was happening, and in the end it was their actions that mattered.

Akseli starts his five hours in Heaven every day at exactly six o'clock. It's a habit he's established through painful experience.

At one time he didn't keep himself to a schedule. Every day he would find some excuse to start his Heaventime the moment he woke up. He could fool himself in countless ways--resolving that he would just take a quick look at it now and then do the real session later, or that he would do all five hours now and then spend the rest of the day working hard, going outside, exercising, meditating. He convinced himself that if he did his five hours too late he wouldn't be able to sleep, even though he knew that wasn't true. He told himself that he would enjoy Heaven more in the morning, but that wasn't true, either.

Then, when he'd used all his Heaventime before noon, he would fall into a bottomless emptiness, unable to concentrate on his work, and then try to nap during the day, which made him unable to sleep at night. Day and night melted together in a sweaty shamble. At his worst he would fall out of bed at midnight to use his next five hours as soon as they were renewed.

Eventually he understood that life as an addict demands enormous self-discipline. He had to harness the remnants of his will for the only thing that mattered--insuring the preservation of the source of his pleasure.

To avoid ruining his daily rhythm he watches the clock and opens the menu at exactly 6 PM.

In Heaven, a miracle happens immediately, every single time, and it happens today, too. Peace comes washing over him, over all of his senses, leaf-green and grass-scented, or pure white and icy crisp, but always the same deep down. He forgets time, forgets himself. He just rests, at peace with his own existence, perfect and limitless. He can do whatever he feels like doing--lie on the beach or in a warm, sunlit meadow and not wonder if some other place might be even better. In Heaven's reality, the weight of history is missing. In Heaven's world a person isn't created to scrape a living out of the cold earth; a person can create his own happiness there.

Even as he's choosing where to begin, Akseli's time allotment is inexorably passing, and he always worries a little about whether he's chosen wisely. Today he chooses Normandy, its wave-washed reality both light as mist and sensually powerful—the taste of salt on his lips, the scrunch of wet sand under his feet, the roar of the waves.

He falls effortlessly into the familiar brightness. The first few moments feel strange, like they always do, as his soul and body find their place, try to understand their surroundings. Akseli sits on the sand in shorts and a sleeveless shirt, the wind brushing against him, the water stretching as far as the eye can see, hazily reflecting the sky. The monastery looms up out of the waves, a massive island that looks like it has gorged itself on stones and bushes, its tower piercing the deep blue of the sky.

He lifts his hand into the wind and feels its smoothness, so skillfully constructed, softness and coolness combined to feel like movement. A wave hisses toward him, then tires and returns to the sea, comes, and goes, like the beat of a great heart. He looks at the sand between his toes, bends to pick some up, rubs the damp, rough substance of it between his fingers, smells the clean dirt smell that brings to mind some flicker of his

childhood. The waves wash away the bare walls of his apartment, his heavy mental labor. Everything is complete, created for him.

He gets up to walk over the damp strip of land that leads to the castle, beyond the reach of the water now, and his feet sink deep into the sand with every step. The water is receding, revealing seashells, round stones, a damp expanse that will quickly dry in the sun.

Akseli examines every detail of the sea and the fortress closely, and he sees a woman on the beach, just a couple dozen meters away. She's stretched out in downward dog position, in a bright red bikini, her haunches in sharp outline as if they were cut away from the rest of her body. Akseli stops to watch her finish the sun salute and sleepily tries to judge from her movements whether she's real. It's not as if a computer-generated avatar couldn't perfectly mimic every twitch of muscle, every slight catching of the breath. The woman's long hair cascades from the top of her head in unnatural corkscrew curls, but that doesn't mean anything either. Of course she would be just what she wanted to be here. Like Lady Gaga, a sleek representation of a woman, her rough, wrong appearance left somewhere far away.

In the middle of her exercise, she tires and drops down to sit on the sand, staring at the water. Akseli looks at the string of pearls of her vertebrae, weighing whether to approach her. He doesn't care anymore if she's real or not. The possibility of talking with a woman feels good, but it would also be easy to walk right past her.

Finally he approaches and sits down beside her on the sand.

"Beautiful day," he says.

"Yeah."

"Do you live anywhere other than here?"

"Does it matter?" she says.

"No. Not to me, anyway."

She smiles and flops onto her back again, swishes her arms to make a sand angel. On a whim, Akseli falls down beside her and flaps his arms up and down over the sand. The motion lasts a few seconds, and an eternity, the sand growing heavier the farther he swings his arms. The blue of the sky descends on him. The cry of a gull fills his mind. He's almost forgotten the woman, when she says,

"I'm Iina."

"Akseli."

"Like in that book."

"Yeah."

"I read it once. My copy must have burned up with the house. They accidentally burned their own propaganda."

Akseli is startled. He's had chance conversations in Heaven on rare occasions, but never about anything outside of Heaven. It's not forbidden, but it's pointless. And now that he thinks about it, it might be dangerous. Iina gets up, picks up her gauzy dress, shakes the sand away, and puts it on. Akseli's heart flutters, skips a beat. The woman has sliced a hole in the peace, and now she's leaving. It's a hole he can just barely perceive, and it will be gone in a moment, a second. He'll hardly even remember it. But it's here now. He can feel it, rending.

He could let her go, breathe deep until he calms down, but something makes him jump to his feet and hurry to catch up with her.

"Are you going to the monastery?" he asks.

"I guess so. Why not. Come with me."

Akseli gives a little bleat and Iina slows her steps. The dissonant feeling immediately disappears and Heaven functions the only way it knows how: it instantly heals the wound in Akseli's mind.

They walk along in silence. The sea has disappeared, too, churning distantly on the horizon. Farther down the beach is a little family, two adults and a child who walks apart from them, dashing here and there after a ball. The wind carries the child's shouts faintly. Akseli can't hear the parents' voices. The child lives only in this world, the adults perhaps also in the other one.

Akseli has already drifted into the deep silence when Iina breaks it.

"I live with a man who's building this place."

There it is again, the outside world, its sharp edge cutting through Heaven's peace. If what she says is true, she might have the right to be in Heaven all the time. Envy tears through Akseli, then fades into the wind. Curiosity flickers in his mind a bit longer, but it's a soft-edged feeling, and he doesn't ask.

They reach the island and walk its narrow lanes, where female avatars have booths offering colorful gloves, cat figurines, and paintings of sunsets. There are pale blue and green signs over the stalls with the names of the products in ornate writing: jewelry, clothing, paintings. Akseli browses among the booths for custom's sake, though he has no interest in buying anything. In the beginning Heaven was a place you could go to live out consumer dreams, but as the peace of the place deepened, the need to own things disappeared, at least for Akseli.

"Do you want anything?" he asks Iina.

"What for?"

"For your home. If you have one."

"My provider has a vintage 2020's penthouse in Manhattan, next to Central Park. It's already perfect."

Manhattan is the most expensive place of all, and although Akseli doesn't need any more places, he feels a sharp twinge of envy.

"What's Central Park like?" he asks.

"There are gray squirrels in the park," she says. "And avatars that jog around in pink and pastel green outfits."

"What's the city like? It's so famous."

She gives a little shrug.

"It's a dream, like all the other places. Tall buildings, cafes, taxis. There is something there, though. It was built a long time before the wave and it has... faith."

"Faith?"

"Yeah. Faith that things will continue."

"Is that why it's so expensive?"

"It's expensive so people who come to Heaven will still have something to dream about. That's all."

Akseli puts down the painting of the sunset. The tone of the conversation perplexes him. Iina's words are like nails piercing Heaven's skin of softness. Her discontent doesn't bother him, not here, not right now, but he senses that he might remember what she said later, and wonder at it.

The sun's light is shining from a low angle now, and its red glows against the cobblestone streets and the gray walls of the monastery. A hint of coolness has crept into the air.

"I should go," Iina says.

"Don't you want to watch the sunset from the tower?"

"It's right there in the picture," Iina says, nodding at the painting.

"But it's always different."

"It's always ones and zeroes," she says, and then she's gone.

The air seems to ripple at the spot where she was, but it's just an optical illusion.

Soon there's nothing there but clean, orderly cobblestones.

Iina tears her glasses off so roughly that five long dark hairs tear away from the seal. She wants out, and it's because of the man, although she doesn't quite know why. He broke her peace, though he was just like everything in Heaven--soft and dreamy.

She sets the glasses on the shelf and locks the door of the safe, then hurries to the kitchen and runs a cloudy glass of water from the tap. In Heaven, it's almost impossible to feel any hunger or thirst, but when the trip's over they come back with full force. When she spends a whole day in Heaven her thirst is pure torture when she returns and her stomach so hollow she feels weak. But the thirst after a short trip like this one is just habit, her earthly body's reminder that it still exists.

When she finishes drinking she notices that Jalo is sitting at the table eating left-over insect meal. He looks bigger, more substantial than she remembers. There's a deep dent in his forehead from his glasses, and his eyes look swollen. She feels she can't leave without saying something. Speaking feels like an effort.

"Did you get some good work done?" she asks.

"Good enough. Differentiating Old Helsinki roses. They're individualized now, like in nature. 1123 different kinds," Jalo says.

"That's great."

"Those were my instructions."

Iina watches him pick insects out of his mush and pop them into his mouth with machine-like movements. His nails are long and his hair is greasy.

"If you'd like to take a bath, I can warm the water for you," Iina says. "There doesn't seem to be any hot water today."

”Not today, thanks. I’m too tired.”

Jalo finishes his meal and leans back in his chair. He gives Iina a strange look, as if he hasn’t seen her in a long time. Iina feels cold. She’s done everything she’s supposed to do, but maybe she should do more. If she was a truly good dependent maybe she would know how to make a good home for him, like her parents once did for her.

Jalo gets up and thanks her for the food. Iina takes the empty container from him, turns to put it in the sink. The fat doesn’t want to come off in the cold water, and she shouldn’t use too much soap, but she doesn’t feel like heating any water. The box doesn’t really fit into the sink so she has to wash one side at a time. The basin threatens to overflow, and the knot in the wood stares up at her from the bottom of the box like an eye.

Iina can hardly keep her eyes open. She thinks about the golden-haired man she encountered on the beach. He thought at first that she was an avatar. She could tell, because a person talks to the scenery in a different way than when they talk to a person. They can see the other person beneath the modifications, and they want to know what they might have in common with them. Once he had decided she was a person, there was a spark of curiosity in his attentions. She was a riddle to him—a rather trivial one, of course, but not completely trivial.

He looked good, like everyone does in Heaven. But there was something disturbing in his beauty, not just a pleasant part of the background. It felt to Iina like a message.

She puts the box in the drying cupboard next to the other ones just like it. She might have liked to know what man he was--though it doesn’t really matter.

When she gets back to her room she wraps herself in a blanket, chooses Mont-Saint-Michel again, and goes back in time. She watches herself and Akseli walk on the soft, wet sand and down the cobblestone streets of the monastery and hates the note of reluctance in her voice. "It's always ones and zeroes." Why did she say that--to make herself even more unappealing than she already is?

She lets the time with the man run out but keeps the landscape. She sits on the shore of the island watching the tide climb slowly up the castle wall. She doesn't take the glasses off until weariness has already closed her eyes.

Later that night, Iina wakes up in the dark, the square of window only slightly paler than the surrounding blackness. Jalo is shouting in his sleep again; she can hear his voice faintly through the concrete wall. Iina closes her eyes, but she remembers the appraising look Jalo gave her. A good dependent would surely care, would want to soothe him, or at least pretend to.

She throws off the blanket and the cold of the room almost makes her jump back into bed. When she reaches his door she hesitates, then knocks and walks in. Jalo is sitting on the bed, but she can't see his expression in the dark.

"Did you have a bad dream?" she asks.

"Horrible. Heaven was disappearing."

Iina moves closer and, on a whim, sits down on the bed. She senses that Jalo is too shaken to take offense at the intrusion.

"I was at the Hanging Gardens and the landscape started to melt, and I knew there was no way to stop it."

"How awful."

"It could happen, if the power went out. Or if I lost my job."

"That won't happen."

"There would be nothing left then. Just rain and mud."

"That's not going to happen."

Iina puts her hand on his, but she's embarrassed by the warm, leathery feeling of his skin, and pulls it away again. Jalo stares at her in the dark.

"Do you still translate those old poems?" he asks.

"Not for years. Who would read them?"

"You were so excited about them."

"That was a long time ago."

Iina hasn't thought about the poems in years, and the memory of her old black notebook splashes across her mind like a longing, tinged with shame. She really did spend whole nights scribbling out ancient odes, trying to put them into Finnish better than anyone else. She would pop an ode into the translator and fall into an agony of creation, trying to say it better than the machine could. She wanted to be an educated person, like her father, to be noble, like wise people in the old times, and she achieved that feeling sometimes, for a fleeting moment. At those moments everything seemed to have a meaning. The rain pattering on the roof of their old woodframe house was the same rain that had pounded the pumice boulders of Horace's time. The words came down through the generations, stronger than flesh. Every day as spring advanced, the garden had a new smell: frozen mud as it thawed, gentle winds, dandelions, rabbit droppings. Being able to turn words over felt like a gift given to her alone, and she wasn't all that tired, not yet.

It's still hard for her to believe that the white window frames of the attic room are gone, and the window panes themselves, and the apple tree outside the window with the

climbing rope tied to one thick branch. Part of her feels like she was left behind in that time, and another part suspects that none of it ever even existed. How could the government burn up a whole world?

"We didn't know anything about anything back then," Jalo says, guessing her thoughts.

"Maybe it was better that way."

"They'll never be punished," Jalo says. "They killed your father, and yet they're in Heaven."

"It's best not to think about it."

"Or about Marius."

"Yeah. Marius is gone. Get back in bed. It's cold in here."

Iina gets up and Jalo lies down again, pulling the covers up to his chin. It's shocking that they're really there, two warm masses of flesh in the middle of the concrete city. It's never occurred to her that Jalo still misses them, but of course he misses them, too. Jalo and Marius were as close as two puppies, and Iina could see that they loved each other in a way that no one would ever love her.

The chill is really getting to Iina now, sneaking through her wool socks and creeping up under her nightgown. The hallway is pitch dark and halfway to her room a crazy fear comes over her. She hurries to her bed, but even after she's under the covers she's too scared to fall asleep.

Only the scent of a summer night in the Alps carries her into her dreams.

After Iina leaves, a heavy silence descends. Jalo squeezes his eyes shut, but his body is still trembling, keyed up. He's not sure if the pain welling up from somewhere deep inside him is because of the imagined loss of Heaven or the real loss of Marius. Grief can come flooding to the surface from a dream, or a word, or for no reason, and he doesn't even know if it's the same grief, or a new one.

Marius was the only person besides his mother who had ever hugged Jalo, had just grabbed him, and he felt so different from his mother, so broad and real.

That last time, his coat was strange, rough fabric that smelled like a cellar.

The soldiers weren't yet swarming through The Light district then; the security forces didn't tighten up until after the attempt to assassinate the Minister of Heaven. Marius had appeared at Jalo's house unexpectedly, eaten some soup and several pieces of bread, and fallen asleep on the narrow bed. Jalo had watched this enemy of the state for a moment, then climbed in beside him and pressed himself against his back. There was a smell of smoke in Marius's hair, and Jalo fell asleep to it, though it was still early evening.

When Marius left, the summer night was already turning gray. Jalo remembers their conversation so clearly that he questions the accuracy of his memory.

"You don't have to go."

"Should I just stay here and hide?"

"You can't win. They have the army, the police..."

”Not completely. The Pure Finland clause rattled some of them. Even the ones who might have accepted the closing of the borders. You can’t restrict citizenship to third generation Finns.”

”But this doesn’t have to be your war.”

Marius came around the bed and sat down and Jalo remembers the power in his movements. Marius had more energy than other people. His physical presence felt almost aggressive. Jalo used to feel sometimes like he wanted to be flattened beneath that big body, but it was more an idea than a craving. He just enjoyed being with Marius. They were true friends.

”I just can’t live in a country that banishes its last remaining children,” Marius said. ”They have nowhere to go. Everybody knows that.”

”But they’re gone now. You’re not.”

”Won’t we all be gone anyway?”

Jalo didn’t offer to come with him, gave up trying to stop him. Maybe he still thought that was how he could save himself. He kept working for The Light and tried to convince himself that the redesign of Heaven was unrelated to the war. Even Marius never talked about the political significance of Heaven, but of course it had enormous significance. Heaven was the money machine of the state. Bread and circuses. When the government raised the Heaven fees and said it was due to costs generated by the children of immigrants, the public vexation that had been simmering came to a boil. Walls of immy apartment houses became covered in words he had almost forgotten, words

that someone imagined bore some relation to the minorities who were still able to procreate. Rapist, homo, faggot, perv.

No one would ever blame Marius for any of this. He could be living right now in one of the innumerable empty apartments in Helsinki, laying around all day in Heaven, slowly fading away, with Jalo. But Jalo can't really imagine Marius like that.

He tries to empty his mind, but the thoughts keep coming. He considers going to Heaven, but doesn't feel he deserves its mercy.

The food delivery comes every Monday at three. When the buzzer rings, Akseli checks several times to make sure he has his key and his Light food coupon at the bottom of his pocket, picks up the cloth bag of return boxes by the door, and goes into the corridor. The hallway is dusty, and it's dark because the lights have gone out one by one over time. The stairs are sticky between the third and second floors, and he hopes the substance sticking to the soles of his shoes isn't blood. He can understand why the delivery boy refuses to bring the food up.

The pale young man looks at Akseli more distrustfully every time he comes.

Akseli understands his mistrust because he's seen himself in the mirror that hangs above the bathroom sink. He knows how he looks--even sicker than the delivery boy, his hair thinning, hanging in greasy curls, red eyes in a pallid face. He shoves his food coupon at the boy and thanks him, because that's what he was taught to do as a kid, and the boy mutters something unintelligible, because he apparently wasn't taught anything.

Akseli has been ordering the same delivery for years--soy, insects, rutabaga, potato, seasonal fruits and vegetables if there are any. The quality of the food has been pretty reliable, and he never really thinks about how it tastes. In the fall, though, he sometimes gets excited wondering if there will be apples, and how they'll taste. The best apples are sweet and shaped almost like they were picked in Heaven.

In the spring there aren't any fruits or vegetables, so he has no reason to wonder what might be in the boxes today. He takes the cloth bags from the boy and climbs up

the stairs. When he gets his valuable load home he sets it on the kitchen counter. He opens the boxes one by one and checks them all, doesn't find any mold or weevils. The insects--probably cockroaches--are ground to crumbs. The roaches used to come whole sometimes, and it disgusted him to crunch them between his teeth. He's heard that the insects are grown in the old library in Käpylä, because it's easy to distribute them by hand car from there. They're the best possible nutrition: animals high in protein that reproduce and grow practically by themselves.

For his first meal of the week Akseli boils potatoes, mashes them in the cooking water and sprinkles in some of the ground cockroaches. He sits at his round table to eat, staring at the wall. The table has been in the same place for ten years, since he first moved from Pasila to the place the university allocated for him. The white paint on the walls has peeled and there are dents here and there that look as if someone hacked at the wall with a sharp object. Maybe a child did it, a long time ago, when there were still children in Helsinki.

"The delivery boy is the last generation," Akseli thinks. "When we get old, no one will take care of us."

He's probably had the same thought before, but it didn't stay in his memory. And it won't this time, either. Death would come eventually in any case, and in the end it didn't matter whether he died lying on the floor of his apartment with a broken hip and dehydration or in a hospital bed, like his mother. He used to think a good death was one where a tumor ate away at you until you were a pale shell of your former self, and you endured it and endured it until you couldn't endure any more. During the purge he saw a different kind of death, the kind that stops a person suddenly, out of nowhere, and proves that all it takes to get to the other side is the sudden whim of some kid you don't

even know, and a piece of metal in your guts. The curtain just rises, and then it falls. That's all.

"If you could just still go to Heaven after that," he thinks as he stirs his roach soup. "If I could just be there."

When he's finished eating he goes back to his research work, but the soup is a warm hum inside him that tugs him into drowsiness. He finds his mind returning again and again to the question: What happened to us? When did it happen? And why?

His assignment is to research the reproductive drive, but he's beginning to realize that it's connected to an endless spectrum of small and large things: the way of building things, cleaning, eating, meeting people. The most striking thing about people in the past is the manic energy they had—to own, to destroy, to use up the world and each other.

The counterpart to that energy was recognized long before the Great Stagnation.

Akseli finds a website from the time about a disease called depression that was defined as a decline in mood and enthusiasm. The illness was characterized by fatigue, lack of energy, and difficulty thinking and making decisions. At the beginning of the 2000's, depression was described as a common, chronic, and often recurring disease suffered by about one fifth of the Finnish population at some point in their lives. Depression was considered Finland's national disease, leading to thousands of disability pensions and hundreds of suicides every year.

In the 2010's, the World Health Organization predicted that by 2030 depression would become the world's most significant disabling disease, but Akseli can't tell if this prediction had anything to do with the Stagnation. Health news was set aside when the drought began to empty out Africa. The decline in the birth rate had already become a normal phenomenon in Western countries, but refugees replaced the aging population and the lack of children doesn't seem to have caused a panic.

Akseli reads theories from the beginning of the century about what was causing the increase in depression, but he can't tell how reliable they are. According to the articles, many people had difficulty tolerating the change when jobs disappeared, religions

lost their meaning, and social life migrated to the web. Life felt lonely and meaningless. Depression and the medications used to treat it caused sexual dysfunction and a loss of libido, which in turn exacerbated the depression, but the causal relationship between these things remains unclear in the articles.

“It’s the same symptoms,” Akseli says half aloud. “But back then the depression didn’t affect everyone.”

He’s only read a few pages, but he can’t read any more. He takes off his glasses and puts his head in his hands. There’s a sour taste of cockroach meal in his mouth.

The dense, pedantic text makes his head pound. They wrote so much, but did they understand anything?

“What’s the point of it?” he asks, a question he can’t even begin to answer.

Iina realizes that she's waiting for Akseli to appear again. She chooses cheap places where he might be and is slightly disappointed when days go by in the usual silence. The places feel almost deserted because most users like to remain invisible. Sometimes she suspects that Heaven is as empty as the streets of Helsinki, that all the users have vanished. She knows she could ask Jalo about it, but the idea always fades quickly away.

When Akseli finally does come, Iina has already stopped thinking about him. She's running her hand through the lovely spring in the Hanging Gardens, sunk in a deep timelessness, needing nothing more than her breath, out and in; it forms a refuge, a purpose. The spring shimmers and splashes over the steeply inclined ground and the smoothly polished elliptical stones that lie at the bottom, more brilliant under the water. If you lift them into the air their surfaces are dry in a moment and their crispness blurs, so she leaves them there, just watching the water move over them. Now and then she looks up at the yellow blossoms of an acacia tree, whose scent wafts heavy around her. There are just a few gauzy streaks of cloud and the sun would be hot if the wind wasn't blowing soothingly over her bare arms and legs.

Akseli appears out of nowhere on the other side of the spring and lowers his hand into the water. Iina is startled to realize that he must have been looking for her. She tries to smile in greeting but it turns stiff, frozen halfway, her jaw tight. It's a new expression she's forcing her face into, and it doesn't suit her.

"You came back to see the ones and zeroes," Akseli says.

"Of course. This is my favorite place."

"Why?"

His question trembles inside her in a strange way, as if it's lifting her upward slightly. It doesn't matter to her where she spends her days, but when someone asks, it does matter, for a fleeting moment.

"I like the fact that it's an imaginary place," she says. "No one knows if this garden ever actually existed."

"I thought some ruler built it for his wife."

"Nebuchadnezzar the Second. But that's just a theory. The city of Nineveh was destroyed around six hundred B.C.E. So no one knows for sure."

Iina thinks about the garden destroyed long ago. According to some, it was very different from the one in Heaven. The original Hanging Gardens are known to have included terraced waterfalls, flowers and trees planted atop pillared arcades. The Light chose a version with a steep slope, a profusion of flowers, and the dry heat of the Near East, cooled by flowing waters. The Gardens in Heaven are filled with places to hide among the trailing vines and a smell of flowers that bombards the senses perhaps more than any real flower's fragrance ever did.

The Hanging Gardens were the first place Iina went in Heaven after that initial visit to the meadow. It was in the Gardens that she felt like she could forget her sadness for the first time since the war, where even when she did remember it didn't feel like real pain, just a trace of darkness at the edge of her consciousness. Even now, when she's in the Gardens she feels a breath of eternity, a reminder that every single atom is the same as it was thousands of years ago, the events of history just a clamor in the background.

Akseli stretches out onto his back. When he speaks, Iina has already almost forgotten what they were talking about.

"Why does it matter if a place is real or imaginary?" he asks.

"It doesn't," Iina says. "Except that the government doesn't like imagination."

She glances at him, but he's lying with his eyes closed and doesn't seem to be listening. The state consists of just one party now, the Combined Patriotic Front, a name that tells you that the party contains all necessary points of view. Questioning the government can lead to punishment, but Iina doesn't think anyone is bothering to watch her. The dictatorship seems tired, without any rebellions or any growth. It just is, year after year.

Right after the war there were rumors that all the women would be forced into fertility treatments, but Iina hasn't seen a single child in the city. The beggars' squares are the government's only visible show of strength--old people and other public dependents aren't supported free of charge; they pay for their upkeep by begging in designated places. So there isn't rampant begging here and there around the city, making you question the power of the state, it's all in one place, demonstrating the state's power.

And Iina doesn't bother to rebel, either, especially in Heaven. Maybe she's saying strange things to stir something in him.

Akseli is still lying there with his eyes shut, and Iina realizes that he's fallen asleep. She turns to watch his chest under his pale blue shirt, rising and falling with his breath. His face is fresh, the dimple in his chin looks like someone pressed it in with a fingertip. She lets her eyes rest on him, then rolls over onto her back. The yellow blossoms swirl against the blue, the murmur of the trees is thoroughly familiar. For a brief

moment Iina wants to nudge the man awake, but the urge passes, lost in the languid breeze and the scent of acacia.

At the end of April, Akseli gets the idea to write a request for research time in Heaven. His carefully prepared petition gets him one month of unlimited access to the virtual world, and throws him into a spiral. Suddenly his daily rhythm is pointless, because its only purpose was to maximize his time in Heaven.

In his petition he argued that the change brought by the Stagnation might be observable over the decades in Heaven. That he might be able to read Heaven like the rings of a tree, to see the fat years and the lean years. The idea seems quite plausible to him, but observing Heaven from the inside proves impossible. The moment he gets there he falls into the familiar forgetfulness. Now and then a faint, uncomfortable recollection that he should be analyzing the place peeps out for a moment, and is instantly forgotten.

Before beginning his month in Heaven, Akseli had managed to write down some basic facts: The Light, a government-owned entity, started creating Heaven in the 2020's, a couple of decades before the Stagnation, and ten years before Akseli was born. Heaven was the most popular virtual world from the beginning, and the only one allowed after 2047. But the use permit, glasses, and suit cost most people a large percentage of their pay, and about a quarter of the population couldn't afford them at all.

On his first day of research, Akseli starts immediately after midnight in Old Helsinki, the first space that was created, and perhaps the most carefully constructed one. He hasn't been in Helsinki before, and its dazzling beauty surprises him. Old Helsinki is nothing like the present city, and maybe nothing like the past, either. The summer days are haloed in sunshine, the sea abuzz with pleasure boats. The winters glow with blue sky and skiers on the ice. The dreamlike place also has an added interest because of the

eventual fate of one of creators; the head designer, Veera Lähteenmäki, disappeared during the wave of attacks on New York in 2043.

Right away, Akseli gives up trying to study Helsinki and lets himself slip into it. He wanders Seurasaari in summer, buys an ice cream cone five scoops high. He jumps up and down. The scoops don't fall off. Strawberry, chocolate, pear, melon, and licorice. They melt on his tongue. Then he throws them one by one into the sea, and flops down on his back on a warm boulder.

He switches to Christmas Street and walks down the sidewalk watching the plump flakes of snow falling, the strings of lights in swooping arches over the road, bright against the black sky. In the display window of Stockmann department store, plush animals bustle about in red elf hats and a colorful wooden train moves over black tracks through tufts of cotton batting. As he walks toward the shore, he passes ever more display windows, packages wrapped in red paper with gold ribbons, mannequins in soft knit sweaters. The styles change with each visit, but eventually the loop starts at the beginning again, because beautiful new things aren't being made anymore, and there's no point in switching to ugly ones.

Christmas Street feels like something from his childhood. He feels like he once walked down the real Christmas Street, and snow was falling, and he held his mother's hand tightly in his own. But it can't be a true memory. The Christmas lights were put up for the last time in 2029, and the last time snow fell in Helsinki at Christmastime was in 2025. The gifts his mother gave him were never in store packages or wrapped in plastic; only rich people could afford such things. But Akseli did have toys, and good ones, too: legos, and a wooden train set, and a little duck that he tugged behind him on a string. His mother bought them at the flea market, mending or reassembling them if necessary,

until even she started to wonder what the point of it was, her hands left forgotten in her lap. Why try? Why create anything? And at the end, the tough but inevitable question: Who was it for?

Akseli only returns to the real world when the his bladder is so full that it's unbearable. After twelve hours in Heaven his head is buzzing, his stomach in knots. He lies in bed panting, trying to tolerate the April light pouring over him. The light in Heaven is golden and bends pleasantly into dusk. The creators of Heaven must have understood that there's nothing crueler than a cold, Nordic spring light that strips everything bare, a light that fades and dies more and more slowly with each passing day.

"That's the secret of Heaven--the light," Akseli realizes. "Maybe there were no other designers who could do it as well."

He tries to focus on his aching reality, but the world around his bed wavers and lurches. The pain in his bladder forces him upright. He runs to the bathroom, pees loudly into the toilet, and curses the time he's wasting. As soon as his bladder is empty he picks up his glasses, gulps down three glasses of tepid water, and is ready to go back.

After his month in Heaven Akseli is exhausted, and so thin that it hurts to sit on a hard chair. He forgot to order his last two food deliveries and is subsisting on a dubious-smelling mash made with stale cockroach meal.

He writes a few notes about Heaven, but isn't able to compile a report. He doesn't have the time, or the strength. By the middle of the month his supervisor, Joonas Aho, has already sent him two new documents, with a cover letter: *Please study these thoroughly*. The documents are called *The Bible* and *The Koran*.

Akseli forces himself back into his daily routine and reads the texts, which seem to flit from one theme or character to the next for no reason. Fear of losing his job helps him concentrate and he eventually finds passages that might have a bearing on his assignment. He writes down his observations and sends them to Aho almost every day, as if it might make up for his previous silence. His findings feel hollow, and he doesn't really want to write them, but with every report he sends he feels a bit calmer.

The invitation Akseli receives from Aho in May takes him by surprise. He hasn't been to the university in more than a year, and the very thought of going there makes him feel sick. He fears the reason for the invitation, fears the possibility of being fired or given a tougher assignment and, most of all, the moment when he'll have to talk to a person in real time and look him in the eye, maybe even shake his hand. He fears the trip across town, wandering the million-mile vacuum through the stony streets, the vanished voices echoing through the halls of the university.

He goes over the route from home to the main university building in his mind over and over. He knows it's a fairly short trip, but he can't shake the feeling of dread. Everything that happens in the real world is so unavoidable, so final. If someone hits him on the head with a rock, he'll die.

Akseli spends two days and nights in fear, and then his time is up. On the morning before his appointment he stands for a long time at the window and looks out at the beggars huddled lifelessly on the plaza. As he watches, a woman with a scarf on her head crosses from Siltasaari Street to the line of beggars and drops something into two cups, then hurries away again. Akseli tries to muster the same kind of courage. The woman and the beggars are just people, after all, and yet they dare to play that unnatural game, where there is only one life to lose. And the game keeps going because in the end everybody's life is insignificant.

Akseli finally forces himself into motion. He puts on his dusty wooden shoes and his light overcoat with its brown cloth patches on the elbows. He used to have leather shoes, but he lost them not long after the war. A gang of men just threw him to the ground, took his coat and shoes, and then gave him one kick. The contempt in that kick is still there in his gut, and so is the memory of what he was at that moment, what he still is, somewhere in the back of his mind—a lonely, helpless man hobbling through the slush in his stocking feet.

Akseli steps onto the street and walks with a steady, brisk pace, though it makes his heart pound and his skin sweat. The city seems calm. There's a smell of mud and seawater. Seagulls call. On the long bridge across the bay to the central city, birch saplings are coming up through the cracks in baffling, indeterminate profusion. He hurries his steps, keeping a steady pace, and tries to reassure himself that every meter he walks brings him closer to safety.

When he reaches Fabianinkatu he lingers in the middle of the street, as far as possible from the enormous university buildings looming on either side. There's a wolf carcass lying in front of the main building and crows and seagulls are tearing holes in its

belly; he can see the red flesh among the fur. He keeps his distance as he walks around the dead wolf, then climbs up the stone steps and takes his key out of his pocket with a trembling hand. The moment just before the door opens is always the worst. He can almost feel a hand falling on his shoulder, ready to throw his carcass in the street, too.

Once he has passed through both glass doors, Akseli feels he is safe to some degree. The colorless foyer is as he remembers it, the bench still overturned in the middle of the floor, FUK written in black on the wall. A rat scurries across the flagstones and disappears into the elevator shaft. The elevator door was torn off sometime long ago. A strong animal smell wafts from the shaft.

Akseli climbs the stairs to the second floor and stops to catch his breath. Portraits of sullen men stare out at him from the dark upper foyer. Then Akseli feels a new, more complicated fear. Aho is right here, but Akseli doesn't know how to approach his door. Is he supposed to knock, or just go right in? Will any sound come out of his mouth, and what sound will it be? Is he even the sort of amalgamation of human flesh that another person will see and consider a colleague?

He hesitates, strolls a few steps toward a marble bust and examines its thick accumulation of dust. He runs his finger along the stone necktie and wipes the dust on his pants, then cleans the dust from the man's lapels as well. The white marble beneath the gray glows in the dimness. It will remain there, waiting through the ages to be revealed if someone takes the time to look at it—but why would anyone be interested? It's incomprehensible to Akseli that somebody once made such an utterly useless pedestal and put a man's portrait on it, and somebody else paid someone to clean it regularly. So much effort for such a trivial thing. In Heaven everything's so much easier—nothing ever gets dusty or broken or used up.

Eventually Akseli forces himself to go to Aho's door. He hesitates a moment, then knocks, startled by the echoing sound it makes. Turning the gold-colored door handle is an effort.

Aho takes his glasses off and lays them on his desk, stands for a moment to shake Akseli's hand.

"You came," he says.

"Yeah."

"I'm sure you're wondering why I invited you here."

"Is there something wrong with my report?"

"No. Your work is on the right track," Aho says, pressing his fingertips together. "You listed the occurrences of lust in the Bible and the Koran very well: Adam and Eve's innocence shattered by an animal that symbolizes a penis, the attempts to force the virgin Lucia into prostitution and then torture her with fire and boiling oil; and in the Koran the women who lust after Josef and the endless rules meant to shackle human desires. Those books are filled with lust and lunacy."

"Yeah."

Aho pauses, leans back in his chair and looks out the window, his fingers still pressed together. Akseli examines the man's forehead, the flesh rolled into sausage-like folds above his gray eyebrows. He seems so calm, as if he has people popping into his office all the time. Maybe he gets more visitors than Akseli imagines. He doesn't know if there are other people working in these echoing hallways, or how many people work for the university from home. Such things are none of his business.

"That's what it is to be human," Aho says. "You can recognize something even though you don't feel it yourself. You can reason it out. Or maybe reason is just a phantom."

"What?"

"You might find it hard to believe, but I know I'm talking about. I've seen it first hand, and I've seen how it vanished. When I was young, there were still lectures at the university, and girls—dark-skinned girls and fair-skinned girls in teeny-tiny shorts with fleshy thighs. You have no idea what it felt like to want them, a feeling like life pounding between your legs, straight from the core of where life is created. Grades, ecological catastrophe, none of it meant anything if you could just get a chance to fuck."

"I understand."

"You don't understand. You can't understand a thing by reading about it. You can only understand it by doing it, and even then you only understand it afterward."

"Then why read?"

"What else can we do? There's no way to simulate what will happen if we release the medication. Maybe it would make us repair the broken windows, or maybe we would just go out raping beggars and then go back to our computers. Maybe we would tear down the wall..."

Aho glances at Akseli as his voice trails away.

"Are you saying that my work is pointless?"

"Maybe." Aho leans back in his chair. "So we have to find a way to get more accurate information."

Aho squints, lurches forward, yanks open a drawer, and takes out a small, white box. He sets it on the desk in front of Akseli.

“I’m sure you can guess what this is.”

Akseli nods, although he can’t quite believe it.

“It’s yours. But only if you really want to know.”

”Why me?”

”Because I trust you. I trust that you’ll report to me immediately if something unexpected happens.”

”Is this allowed?”

Aho laughs.

”What do you think? I’m giving a young man a substance more dangerous than a nuclear bomb.”

”What if it kills me?”

”None of the mice it’s been tested on have been harmed by a standard dose. But of course they consumed it in reckless amounts. They’re animals. They made no attempt to control themselves. Start with half a pill a day and be careful, because the aggressive thoughts can come on very quickly.”

Akseli weighs the box in his hand and hears the pills rattling inside it.

”I have to think about it,” he says.

”Of course. Think it over and get back to me. But not on the university network. Nothing there remains a secret.”

Akseli nods, looks at the box, and already knows what he’ll decide, even if he thinks he doesn’t. The chair legs screech against the stone floor as he gets up to leave, only stopping when he reaches the door, to ask a question.

”Do you intend to try them?”

Aho flashes a smile.

"I'm old enough now that it's best not to. I don't want have it just to lose it all over again."

Akseli walks down the hallway with the box clenched in his sweaty hand. He remembers now that he has to go back out there, at the mercy of that remote sky, through the gauntlet of the unforgiving city. If somebody attacks him now they won't just take his shoes and coat; they'll also get the box. He can see it already, him on his back on the ground, the pills scattered over the cobblestones, his attackers scooping them up and putting them in their pockets.

Akseli strides out the door and across the sun-dried paving stones of the courtyard, almost running to get home, trying not to think.

When he reaches Hakaniemi Square he can see his building and his fear begins to lift. The sky is still too high above him, the sun too warm. He slows his steps and lets himself look at the shelters on the plaza. From up close the orange canvas looks faded almost to gray and the beggars look wrinkled and elderly, or like old-looking young people. They huddle at equal distances from one another, some on their knees, some sitting.

An unexpected impulse causes Akseli to slip his hand into his coat pocket, reach past the pillbox, and take out two marks. He chooses a woman more wrinkled than the others, holding an enamel cup with a faded red heart on the side. She huddles with her head bowed, but there's something dignified about her, as if her present, downfallen state can't completely wipe away the nurture she received when she lived in the old welfare state.

The woman raises her head as the coins rattle into the cup. Akseli is startled by her clear blue eyes and the natural gratitude on her face, and quickly backs away. He

keeps walking and remembers something his long-dead grandmother used to say something about having "nothing of your own that hasn't been eaten or given away." He has an idea now of what she meant.

When he gets to his apartment, he puts the pillbox on the kitchen table and runs a glass of water. The tap sputters air at first, but then sprays water. He sets the glass next to the box and sits down on the stool and stares at them. He thinks of Aho as a young man, of the girls he knew, of the tortured Lucia, of Lady Gaga's gleaming helmet, and he wants to understand it.

The pill is a small, flat disc with a slightly rough surface. It has a groove down the center, where Akseli breaks it in two. He looks at the half pill in the light that floods in through the window, feels it between his finger and thumb, then quickly tosses it into his mouth, as if someone might try to stop him. He takes a drink of water and swallows.

Part 2

**RED**

Fog hangs over the meadow and the camp still smells of blood.

My muscles ache after a night of sleep, but I lay still a little longer, listening. I am a part of the damp earth, and the earth is part of me. I see grass and bluebells curling away from their stalks, the blue of a simple northern summer. I see my hand, the crescents of black mud and animals' blood under my fingernails.

The skin on the back of my hand is red with dried blood. I lick it--yesterday's victory. It tastes of salt and iron and soil, and it makes me thirsty for cool springwater. I haul myself onto my feet and walk a few steps away from camp to pee, my member half hard, the earth steaming under the stream. In the forest, a crow caws.

It's cold, but I don't mind. It's nothing, because it has a counterforce. Me. A man. I feel the hardness in my gut, my skull, my calves. I stand against the world, yet I am a part of it. I breathe in the cold and it turns hot inside me. I'm alive.

Then I slowly slip awake, so slowly that I can almost feel the cold as it subsides under my blanket. The hum of life beneath my skin fades away. The manhood glides out of me. I touch my penis through my pajamas and am disappointed to find it soft, as always.

I lie still, trying not to lose the smell of soil, but it's already gone.

Akseli reluctantly opens his eyes and sees the same thing he's seen on a hundred other mornings. Clouds hanging heavy outside the window, the peeling white paint on the ceiling the same as it always was. The shadows in the corner are familiar, and the blanket that smells like a human. And yet something has changed. He's like a captain at the end of a long sea journey, finally seeing land through shreds of fog, green and bathed in sunlight.

He lies there, feeling this strange sensation, a clearness in his head, a lightness in his limbs, fresh air. He wants something. To get up, at least. And something else, something essential, something useful, something that belongs to him.

"Work," he remembers. "I have work to do."

He swings himself upright and strides into the bathroom, has a piss, runs some water into his toothbrush cup and gulps it down. Then he goes back into the main room, puts on his glasses and skims through his notes on movies, books, and Heaven. There are also summaries he sent to the university, more or less compiled from his notes, together with his analysis. Most of the notes are a complete mess.

American Pie, 1999. What's so funny about it? Laughter = joy of life = will to live

When did we stop laughing (good-naturedly)?

Fifty Shades of Grey, 2011 Lust mainly for material things at this point?

Purge, 2008. Sadism already selling best?

For Myself 2025. Attention = success = happiness.

Under the Blue Cross, 2034. Fantasy of a pure people.

Heaven:

2020-1 Major works (Helsinki, Paris, New York, Pyramids, Lighthouse of Alexandria)

2030-1 nature subjects, falling and fallen cities. 2040-1 no major new works, work has lost its "glow".

Akseli is shocked by the meagerness of his comments. He can still remember the movies, books, and research trips to Heaven very well, but the fog of confusion around them is gone now. The images in his memory suddenly have sharp outlines and, stranger still, they have affixed themselves in a particular place in his mind, and he has opinions about them.

He can feel his heart begin to beat faster. His skin is tingling with a desire to write down his thoughts. He opens a new document with a flick of his eyes and starts to write.

What can we deduce from Heaven's development?

The most important places in Heaven represent humanity's greatest achievements and nature's most beautiful places, and their aim, particularly in the 2020's, was to promote Finland. The most expensive building projects of the 2020's were the four-year Helsinki project, and the Pyramid of Cheops (one of the seven wonders of the world). The goal was to construct the other six wonders

as well, but only the Lighthouse of Alexandria and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (both of which are imaginary as far as their appearance) were completed. At the beginning of the 2030's, designers were interested in rescuing drowning cities in the virtual world. The destruction of New York wasn't predicted in advance, but at the time of the 2043 wave of attacks the construction of essential parts of the city was already completed.

The last of the large rescue projects was the Amazon Rain Forest (completed in 2041). After that construction was interrupted for nine years. More recently, existing spaces have been completed, and revised to be strictly within the boundaries of known reality.

Akseli stops to look at his text and realizes that it's a catalogue of facts that anyone could have written. He wants to do more, to give the subject his own interpretation, even if he gets it wrong. He doesn't feel qualified to interpret anything, but if he isn't qualified to do it, who is? The beggars, staring into their cups all day? The people who spend almost all their time in Heaven, who escaped into pictures decades ago? In the old days people invented things all the time, straight out of their heads.

The designers of Heaven had an obvious fondness for phallic symbols, a reflection of society's general proclivity for producing extremely tall, eye-catching structures. Buildings that reach for the sky have appeared throughout history as an expression of power and the will to live. An especially multifaceted example of this can be seen in the pyramids, which have been used to mark human graves (mostly those of men).

I interpret the pyramids as phallic symbols whose broad shape is a result of the limitations of the building techniques of their time. Completing a challenging building project under difficult conditions was a show of the pharaoh's power and a message to its audience about his greatness not just in this world but also in the world to come.

Pyramids are a way to express the will to live in megalomaniacal form, a will to live forever (see: religion).

This tendency to use buildings as a demonstration of power has been a feature of nations throughout history, particularly nations on the rise economically. At the beginning of the 2000's, the tallest buildings were being built in Asia. The tallest was the Jeddah Tower, which had over 200 floors and was completed in 2022 in the city of Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia. The Tower was a kilometer tall, a distance that would stretch from Helsinki's Railway Square to the Long Bridge. Just imagine that distance turned upright, pointing toward the sky, and you'll have an idea of the proportions of humanity's drive to live (megalomania). The Jeddah Tower never made it into Heaven, due to the designers' preference for historical architecture of a specific type.

More twisted forms of the will to live can be seen in war and genocide. In times of war leaders (who were generally older) have harnessed the life force of younger men as a show of power, as if they could enlarge their own existence by spending that of others. Depriving an enemy of his life nourished their own life force at a symbolic level, accentuating the difference between the enemy who was dead and themselves, still alive.

In its more constructive forms, the will to live produced art and science, a drive to document the world and the universe, a need for collaboration, to produce and experience pleasure, to reproduce and protect the future of one's offspring. It created a burning desire in the individual to make some kind of progress, and if that progress was thwarted for one reason or another, individuals numbed their boredom or outright pain by means of various intoxicants.

Akseli stares at his text and has no idea where it came from. Are his conclusions correct? And who will be the judge of their accuracy? Who would even be interested? Whether he's wasting his time or not, a pleasant, warm quiver goes through him. He has produced ideas. Bad ideas, perhaps, or incorrect ideas, but ideas of his very own that weren't written decades ago. He wrote them, today, on a rainy Helsinki morning in May of 2058.

He continues writing until his time to go to Heaven, letting stray fragments of fact meet and combine in ever more peculiar structures of ideas. Even a crazy idea starts to seem quite reasonable once you write it down, one part of the endless tapestry of all the texts ever written.

As he writes, a thought takes shape in his mind, frightening and liberating.

"All ideas are incomplete. Nothing's ever finished. Not even Heaven."

It dawns on him why computers didn't solve society's accumulating problems. Even if computers did learn to mimic the structure of the human brain, something would be missing.

"They don't feel any desire to think. They think they're complete. We settled for being machines, but machines didn't become people."



When Akseli wakes up the next day, the sun is already high in the sky.

He lies in bed for a moment and realizes he's dreadfully hungry, an aching emptiness gnawing at his stomach. A memory comes to him from distant childhood: bacon oozing fat and the plump, glistening orange eye of a fried egg. It was a rare treat he had for breakfast while visiting relatives in Kuhmoinen, back when his mother was still able to travel and they could sometimes leave Helsinki. The bacon was crisp and tender from the fat and the deep orange of the egg yolk was filled with flavor. It was quite different from dried-out porridge and mash. The fat struck his gustatory nerve and flowed into his belly without chewing or swallowing.

Akseli hops out of bed, hurries to open the cupboard, and feels crestfallen, although he knew what was in it before he looked. Breakfast is half a pill and a bowl of porridge. He cooks the porridge and pours in some cockroach meal, hesitates for a moment, then adds some soy, too. At this rate he'll be out of food by Monday.

"I'll just have to get some more," he thinks, and the idea lingers gleaming in his mind. "Something good, maybe."

The memory of bacon and eggs comes back and hits him hard. He can see himself poking his fork into the shining eye of the egg, taste the yolk filling his mouth. Chickens were replaced by insects, soy, and other undemanding foods long ago, but suddenly Akseli can't accept that. He'd be willing to raise a chicken in his own apartment if he could get just one egg.

He jumps up and walks to the window, scans the area as if seeking his prey. Where can he get some food? The beggars are huddled in their familiar square, but otherwise it's quiet out. Not even a rabbit or a rat to be seen.

“The market square, of course.”

The idea feels like an inspiration, until he remembers that he doesn't have any money. Food coupons have to be saved for basic necessities. But the dream of something new and delicious to eat has its roots in him now and it drives him to go through his belongings--there must be something in the apartment worth trading for. Akseli looks around the rooms and rummages through the cupboards: table, bed, armchair, glasses, clothes, a pot, a ladle, two worn drinking glasses, a plate, a spoon, a knife, scissors, a needle, thread, half a package of energy-saving lightbulbs, a coat, a pair of shoes for winter and another one for summer, two t-shirts, a sweatshirt, a sweater, three pairs of underwear, and four pairs of socks. The clothes are patched in many places. Everything extra was sold long ago. It will have to be something from the box.

Akseli takes the box out of the closet, sets it on the floor near the front door, and looks at his mother's things: an album of photos, a red dress, a silver lily pendant, and a pair of brown leather gloves. Just these few objects survived the difficult years, when they had to sell almost everything. These are the things Akseli has saved, because they hold his childhood as he understands it, the time when his mother still joked around sometimes and tussled his hair.

Akseli deliberates for a long time and finally chooses the gloves. He puts the box back in its hiding place in the closet and stands by the front door, at a loss. Can he just go out, just like that? Just put on his coat and grab his keys? He runs his hand through his hair and feels its filmy coating. He notices a strong, sickly-sweet smell.

The pale man looking back from the bathroom mirror is the same as always, but he disgusts Akseli now. He forces himself to examine his face. Some of his facial hair is light and some is almost black, poking out at different lengths in all directions. His hair hangs in his face, his eyes are red with shadows under them.

”That’s me. A stinking animal,” he says to himself.

A smashed piece of soap that he occasionally uses to wash his underwear is resting on the edge of the bathtub. The drain smells musty, but the cold water comes out steady after the first few sputters. Akseli crouches at the bottom of the tub to scrub himself down. He finds an old razor in the cabinet and shaves, then cuts his hair and nails with the kitchen scissors.

When he’s done he looks in the mirror again, at a stranger. He tries to assess the result, but he can’t. Does he look like an easy mark? Or a dimwit?

Does he look good?

Out on the street the air smells like the beggars’ seagull soup. The sun feels warm on Akseli’s back. The color of the birch leaves has deepened, and Akseli plucks off a leaf as he passes, sniffs at its green scent and crushes it between his fingers. He lets the crushed leaf fall to the ground and smells his fingertips. They smell of fresh birch and a hint of pine soap. Walking feels good, but he quickly starts to tire. As he’s slowing down to pass the university, he realizes that he’s forgotten to be afraid. He glances around. The street is deserted.

At the corner near Esplanadi Park, he stops to watch a rabbit nibble at a dandelion poking up from the ruins of a collapsed building. A small domed section of the building is still standing, and Akseli realizes it’s Kappeli restaurant. In Heaven’s Old Hel-

sinki, Kappeli smells like coffee and princess cakes and is filled with murmured conversations and shining forks clinking against dessert plates on soft summer evenings. The glass walls of the restaurant are shattered now, the largest shards not yet completely covered in undergrowth. A large strip of green roof still lies on the ground in one piece.

"This was a real pleasure palace," Akseli thinks. "They were all on a pleasure trip. And now they're gone."

The transitoriness of the real world shocks him. Why does everything have to tend toward chaos instead of order, while time just keeps rushing onward?

His sadness subsides as he turns away from the building and heads toward the market square. He can smell the food from a block away, and as he passes the Havis Amanda statue the hollow feeling in his stomach intensifies. He shoves a hand in his pocket and feels his mother's gloves, almost worn through but still in one piece. The thought of some savory treat hurries his steps.

When he reaches the market he quickly maps out his options: grits, food oil, crickets, rabbits, seagulls, fabric... He could buy ingredients to bake bread, but the mere thought of waiting that long twists his stomach in knots. There seem to be only a handful of booths selling prepared foods. Akseli's eyes fix on some plump, dark-brown loaves of bread, and he tries to look indifferent as his eyes wander over them.

"Cricket loaf?"

Akseli shrugs.

"Only 30 marks."

He shakes his head but he can't take his eyes off the loaves of bread. They lie in rows in a wooden box half covered with a cloth. Their crusts glow deep brown. Akseli

imagines sinking his teeth through the crust, chewing something solid for once, something with some fat in it.

"Are they fresh?"

"Baked today."

Akseli hesitates, then finally hands the gloves to the vendor. The heavy-browed man examines them carefully.

"They're worn. Three loaves."

"Six."

"Four loaves. It looks like you'll need them wrapped up, too."

Akseli settles for four, the vendor wraps them in paper, and even as the man hands him the package Akseli knows that he made his decision too quickly, rashly, but he can't really regret it. He could have got a lot more bread by baking it himself, but the loaves in their wrapping feel so solid.

There's a pale-blue wall around a building far enough from the shore that there's nobody around. Akseli sits in a sun-warmed nook and unwraps the first loaf.

The bread is syrupy but rather dry, full of crunchy, very salty crickets. Akseli is disappointed in its mealiness, but it doesn't stop him from devouring the whole thing in one sitting. The tough bread goes down satisfyingly, filling the hollow in his gut and radiating peace all through him. The outlines of the surrounding world look clearer now. Akseli notices the men armed with bayonets standing on either side of the market, watching the transactions. The sellers of used goods are gathered on the street side of the market, their inventory piled around them like fortifications, sparking Akseli's curiosity.

He gets up and strolls over to look at what's for sale: porcelain cups, a tiny fork and spoon in a basket, dark pieces of cloth, gray clothes, down-at-heel winter shoes. At a booth at the end of the row Akseli's eyes hit upon something surprising. He has to search his memory for the name: Sneakers. Running shoes. The shoes are brilliant with flashy color. Orange and bright green intertwine in bold patterns, and the laces look almost new. He slowly rubs the shoes with his hand and looks at the size on the bottom: 45. He gasps; it seem almost like a sign that the shoes are meant just for him.

"Would you trade these shoes for two loaves of bread?" he asks the middle-aged vendor.

She glares at him.

"Shoes for bread? What are you, crazy?"

"They aren't real shoes. They're full of holes," Akseli says, showing her the porous mesh fabric.

"You can walk in them alright. They'd even work in the winter if you put on wool socks."

"Three loaves?"

"No deal."

Akseli knows it's useless to keep trying and gives up, but the shoes won't leave him in peace. When he gets home he eats another loaf of bread and sits at the table, caressing the beautiful shoes in his mind. If they were intended for him, then why can't he have them? And why is he thinking like this when he doesn't even believe in omens or intentions, doesn't believe there is anyone or anything to intend such a thing?

He jumps up and hurries to the closet. He takes out the dress, because a useless piece of jewelry probably wouldn't be worth much in trade.

The running shoes are still there next to a gray flowerpot, glowing, as Akseli shows the woman the dress. She inspects the fabric for a long time, but eventually agrees to the trade. Akseli quickly hides his treasure under his coat and hurries home.

Back at his apartment, he tries them on. They press against his feet pleasantly, capturing the flesh in a carefully formed nest. The way they press against his ankle gives him a strangely upright feeling, as if they're pushing him to stand up straighter. The shoes are so light you could fly in them. Akseli takes a few running steps across the floor, but the wall immediately stops him. He would like to go outside, but he realizes that in this gray city the saturated colors of the shoes would be visible from a long way off and might attract thieves.

Akseli sits down on the floor, takes the shoes off, and strokes the beautiful mesh. He feels a terrible longing, though he doesn't know for what.

In May the days stretch to unbearable lengths. Pale green dominates the Esplanade and scrambles out of the park into the street: grass, dandelions, and slender trees spring up from the cracks in the asphalt, ants and beetles scamper everywhere, and Iina dodges through dense swarms of buzzing insects as she hurries to the market square.

Nature is making it clear that it intends to conquer the city. It's overrunning everything, like a conscious entity, and Iina isn't sure whether to be horrified or consoled. She can imagine the city a hundred years from now when there isn't a single person left, just nature's furious drive to multiply.

There are still people hanging on at the market square, which Iina hates visiting more and more with every advancing day of spring. Dirty human bodies, the rotten fish smell of the sea and scents of animal blood and fresh birch tangle themselves into a fabric that sends flashes of horrifying memory through her mind.

It was this same time of year, late spring, when the Heaven fees went up and the anger boiled over. Marius said that the government was doing it on purpose. They announced that the increase was to offset the costs expended on immigrants' children, cultivating public hostility toward minorities. Many people who had become accustomed to virtual life saw the light of day for the first time in years, and they saw strollers and playgrounds without a single white child in them.

Iina remembers it, the chilling feeling of being left out as she walked past a playground by Töölö Bay and saw children, their skin glowing, their mothers in wraps of colorful fabric and henna-painted hands. They were still adorning themselves, still having

children and taking care of them, while Iina could barely manage to take a short walk around the bay and tell herself it was exercise.

She was particularly stricken when she saw a young woman lifting a strapping toddler out of a stroller. Iina walked close enough to smell the sweet scent of the child and see the half-empty baby bottle, the blanket with pictures of teddybears jumping rope. It came to her in a flash that there really were these little people who loved teddy bears, and mothers pushing strollers—something Iina would never do. There were women plumping up like Earth mothers and printing out copies of themselves made of living flesh. Miracles were still possible--but not for her.

Iina should have understood the power of hate, but she saw it all as if in a dream. On the day her mother and Mikki left, their childhood homes were like two pieces of candy: Iina's family's house bright red and Jalo's parents' place deep orange. Iina remembers the moment of departure like a photograph: red roses, the veil of mist from the sprinkler, the flowered Marimekko comforter covers and pillowcases drying in the back yard. Mom's brow was furrowed, Mikki was chewing gum, the pug Mopsi on his leash sniffed at their suitcases. Marius was standing next to her in a red t-shirt. Dad ran inside to get one more thing. The apple tree with the apples that Iina and Marius used to pick and throw to Mopsi when they were little was still there, arching above them. The dog used to run after the apples as fast as he could, and then end up running around in circles, confused, because the ground was covered with apples. Mopsi was a dumb dog.

"Are you absolutely sure?" Iina's mother asked her. And she was.

She didn't ask Marius, just looked at him as only a mother of a firstborn child likely to be charged with treason can look. Within six months Dad was dead, Marius had

disappeared, the old neighborhood of wooden houses was burned to the ground, and the whole city seemed to be filled with marching leatherheads bellowing patriotic songs.

Dad and Marius stayed behind as a matter of principle, but Iina still doesn't know why she stayed. Maybe she thought she could look out for them, or maybe she was just lazy. She had just moved into a studio apartment and she couldn't bear the thought of turning back time, of living at her aunt's place in Tampere with her teenage cousins, of sharing a room with Mikki and Mom, of packing everything and unpacking it again. Maybe she didn't quite believe that it was all real.

She spent nights in her apartment studying and slept late into the day and time started to warp into shapelessness around her. She rarely ventured outside, because men had changed. They shoved her and called her "whore" and "immy-lover". Maybe some of them really believed that all the women were having secret trysts with foreign lovers. But there was an absolutism in these men's anger that could not be swayed by reality. They wanted to hate her because it was something they could still do.

An essay about the hatred of women was the most-read post on her dad's blog.

It might have been the post that was his downfall, because he used the dreaded word, impotence, to describe men's predicament.

After he wrote it someone broke their kitchen window and a red swastika was painted on the side of their house. Her dad was used to threats--after all, he had been writing since the days when the news was printed on paper and slipped through a slot in your door. His blog didn't have a huge number of readers, but the ones who did read it were the people the government couldn't tolerate: the opposition, people in media, arts, culture.

Iina never asked her father to stop writing, and he wouldn't have stopped if she had asked.

"The people of this country are rational at heart," he said, and Iina understood what he meant.

They had all gone to the same schools, arriving in shifts every morning at eight, nine, and ten. They had all been taught the same things about Finnish grammar and the circulatory system. It had been way more than a hundred years since the Finnish civil war, and even if Finns did yell at each other on the internet, and in the street, more and more angrily all the time, it just didn't seem possible that they could want to butcher their former schoolmates.

In her father's country, journalists were not killed as a warning to others, but when he died, that country didn't exist anymore. The army and the police were still the same mechanism of violence with the job of protecting the country, but the country belonged to someone else now.

When she gets to the market, Iina holds out her container to be filled at the first booth she comes to and promises herself she'll start having their food delivered.

The orange shoes seem to light up Akseli's whole apartment. They're placed neatly beside the front door with their toes pointed toward the wall and he notices himself constantly glancing over at them. In the morning before he gets out of bed, he peeks to make sure these two suns of his are still there, and on his way to the bathroom for a glass of water he checks again. He's dying to go out in them, but afraid it will lead him into danger.

On the fifth pill day, Akseli wakes up in sunlight, lies for a moment with his eyes shut tight, the sun shining red through his eyelids. He doesn't remember what he dreamed, but it left a pleasant flutter that's still alive in his limbs as he hauls himself out of bed. He wants to get up and see what the day will bring, wants to go out, take the risk.

He makes some porridge and sits down at the round table, looking at the shoes. They're still there, an unnatural phenomenon of the light, like the summer that feels stranger with each passing year. The blazing streets don't belong in this country, and the shoes don't belong on a man like him. An image comes to him in a flash--himself struck to the ground and a filthy, hairy foreigner tearing the sunshine off his feet.

The shoes are too bright, too beautiful. But they want to go outside.

Akseli's spoon stops mid-air, and he looks down at his oatmeal.

"I can go wherever I want," he says. "I'm a person. I can leave."

His jaw is clenched, his words muttered between closed lips.

"A person can leave," he says in a louder voice, startled at the strangeness of it.

Moved by this feeling, Akseli stands up. He quickly puts on his linen pants and shirt, tugs on his nearly threadbare gray sweatshirt with a picture of a reindeer on the front, and walks toward the sneakers. As he reaches them his steps slow. He slips his feet solemnly into the artfully constructed contours inside the shoes, tightens the laces, and stands up. He feels certain that he is about to lose his treasure, but he can't stop.

Akseli gropes his way down the stairs, feeling how the shoes meet the floor, stiff and untried. The cool gusts of wind on Siltasaari Street batter him, but the sun looks down from the sky at his sneakers and protects him on his journey. His feet move haltingly, but he forces them into a fumbling rhythm: go, go, go, go, step, step, step. The movement is strange and his body struggles against it, but somewhere deep within him heat begins to rise and his insides begin to hum into life.

The smooth hum quickly turns stiff. Before he's run even half a kilometer he can feel something throbbing and squeezing around his heart, sludge collecting in his mouth. He can see a flash of the harbor through the trees, and he wants to be closer to the shore, but he doesn't dare make his way through the tangled underbrush, where immigrants and libtards were lynched during the Purge. The remains of enormous bonfires are still visible on the beach, blackened piles of metal of no interest to scavengers. There's a piece of rope tied around the limb of a fallen tree, as rotten as the wood. Something rustles in the underbrush, and fear streaks through him, but it's just a rabbit.

"There's no one here. Respectable people are at their computers, the vendors and beggars are on the squares, the workers are at work," he assures himself over and over. "People at computers, beggars on the squares. People at computers, beggars at the squares."

He knows he's lying to himself, because of course there are other people who could be out—thieves, murderers, outlaws. There used to be institutions for them, but no one maintains those anymore. The Light Police do their best to protect the people of the city and execute wrongdoers. There are opportunities for everyone: if you are unable to work, you can scavenge or beg. That's how the elderly, the disabled, and the retarded take care of themselves. There are no children to care for anymore. The Helsinki of The Light is a straightforward city. The Light supports the Heaven users, and the users support it.

We exist for The Light. Our society isn't for the criminals, and it isn't for law-abiding citizens, either. It's for The Light. Social tranquility is good for business.

"We live in a Lightocracy," he says quietly, and his sneakers repeat it: Lightocracy, Lightocracy, Lightocracy.

He emerges from the trees onto the narrow bridge above the rail yard in Linnunlaulu and stops to pant, hacking up phlegm, his hands on his knees. Looking along the rails to the north, he can see a green and white train car on its side, its wheels groping the air. Farther up the tracks a brown handcar is approaching, perhaps some trader transporting game from the forests in the north part of the city or insects from the feedlot in Käpylä.

The wind blows in cooling puffs against Akseli's sweaty neck. He looks down from the bridge at the tracks and it occurs to him how easy it would be to throw himself over the railing. He's so exhausted from running that he would hardly have any strength to resist, would just go flying off the bridge with his limbs flopping and smash against the tracks. Then he hears a snap behind him—surely an attacker—and whirls around.

An old woman is standing a few meters away, staring at him. They freeze where they're standing, as if choosing their roles, until the woman hisses at him and teeters hurriedly past. She's bent over almost double, weighed down by the gray bundle on her back.

Akseli drops down and sits on the bridge. The sun has gone behind a cloud but his sneakers with their garish colors are laughing at him, marveling at a man lost in a thicket. He sees himself as if from above, sitting there in the middle of a wasteland with the rabbits and foxes and trash. If it weren't for the pills he wouldn't have felt a need to wander here. Everything would be good enough, like it was before. His home wouldn't have been transformed in his mind into a cramped, stuffy prison, and he wouldn't look like such a lunatic.

"Damn pills," Akseli puffs. "Damn Aho."

He rests his head on his hands and tries to convince himself that this moment of hopelessness is just a surge in some neurotransmitter, a thing that will soon pass. There is only one reality, and right now his brain is adjusting to it. The world can be looked at in different ways, but it doesn't make the world any different, because a person isn't a mirror, he's a living thing that can be well adjusted or poorly adjusted.

When Akseli raises his head the day seems to have grown darker. A mass of gray clouds looms on the horizon, and as he looks at the sky it seems to be reeling above him. Seagulls screech over Töölö Bay. The air presses down on his shoulders, warning of a storm. Terror strikes him, and he leaps to his feet and runs toward home as fast as he can, his heart pounding, his lungs ready to burst.

The fear follows him all the way up the stairs, never slackening until he slams his apartment door with a boom that echoes through the building. He slumps against the

wall and slides to the floor, feels the sweat running through his hair, the sludgy feeling in his mouth, the thump of his heart, the blood rushing through his body.

He leans his dripping head on the wall and a feeling of pleasure starts to rise up from somewhere deep inside his body. His sneakers are in front of him, only slightly dirty.

They're still here, smiling at him.

Restlessness sends Akseli out to run again and again. He knows he must be quite an extraordinary sight as he stumbles along, but no heads turn as he runs past; even his bright orange shoes don't attract any attention. The beggars stare into their cups and everyone else flows by as if programmed for their required tasks. Every dilapidated building and stretch of weed-grown road radiates indifference. The city is like an old pair of shoes, its soles nearly worn through.

Akseli can sense the despair, but something within him has been awakened and is looking ahead. It's at its strongest in the morning when he opens his eyes and sees the day. He wants to eat, wants to go running, wants to work, and, above all, wants to know. The desire is a red engine inside him that struggles on, bouncing from one thing to the next and resting only in the evenings, in Heaven.

That engine moves him to petition the university for the right to research censored foreign materials. Sending the request is scary. It could cause people to ask questions. They might begin to suspect him of being rebellious, or ambitious. He doesn't want to arouse any sort of suspicion, but his curiosity is a self-feeding flame that seeks out ever more fuel to lap up.

His petition is granted without further inquiries and Akseli now has a great deal more research material than he has time for. The web content is stored in various parts of the world, and although Akseli doesn't actually know any foreign languages, his translation software does. At first he's careful with his searches, trying to stick to his subject, but he soon forgets to shackle his curiosity and enters ever more search terms, his eyes flicking eagerly over the text, following his own impulses.

The water refugees and the walls are the most censored news subjects. The European Union began building the walls just before its dissolution in the 2030's, after many member countries had already built walls of their own. They all wanted to protect themselves from the locust swarm of refugees. Akseli remembers hearing about the refugee problem, the pictures of enormous tent cities and lines of ragged people. He gets lost in the websites of old civic organizations where the refugees are shown as sad-eyed children and desperate parents, and the pictures make Akseli uncomfortable. They look just like people.

Finland, the best country in the world, isn't mentioned on foreign websites at all. Heaven is mentioned here and there, but rarely the fact that it's Finnish. In 2051, interest in Finland rose a bit when Finnish National Socialists were reported to have started a civil war. The erroneous headline in a British newspaper shocks Akseli. National Socialists? It sounds so weird. Maybe the reporter had National Socialism confused with nationalism. The internet collapsed not long after that article, so there's no way of knowing whether that misconception about Finland lived on.

Akseli takes off his glasses and gets up. He squats and jumps up again, squats and jumps up. After twenty repetitions he realizes that he can do more. After forty, he gives up and drops down onto the bed, his heart pounding, sweat forming at his temples. Foreign countries were just like they said in school: dangerous, confused, filled with earthquakes and floods and terrorist attacks. The news just confirmed that, didn't it? So why does he have this uneasy feeling?

He can understand why the government would want to protect the public from the chaos abroad. Foreign countries were full of people who didn't really understand Finns, but that wouldn't stop them from writing about Finland. It was unquestionably

easiest to just stay inside the walls. But the foreign countries didn't just go away; they're still lurking somewhere out there. They must still exist.

Akseli remembers just a handful of the more significant news stories from abroad. When he was thirteen he watched the wave of attacks that destroyed the eastern coast of the United States. New York wasn't the first city to fall, but what was important wasn't the city, or the refugees who came from it. Even at that age Akseli understood that New York was more than a city, it was a symbol of an era that had come to an end.

His mother's computer was broken at the time, so they went over to watch the broadcasts at Niila's house. Plastic and metal debris leaned against the sides of strangely familiar skyscrapers. When the rescue efforts were over the news helicopters filmed the buildings as they filled with water. Sometimes the camera would find an interesting detail—a shoe, the yellow inner shell of a Kinder Egg, a doll's head—but when night fell all that was left was the beating of the helicopter blades and the lights flashing over black walls and blacker water.

Akseli remembers the click as Niila turned off the laptop, looking old behind his round lenses, and Akseli could almost hear something in their world sigh and go blank. After that there was no possible thing to say except, What does it matter? Nothing to do but shut down the news broadcast, and himself.

Akseli stares at the ceiling, its cracks crisscrossing like rivers. When the tears come, he isn't crying for the world. He's crying for himself.

He's finally ready to look now, and there's no one to look with him.

The sun in the clearing beats down on my head and shoulders and I drip with sweat. I press the sole of my foot on the mossy ground and push myself forward and it feels as if the effort gnaws at my exhausted calf and buttocks, the leather strap of my pack biting deep into my shoulders. The weight on my back is the weight of the benevolence of the gods, the weight of life, so it's good, even though the skin under the straps is rubbed raw.

It's not much farther to home; that's why I know every branch, the outline of every tree against the sky. A squirrel dashes down a tree trunk, and its tail is nearly as big as it is. I smell smoke in the air, still just a distant hint, but it fills each step with home. The sense of expectation is a chuckle in my belly, my groin. Though I haven't really thought about her, I can already feel her under my hands, smooth as a sea-washed stone.

A branch cracks under my foot and I stumble, the flesh of my shoulder crying out as my pack tips sideways. I force my back straight with muscles strengthened by the pain. The effort makes my chest and ears pound, and I can smell the pungent stink of my body.

I place the next stride more carefully, on a low rise. Step, and step, and step, with stiff calves, forcing myself upright as I cross the soft ground. The pain in my shoulders intensifies, forcing me to tug the pack strap into a new position. It helps for a second. The small hummocks are covered in bilberry bushes that someone has stripped of every berry. Perhaps she picked them. I can picture her squatting, half hidden by the bushes

like someone taking a pee, the pale flesh of her rear end visible under her leather dress,  
and the thought makes my body twitch.

I hasten my steps and the smell of smoke and the cool of evening grows stronger. I can sense others coming after me, and their desire to reach the place presses me onward.

Just as I know I'm nearly there, the scent of smoke starts to shred and the weight on the leather straps lightens. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut and pretend I don't know I'm doing it. Moment by moment I can sense the wrong me more clearly, the soft me under the suffocating warmth of my blanket. I keep my eyes closed, but all I see now is blackness, and the air I'm breathing is filled with nothing, is so insignificant that it hardly seems to matter whether I breathe or not. I'm scared to death that I'll never see her again.

Akseli finally knows what to do. It feels like a fact, branded into him. He's not making a decision about what to do—it's his only choice.

He finds Iina in the Hanging Gardens so easily that he doesn't have time to realize he's afraid until the moment he sees her. If he gives her a scare, he won't get another chance. Akseli can feel the presence of his own body, needing space to think, can feel himself trembling, acting hastily, but he can't turn back. He's suddenly aware that Heaven doesn't feel the same as before. It's soft and soothing as always, but he's too solid to melt into it completely, too full of restless purpose.

Iina is lying on her back running her hand through the spring water. Akseli can feel its coolness in his fingers. Red fabric swells at her breast and drapes between her legs, the round tips of her toes peeping out to be caressed by the breeze.

Akseli steps closer and can't believe that his former self could barely keep the woman's features in his memory. Her body feels like an invitation, and Akseli refuses to recognize the possibility that she might be quite different in the real world. He looks at the hemispheres of her breasts, can't take his eyes off them, longs to touch them, regardless of what sort of drooping dugs they might be in the real world.

Akseli sits down, but she doesn't move.

"Hi," he says.

Iina opens her eyes but doesn't bother to sit up.

"Hi."

Akseli smiles and knows immediately that there is too much sunny sweetness on his face, a clear view straight into his sick mind. But she doesn't seem to care. She glances at him and her lips quickly curve, then she shifts her gaze to the sky and closes her eyes.

He realizes then that Iina hasn't changed, even if he has. He can just come right out and tell her why he's come. He's certain that she doesn't care about any but the most essential things.

"I was looking for you," Akseli says. "I wanted to ask you something."

"Well?"

"I'd like to see you in real life."

Iina opens her eyes and sits up. Akseli knows he has stepped irrevocably over a line.

"What for?"

"It has to do with my research. I'm a researcher."

Akseli can see the thoughts flitting behind her eyes. Whatever they may look like in reality, the image of her eyes in his glasses look genuine, sky blue, dark around a pale azure iris. They have a startling beauty, but Akseli doesn't know if they're unusual. Maybe he's just never paid attention to anyone's eyes before.

"You can choose the time and place to meet. I'll come anywhere you like," he says.

Iina wraps her arms around her knees as if she's trying to hide herself. Akseli understands that he has broken rules that are so absolutely clear that they don't need to be written anywhere. Heaven is peace; it's not a place where you can bother people with demands about the outside world. It's a wonder Iina hasn't left yet.

"I don't know anything about my provider's work," Iina finally says.

"I'm not interested in that."

"And I don't do politics."

"This isn't anything political," Akseli says, and feels her watching him. He remembers her comments about the government and realizes that her refusal might be a test. Maybe she thinks he's a revolutionary, and that politics is exactly what he wants to do. Or maybe she's a spy, and she mentioned politics to lead him into a trap. In any case, the turn the conversation has taken makes him nervous.

Iina hugs her knees tighter and looks up at an eagle soaring across the sky.

"Give me one reason why I ought to agree to meet you."

Akseli's anxiety rises. He doesn't know why she should meet him. His own wishes are no reason for her to agree, of course. She has to have her own reason. The effort of putting himself in another person's place makes his head hurt. He realizes that he knows nothing about her. He can only think of one thing that he's sure of.

"You're not happy."

"Will this meeting make me happy?"

"Maybe."

Iina smiles.

"Do you have something better than Heaven? Like poison?"

Akseli feels even more anxious now. She's so unpredictable. She might report him, and when the security police search his apartment they'll find the pills, and investigate his History of Heaven, and know what he's been up to.

Iina watches the effect of her words on him, but she doesn't seem particularly curious about him. Akseli notices that he's holding his breath.

"I don't have anything to steal."

“I’m not planning to rob you.”

”And my provider won’t pay anything for me.”

”Of course not.”

Iina looks out at the horizon. She can’t see the eagle now, but it’s still there somewhere. Heaven isn’t just an image for them to look at, it’s a world with its own laws, made for them but independent of them. It exists even when they’re not looking at it. At least they think it does.

”The cathedral, tomorrow at noon,” Iina says.

Akseli is surprised at this answer. It feels too easy. He doesn’t believe she’ll come, but there’s nothing more he can do. It’s hard to get any words out.

”Okay.”

”If you’re not there at noon, I’ll leave immediately.”

”I’ll be there.”

Iina nods. The eagle ascends from a far off thicket, dangling some disproportionately large-looking prey from its claws. Iina sighs and lies back down again.

Akseli knows the conversation is over.