

The Colonel's Wife

a novel

by Rosa Liksom

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Thank you, H. H.

The beams of the fish weir creak, the wooden boat tied beside it screeches against the wall of the weir, and if you turn your gaze toward the little village, you see that the houses are dark, their inhabitants gone to sleep. A faint flash of fluttering curtain. Someone rolls over beneath a flowered blanket; another, in a deep sleep, scratches a leg; another's mouth is open, drool dripping onto a white pillow case; another one flinches, waking from a dream, and falls asleep again; one intermittently snores; one sits down on the edge of a bed, lights a half-smoked cigarette, smokes it, squats over an enamel chamber pot for a minute with eyes closed, slides the pot under the metal bedsprings, and tumbles with a sigh back onto the straw mattress and into a good sleep.

But in one house, at the farthest edge of the village, a homely light quavers. That's the Colonel's wife's house. From the lakeshore it looks like a cross between an alpine hut and an old-fashioned, chimneyless cabin. The house is two stories high, with old, warped timbers.

In the blackness just after nightfall the frost begins to make its way in between the floorboards. The Colonel's wife stuffs her hands under her reindeer skin tunic, pulls the belt of the Colonel's old sauna robe tighter around her, looks down at her long, camelhair stockings and the reindeer hide boots that keep her feet warm during the long hours of night, sighs and walks to the fireplace.

She puts in a few sticks of birch that Tuomas brought her. On the sixth match the flame catches, the burning birchwood crackles up the chimney and condenses into a blaze of white heat that reaches for the icy sky.

The joy of the past is that it's never coming back.

But nothing's ever gone for good.

The Lotta Svärd women's volunteers were having their summer camp. I caught the bus as far as Kittilä and backpacked in on foot to a damp stand of pine deep in the woods between a lake and a backwater. The other girls and married women were already there setting up camp and I pitched in. There was a pond to the south, quickly growing over with moss, and to the north a very pretty, placid wilderness lake with clear water and a sand beach on the south shore. Wandering in the woods was something I was well used to. My father took a shine to the scouting movement when he was in Germany, brought the idea home with him, and put me in the Girl Scouts when I was seven. At that age they called us the Wolf Cubs. I learned that a person should be trustworthy, helpful, mannerly, truthful, responsible, hard-working, brave, and patriotic.

While we were receiving this lovely training we fought and picked on each other, bullied the littler girls, and learned about life. I was an enthusiastic scout and got to go to several summer camps in Germany, and I learned the language while I was at it. *Juuten raus!* It sounded so pretty to my ears back then, and sounds so awful now. The girls in our family were Little Lottas, too, a good ten years before the Little Lottas were officially founded. We were a civil defense family, a model for all Finns.

In the Little Lottas I learned how to set a table and how to crochet a lace tablecloth. After the War of Liberation we collected bones to make soap, and dandelion roots for making coffee. I collected such a pile of pine cones that I got a star pinned to the chest of my uniform. I saved all

my uniforms, although after the armistice people thought they were shameful. I wasn't ashamed. I put them in the bottom of my hope chest, which is still there in a corner of the bedroom.

Our Lotta General at the camp was Rovastinna. She was attentive, sharp, careful and strict, always on the side of life over death, and for that reason believed to be a pacifist. She taught me how to make decent coffee, how to provision a thousand men at once, how to give first aid to the wounded, how to collect money for civil defense. I learned that a woman should always be industrious to the point of self-sacrifice, and also obedient and diligently making preparations for her future role as a mother of soldiers. That men should have a dash of tyrant in them, and be morally superior to women. That love is a battle that begins with hostility on the man's side and ends with his moral victory, and a woman has to learn to accept that and still love the man purely and sincerely.

One day at the camp we had some free time. We could do whatever we liked. Some read the Bible, some sang hymns, some played tag. I went to look at the marsh, to see what kind of berries we were going to have that year. Whether the cloudberry were blooming yet. I squeezed through some alder bushes and then the dry ground under my feet started to sink and the whole world went sideways, like I was in a rocking chair. A great big beautiful swamp stretched out in front of me. I galloped like a wild reindeer and whooped like a holy roller. I jumped around and churned up the bog water and such smells and gasses rose up from the bottom that if I hadn't clung to a hoary pine branch I would've fallen in a faint. Different colors flittered through my head. I saw lights and shadows, all sorts of reflections. The red-barked pines were humming, the mossy spruce trees roaring, the boulders ringing, and a flock of cranes shouted in the sky. I felt feverish, like my head was loose from my neck, and I laughed like some wild thing. I kept slogging on, splashing through the water in my bare feet, feeling the chilly breath of the marsh

with my toes. I was wet to the waist now, and every so often I properly sank into the sediment and sludge and water weeds. There were all sorts of swamp weeds and fossils hanging from my hair, but that wasn't going to stop me. I forgot about the berry blossoms. I was so free and full and limitless that I could feel the sap running through me and I thought, if death came for me right now I'd welcome it with open arms. I was nothing but divine, wondrous energy from top to bottom. Gnats and bugs and beetles and blackflies and swarms of some sort of horsefly were buzzing, frogs were croaking, beckoning, and the cranes screeched like somebody'd shot them. I squeezed my eyes shut and floated onward, trusting my instincts. My sense of smell pulled me south, my sense of touch to the west, and when my strength failed around evening time I stopped and opened my eyes, not knowing where I was. I didn't panic. Just looked at my muddy legs. They were covered in dark, bloody cuts, torn up by the sharp-edged sedge grass and bitten by critters. My whole body was covered in slime and I was as black as a burnt-out pine stump. I felt between my legs, because it was sort of stinging, and my hand felt something slick poking out and dangling there. I lifted up the hem of my skirt and saw that it was an eelworm, sucking my blood, right next to my coot. It'd been slurping it up for a while, a fat, swollen thing. I detached it carefully and threw it in the rotting reeds. I was all in, so I went to lie down on a raft of weeds, and right then I saw the world in a flash, the way it might be some day. It was a world that would be both man and woman, playing and loving, flooded with tenderness and pleasure, and everybody would be good to each other and everybody would just be what they are, not bad or good, and no words at all, just the senses.

With that wonderful vision, I fell asleep. The turf raft held me up me all night long, and when I woke up the waning moon was fading and I had bumped against the shore. The water was pitch black and I looked down at its bottomless depths and saw the lights and shadows of the

clouds, and I saw myself flashing on the surface. The peaceful face of a young, pretty girl, and a flagpole poking down in the wrong direction. On the flagpole fluttered the Lotta flag. I turned around and saw our camp not far down the shore. They were all cozy asleep. I tiptoed to the spot we had our campfire, laid down a crisscross of kindling, lit a little birchbark fire, and made a big kettle of coffee. When the others woke up they were quite pleased to get around a pot of hot coffee straightaway.

After the summer camp at Kittilä I was so buoyed up that nothing could hold me back. I was full of scouting and civil defense work. They were both based on German idealism and the German feeling of superiority, plus hatred of the Ruskies, and the idea that our job was to join all the people who spoke Finnish into one Finland. But the most basic thing was the holy trinity: home, faith, fatherland. That suited me. I took on the task of making everybody converts to the religion of civil defense. I couldn't keep my mouth shut about it, not even at the dinner table. My mother was rattled by me and my talk. She was a liberal at heart, a Young Finn, like my father had been when he was younger.

When it came time for the Lotta days in Kemi, I was hankering to go. My mother said no at first, but when my sister Repekka promised to look after me, she relented. I copied Repekka, wore my Lotta uniform and gave my first little speech, about how the fatherland is a treasure for which no sacrifice is ever in vain. The festivities culminated in a parade that included the Lottas and the handsome civil guards all decked out in their uniforms. The beauty and unity of the parade stirred up our will to fight and enthusiasm for the coming war with the Russians.

My father, Juho, was born into a well-off family of farmers and Kittilä's only merchant clan. He became the town's first agronomist. My paternal grandfather, Fransi, died before I was born, and

his wife, my grandma Elve, was full-blooded Sami. She lived to be a hundred and one. She wasn't from some shabby fishing family; she was a reindeer nomad. As a kid she used to take off on a reindeer sled up and down the snowy hillsides like a tundra princess. At midwinter, when the sun took its light and warmth away, or after a cold, dark winter, Grandma Elve would sprinkle reindeer milk in the direction of the sun. I was Grandma Elve's pet, and she taught me a lot of the tricks of the old world. My mother, Iida, was from Helsinki, from a noble Finland Swedish family. Mormor Hiltruuti, my maternal grandmother, had been a secret confidant of Governor General Poprikov, and her husband Thoomas, my maternal grandfather, was a well-known businessman who made a lot of money and then lost it all. I don't have any memories of them because they died before I came kicking into the world.

I wouldn't have known anything about the collapse of the world markets and the economic depression that started in New York if it hadn't slapped me in the face when my father's beloved boyhood home outside of Kittilä went on the auction block. My Uncle Matti had been running the place after Grandma and Grandpa died. He'd taken on some bills, and when it came time to pay, he didn't have the money, and then he got the idea to add a couple of rooms to the house and pay for it on credit, like a rich gentleman. I happened to be at Uncle Matti's place, sipping a cup of raspberry leaf tea and writing poems in my diary, when this fellow Paksuniemi came to the property with some workmen. They arrived around noon, sawed the two back rooms right off the house, and had all the lumber hauled away in a horse cart before nightfall. It was my father's home place, left there to cry, ravaged and humiliated. Uncle Matti said, Only rich people have money nowadays. Skilled workmen with no work dragging themselves down the highways and all the jobs gone and on top of the shortages and the poverty there's been crop failures

several years in a row, farms auctioned off, debts taking a scythe to their fields, foreclosure announcements in the papers.

Then an idea came into my head, as clear as could be, that Finland needed a tough leader, too, someone who would say no, who would hear the voices of the poor and the people who'd been forced to the margins of the economy. The Communists weren't going to do it. All I had to do was look at my Uncle Matti. He was a Red, and all he did was sit around bawling when he ought to have picked up an ax and defended what belonged to him. That was when I decided I would play this Lotta Svärd thing out to the end. But not only that. We needed a harder, clearer, simpler way of thinking and behaving to bring Finland up.

Those rooms of Uncle Matti's handsome house were gone. Then, when Finland started to rise and the lean years turned to fat years again, he built new rooms, better than the old ones, and put tall tin stoves in both of them. I liked my Uncle Matti, and didn't care at all that he was a Red. He had the same nose as my dad, but he was lazier. One time when I was being a crazy kid, he grabbed me and picked me up and took me to the woods. It was summer, and the gnats were out for blood. He carried me across a muddy pine bog. I didn't know where he was taking me, but he was holding me, and I didn't make any fuss. He talked to me, told me I should never go to the swamp alone, that people drowned there, and animals, too, and that there were all kinds of diseases that you had to watch out for, like the creeping crud, and stinging beetles that give you bad blood, and lung cancer, and there were desperate thieves and child-murderers with nothing to lose hiding there, and unwanted fetuses. I started to cry. He shushed me and said there was nothing to be afraid of, but I should always remember what he'd said.

I did remember, and after that I always rode my bike as fast as I could when I went past the marshes and swamps, which were around every corner in Lapland. When I was older, whenever I saw a swamp I always stopped and stared it down, just to show it who was boss.

That was how I overcame my fear, and little by little I started to love swamps and marshlands, bogs and bayous and quagmires.

I was born at a time of anger.

I grew to womanhood at a time of anger and revenge.

The very day that my father drew his last breath, the Colonel had been to our house for a visit. I hid behind the door and listened to their conversation. The Colonel said that once the Hindenburg got on its feet, all the air power would be on Hitler's side, he had the money behind him, and then he would give work, wealth, and pride back to the German people and conquer the world. Then my father said, We're Germany's friends, aren't we? And he said that we could sort of fly on their wings, and free the other members of our tribe from under the boot of the Ruskies, and all the lands of the Kalevala would be united in one Finland, all the way to the Ural mountains. Then the Colonel said, There isn't a Finn alive who wants to be seen as nothing more than the northernmost of the Baltic countries. And Dad said, Of course not. There's going to be a war soon, and we've got the nickel mines in Petsamo, so we'll be alright.

Even as a kid I sensed that there was something special between my father and the Colonel. My mother once let slip that in the jaegers' camp in Germany the Colonel had saved Dad's life, after he'd had a string of bad luck that'd driven him to try to hang himself.

The Colonel headed home early in the evening and Dad asked me to take a sauna. I was his favorite daughter. We took turns pouring on the steam like lunatics, I gave his back a whisk, and then we sat swigging small beer in the sauna room. Dad told me how he and Mom went to Copenhagen on their honeymoon. Back then, of course, a young couple taking a honeymoon trip abroad was unheard of in Kittilä. In my mother's upper-class Swedish family, though, it was practically a duty. So Mormor and Mofa were for it and my Grandma and Grandpa in Kittilä

were against it, because they were terribly religious, practically old-time Laestadians. My parents stayed in a pension in the center of Copenhagen and lived like royalty. It wasn't long before their money ran out. Dad called his sister in Rovaniemi and asked her to send money. His sister said she wasn't going to send him a penny, that if he was so down on his luck, him an agronomist and the rector of the dairy school and all, he ought to have married one of his students. Then he called the only phone in Kittilä, which was at the family place, and as luck would have it, Uncle Matti answered. Matti sent some money right away, but the mail was slow. The man who ran the pension had demanded the rent, and didn't understand when Dad told him in Latin that *pecunia venit*. So the old man called the police and they took Dad away to debtor's prison. Mom was at the conditori buying pastries and when she came back, Dad was gone. So she asked the manager of the pension in clear Swedish where her new husband was. But he answered something in Danish and she couldn't understand him. She cried for a week there in the room and had nothing to eat but the pastries and nothing to drink but champagne. She thought my father'd found a new woman and run off with her. Then one dark evening he showed up again, with a wad of money in his hand, and found his wife lying on the bed paralyzed. Everything was back to normal soon enough. They bought a great big Victorian style baby carriage as a souvenir, because it had come to their attention that my mother was expecting their first child. Repekka, that is. That was the same baby carriage that I spent my first few months in, looking up at the Northern Lights in the Lapland sky in the winter and the sky blue and white as the Finnish flag in the summer. I felt whole and perfect.

When Dad finished his story, we tossed on one more ladle of steam, then walked across the yard to the teacher's quarters, where we were living. Halfway there, my father tumbled to the ground right in front of me. He lay there with his eyes rolled back in his head, and with his last

bit of strength he took my hand and said, You are my black angel. Nothing more came out of his mouth but a trickle of blood, which ran down onto the dusky ground. That was such a horrible spot for me that I never did get over it. For years I thought my father's death was God's revenge against me for secretly listening to the men talking.

After Dad died, Uncle Matti ought to have taken a father's place for me, but instead the Colonel did. My uncle was too soft; my mother wanted a capable man to take Dad's place. She raised us daughters in fear. Before she took the strap to us she'd always say Spare the rod and spoil the child, and after a beating she'd ask, can you feel that in your brain? And you were supposed to say you could. And it was true. The memory stayed in my brain, and the pain in my body. She used to beat us till our backsides were bleeding, and it made us skittish girls. I was so jittery that I used to eat the beads off my necklace, chew on the hem of my skirt, gnaw at my mittens.

Repekka once said to me, Put your little toe on top of the block and I'll tickle it with the ax. I did what my big sister told me to, and the next thing I knew my toe flew off and hit the barn wall. Mom beat both of us for that, and only then bandaged my foot. I lost so much blood that I caught a fever and lay half dead for a week. Then when I got better my mother said Whatever doesn't kill you toughens you up. Mom was a thin, fragile little thing. I was taller and stronger than her by the time I was ten, but I still had to submit to her child-rearing. I'm training you girls to be decent and virtuous, she said, So the spirit of God shows in your character. She was a deeply religious person, and always angry somehow, always babbling such things, and that can affect your temperament when you're full grown. Her favorite saying was If it's not necessary then it's a sin. Which didn't apply to her, of course, just to anything us kids wanted to do that she thought wasn't proper. If we did it anyway we'd get a visit from Mr. Birchbranch. Once when I was just

four tender years old, I was lying on my Uncle Matti's cellar door enjoying the sunshine. I took my pants off and started fiddling with my cooch. My mother walked by and saw me. She yelled at me and said that it was an ugly thing I was doing and that if I ever did it again God would strike me blind. That gave me a scare, of course, and I started bawling. Then when I was a little older she gave me a lecture about how everything to do with the body was pollution of the spirit and retarded your intelligence and made you crazy. After that, whenever she wasn't looking I tried to break those rules as often as I could.

My father was given a nice burial and then I was left all alone. My world was barren and empty. In my head I thought, Am I going to die, or am I going to follow in my father's footsteps?

After the funeral there was a summer jamboree in Oulu. I told my mother that the Lapua blackshirts were calling to me with Dad's spirit, and she said, Don't mix your father up in this, you're not going. And I said, But Repekka gets to go. And she said, I'm not letting you crazy kids go and make a ruckus with the fascists, there's a limit to everything, including patriotism. Repekka stayed home, but I snuck out.

The train whisked into Oulu station late in the morning. The church bells were ringing, an orchestra was playing a march in front of the railway station, and a festive mood was in the air. The parade and speeches were scheduled to start at noon in front of city hall. I walked around looking at everything and joined a crowd of farmers headed toward the market square. Then I sat down on the steps of a building next to the square and took out a sandwich wrapped in wax paper that I'd brought with me. And who should sidle up to sit beside me but Ritva Rämewaari, my old schoolmate. She told me she was a Red, on her way to the Communist Youth camp. I said, Then we've got a lot in common, old schoolmates plus both of us filled with a feeling of power, a

longing for revolution, both burning with rebel fire. I said that I was glad that democracy was played out and that the New Europe was getting their hands on some leadership who knew what they were doing, and that she no doubt agreed. She nodded. I offered her some sandwich, we swapped news and gossip, and then went our separate ways. I meandered over to the main stage for the ceremonies. The sun shone cold in the East, and there were a lot of us. At exactly noon, two big black cars pulled up and stopped behind the stage. Out of one car, slowly and ceremoniously, emerged Vihtori Kosola, the king of the Lapua Movement. We all watched in silence as he stepped onto the stage. Already waiting there were Paavo Nurmi the runner and Tauno Palo the movie star and a poster of Mussolini. Vihtori Kosola had Paavo's steady gait, Tauno's eyes, and Mussolini's Italian fascist gestures, and his speech went through me like a freshly sharpened knife. I was thrilled by his words, like race, which I immediately associated with bloodlines and the honor of our forefathers; and heroism, which to me had a whiff of the legends of the saints and the simple beauty of a Spartan soldier; and asceticism, which was about how money and riches aren't what will bring you happiness, only a belief in God and our growing, blossoming fatherland can. Kosola said that the national feeling of the Finnish people had grown weaker than the Germans', who were intelligent and curious, and it was our job to catch up and then surpass them. When the speeches were over I was dizzy with the magic of fascism and it felt as if anything was possible. Like there was a direct connection between Kosola and me and the whole audience, like the line was completely open. I bought a black shirt from a souvenir stand and pulled it on over my Lotta uniform. After a short pause, the orchestra struck up a march, the parade fell in, and we set off at a clip toward Civil Defense headquarters or the fire department or someplace like that. I marched with hope and passion, the only young woman among all the men. We shouted that the Baltic Sea was going to become the German

Sea, and that we wanted a one-party system modeled on Germany because that was the best way to fight off Bolshevism, and that labor unions should be abolished and a Finnish Labor Front established where employers and employees strove together for the good of country, and some other things.

A wise man once said that you can only surrender once, but life has showed me that you can actually surrender again and again.

After the march the leader of our unit asked me to come with him to a nearby school because there was a picture of Marshall Mannerheim there and he said he bet I'd never seen it before. I trustingly followed him, and when we stepped inside the school building he shoved me into a sports supply closet and took me by force.

I was left lying there on the floor, unable to move. I was like ice from the waist down, and couldn't work my legs, or even my tongue. It felt like I'd had a big rusty nail pounded into my head. It wasn't until night fell that I could move my pinky toes enough to get the blood back into my legs and eventually stagger out of there.

I went home completely beaten, and my mother's anger relented the moment she saw the sorry state I was in, which made her jump. She asked if I'd caught the plague or consumption or what. I stumbled through the dusty geraniums and the brass knickknacks and the Chinese floor vases all pale, with my head pounding, and said I just had a a horrible flu and I was all in. We left it at that, but I knew I had to get away from home right away because I felt so horribly disgusted about the whole thing. I decided I would do like Germany did and plan a surprise: I would marry the first man I came across. I thought marriage was a way to move out, to make a clean sweep, a fresh start, like the Fuhrer did in the spring of 1930.

It was potato picking time and I went to the Laakkonens' to dig some spuds. I saw a fellow there who lived down by the lake someplace. He wasn't ugly, or pretty. He wasn't anything. I don't remember his name. I called him Handsome because he had such stubby legs. I married him and moved into his place, a big country house. For my inheritance I got my father's old gold-framed mirror that he bought in Ingria and my mother's old piano, which was so out of tune that you couldn't really play it, but I played it anyway. The marriage lasted from autumn to spring. There was nothing really wrong with the fellow except that he was tied to the land all the way up to his eyeballs. I thought that I was made for greater things, that the life of a housewife was too trivial for me. I wanted out of the marriage. It had accomplished what it was meant to do.

I got my divorce at the same time that Germany broke the Treaty of Versailles. I wanted my natural instincts back, and so did Germany. But getting a divorce was like pulling teeth, and there was nothing I could do but wait. My life dragged on, and while it did the Lapua Movement, and its offspring the Patriotic People's Movement, started to leave a bad taste in my mouth, like barn muck. I went to the village sports club and listened to the old guys reciting their lists of the people in the village who ought to be slaughtered. They harped on about cigar-smoking Jews looking for amnesty in Finland even though they had plenty of money for expensive tobacco. They weren't going to let them in. And the poor Jews were whining for amnesty for purely economic and humanitarian reasons. They weren't going to let them in, either. They weren't letting any Jews in. So they all ended up in the camps.

I got fed up with them after the incident with Gröönruus, the writer. He ran the village pharmacy out of his house, and wrote Agrarian League pieces for *Home and Hearth* magazine. I used to go at least once a week to visit and chat with him. We'd talk about books, or life.

Gröönruus said that there was only one serious philosophical problem in the world: suicide. I've thought about that ever since.

One morning Handsome went out to the barn and he heard a weird wheezing, squeaking sound from the muck room. He thought a pig had wandered in there, and he went to open the door and let the thing out, and when he pulled the door open he saw a burlap sack in there and noticed that there was something moving inside it, and that was where the noise was coming from. So he opened up the sack, and there was Gröönruus. Handsome came to the house to get help, and of course I came running, and brought the camphor drops with me. It was a bloody sight. I said, Is he alive? He was, but he was crippled up for the rest of his life. The Patriotic People had smashed his writing hand to bits with the blunt side of an axe. I was so fit to be tied about it that I caught a train to Lapua to see Vihtori Kosola. He wasn't home, he'd gone to the party offices. So I went to headquarters and there was Kosola, planning Finland's final whitewash. I thought, Vihtori Kosola's a wise, sharp-witted man; he'll put a stop to this nonsense. First I told him whose daughter I was, because he and my father had known each other back in the War of Liberation days, and then I told him what had happened to my friend Gröönruus. I swore that he wasn't a Communist, just a harmless Agrarianist writer. Kosola listened carefully and then he said, You're too tender-hearted. You ought to toughen up, because it's ink-blackened niggers like him who are paving the way to Communism. I left there in shock and decided that I wasn't ever going to participate in Finnish fascist activities again. I didn't want to be any part of their stupid marches crowing about intelligence and wisdom.

Kosola could keep his clumsy Mussolini fascism. I would find a better, purer way. I remembered what my father said: that everything good comes from Germany—religion from Martin Luther, coffee from Paulig, and (I added) nationalism from the Fuhrer. So I gave up on

Finland's cheap, made from scratch fascists and turned my gaze to Germany. Repekka came to the farm to see me in the early winter and we barricaded ourselves up in the south end of the attic. We read aloud to each other from *Mein Kampf* and were as excited as two crazy kids.

Every now and then Handsome would come to the door and knock quietly and ask if he could come in and we would shout, Go away! We're talking about women's troubles. Repekka read to me about how the Fuhrer had a built a fine and functional network of concentration camps where they put the filthy people. Back then the camps were a fact of life all around the world. In both the East and the West people thought they were an efficient, practical way of organizing things. I thought that progress was moving forward and that the Nazis wouldn't build the kind of barbaric, bloody places that we'd had during the War of Liberation—and for a long while after. Germany was a great civilization, surely they understood good food and hygiene as well as they did everything else.

I saw my first real German at the beginning of June in 1918, as the War of Liberation was ending, when German troops came to Oulu from Helsinki to size up what they thought of as their territory. Finland was practically a German colony at the time, and that summer my family were in Oulu because of my father's work. Me and Repekka stood stock still next to my father at the railroad station, eagerly waiting for the arrival of these guests. I remember my Dad's felt hat, the smell of summer berber, and Repekka's white apron, which I coveted. A band of German soldiers gave a drumroll and marching music echoed across the summer day and a lovely hubbub and a smell of horse manure spread over the rail yard. The train was brimming over with hundreds of Germans: officers, drabs, bicycle corps and infantry who smelled so sweet I wanted to lick them. Some of them had bags of wheat flour on their backs, some had sacks of rice. One of the soldiers came right up to me and picked me up in his arms and kissed me on the cheek and

whispered German secrets in my little ear. Then he stroked my curly black hair and lifted me onto his shoulders. I fell instantly in love with that big-eyed German boy, because my father, of course, never knew how to be tender with us kids, he always just moped behind a newspaper. It was on that same train that the Colonel arrived, too, coming from his training on the southern front. It was his job to whip the wild, free north into shape and get it organized. Repekka said that the Colonel and Tschirschky, who was the acting commander of the Germans, walked as far as the market square with us and chatted with Dad before they joined the German parade. I didn't remember that. Dad and the Colonel had a lot in common: football in their youth, the Civil Guard movement, the Jaeger movement, Greater Finland, and after the War of Liberation monarchism. Dad was really disappointed for a while when Finland didn't become a kingdom. He would have liked to have Prince Frederick Charles of Hesse as the king of Finland. He thought it would have solidified our relationship with Germany. But the Finnish people refused to go for it. The Democrats schemed to give us democracy on the excuse that the German front was crumbling in the west, and Germany had lost the First World War. We never wanted to be on the side of the losers, although we always seem to end up there.

Repekka said that after the welcome march Corporal Herman Zulmann set up a canteen along one side of Oulu market, between Sutinen's chicken coop stand and Viikman the bespoke tailor. Herman had all kinds of treats there that we didn't have in Lapland. I went running after Repekka to that canteen several times a day.

It was like we were in paradise. Repekka said that the whole town of Oulu burst into blossom. She danced with the Volunteer Fire Department every night and even I got to stand in the doorway sometimes and watch. I remember how the helmets hanging on the coatrack clattered sometimes to the beat of a polka.

And then the Germans left, continuing east through Kajaani to Viipuri. I remembered it for a long time as a terrible tragedy. The sky looking grimly down at us, buckets of rain, bells tolling, and the soldiers loading everything they'd brought into black boxcars. I stood on the station platform behind my mother and father and the Oulu elite, wet through, as the band struck up the *Pori March*, immediately followed by *Deutschland Über Alles*. Repekka ran along beside the train shouting goodbyes to the beloved German soldiers and officers, my mother cried, the day turned dark, and silence fell over us. Our few days in paradise turned back into ordinary life, like the bottom of an empty sack a person tries in vain to scrape a little joy out of.

Holed up there in the attic, me and Repekka sized up what the writings of the sharpest thinkers in the Patriotic People's Movement like Pastor Simojoki and Martti Pihkala had in common with Germany's National Socialists. We found all sorts of things. We hated democracy, liberalism, Russians and Communists, worried over the fate of our beloved fatherland on the brink of crisis, and dreamed of an ideal nationalist Finland, with just one party, one leader, and one people. A country with no conflicts, crises, or problems, full of discipline, order, obedience, and loyalty. A country with a strong leader doing God's work, a strong nation where the individual was a cog in a well-run machine, where the mark of a citizen was a powerful will to be a model of sacrifice and renunciation, where militarism, industry, and agriculture blossomed, where the pure Aryan (in other words Germanic) race controlled the lower races, where life was governed by the strongest, in the social Darwinist intellectual tradition, and by biologically-based racial science, mass-psychology, a separation of spiritual and mental ideology, mythical dualistic concepts of history and reality, a rejection of Christianity and other religious philosophies, a disdain for feminism, and a cult of hero worship.

The sum of it was that Nazism was our new home. There was only one leader for us, and it was Hitler.

Repekka went back to Helsinki and sent me books she got from Talvio Maila. She'd met Maila in Helsinki and they'd become friends. As a Germanophile, he had many direct contacts in Germany, and had been a supporter of the Fuhrer since 1922. I started subscribing to *Der Angri*, which was edited by Goebbels. I can honestly say that I understood the ideas and philosophy of the Third Reich from top to bottom. The Fuhrer had decided that Germany would produce everything it needed, that self-sufficiency was key. And Germany had everything it needed except for nickel and ballbearings and money. Which it needed for the coming war. We, on the other hand, had Europe's largest nickel mine, in Petsamo. The Fuhrer had banned animal experiments, talked about vegetarianism and how a healthy mind in a healthy body radiated with a flow of balanced energies. All of this excited me. I had no sympathy for Jews and other unclean people. Getting rid of them was the price to be paid for a cleaner, prettier, better world. I've been a hypocrite ever since I was a kid—and a godmother, too.

I could see that Germany was going to lead first Europe and then the whole world to a new level of organization, and I wanted to be part of building it. Germany had put the Weimar Republic and its unemployment behind it and was taking off toward a new, better, more simple and rational world.

My divorce papers finally arrived in the mail and I told Handsome, very sweetly, *auf veetersane*, applied for a teaching job in Hirttojärvi, and was hired. The teacher of the upper class was a pastor and a Jaeger and he always wore his uniform, with his medals on his chest, when he was teaching. He preached against Russia and the devil in the same breath. I was the popular teacher and I treated the kids with respect. I taught them that animals and nature should

be treated with respect, and they understood that. They possessed an inner sense of the equality of nature and people that I, as an adult, no longer understood. I told them that if humanity were to disappear from the earth, in about five hundred years everything would be covered in wild forest. The people in the village thought it strange, of course, when I sometimes taught them math or history sitting on the riverbank or the lake shore, but I preferred the fresh air to being indoors, so we were nearly always outside. The kids didn't mind. In fact they were keen to get to school.

My father was my role model for how to be a teacher. Before he died us kids were his pupils. He was a strict teacher. I once gave a wrong answer during an arithmetic lesson and he swacked me in the ear with his pointer so hard that the blood flew. As a father he was relaxed and gentle, unlike my mother, who beat the heck out of us just for fun. My father had been in the same course as the Colonel for Jaeger training. My mother had the idea that there was a bond between them. They were sort of cut from the same cloth, although my father didn't like the Colonel. When the Colonel had a timbered fortress built across from our place, Dad forbade us kids from going over there. I was four then, and naturally I went over as soon as he wasn't looking. When I got a little older I started to be afraid of the Colonel. Was it because he always tickled me after he gave me candy?

He used to come over and sit in our easy chair and dole out his truths: Ståhlberg had no understanding of the Finnish people or Finnish values, he was a shitty president and a Russian turncoat; What the country needed was order and discipline; Young people were rotten through and lazy and had lost their morals spinning on the dance floor and nothing was sacred to them anymore and that was why they had become tools of the devil and had rejected virtue and surrendered to temptation. And we ought to stop fussing over the Reds. If my Uncle Matti

happened to be over, too, and disagreed, the Colonel would go crazy, roaring and threatening and eventually pulling his pistol out of his pocket. We kids understood that the Colonel was always right and knew everything there was to know. He would look at me with a crooked grin, but he would stare at Repekka.

When I had my thirteenth birthday party, a couple of years after my father died, my godparents, my Uncle Matti, and the Colonel came over. He had his hair slicked back and parted down the middle, short sideburns, long eyelashes, a sparkle in his eye and a hearty smile. He had a colorful row of ribbons over the left breast pocket of his military tunic, like other men of his rank, and he wore the top button open, with loose pants tucked into *lapikas* boots. He was different than the other officers, and even though he was old, he looked handsome. He brought me a book of Koskenniemi poems as a present. I loved that book. I decided that I wouldn't be afraid of the Colonel anymore. At my mother's request, I read a poem I'd written myself while we sat around the table, and I noticed the Colonel looking at me in a very different way than before. After that birthday party he always called me "the little poetess". That look became very familiar to me over the following years. It was both horribly repulsive to me and at the same time caused a sort of a little flutter that he was looking at me now, not at Repekka. My Uncle Matti saw the Colonel looking at me, and when he and I were alone he gave me a fatherly talk and said to watch out for that Colonel whatever I did because he was a mean, ruthless caricature of a human being who had sold his soul to the devil. I thought it was just the envious class resentment of a Communist.

I was nine when the Colonel and Katri got married. The whole family went with my father to the wedding. Eight daughters and one son. Dad picked his nose though the whole ceremony.

After the wedding I had two summers left to spend with Dad before he died. Then the Colonel took the reins at our house, put Mom on a leash, sent us kids to the middle school and then to the teacher's college in Jyväskylä, except for Repekka. Repekka was so afraid of the Colonel that she ran away to Helsinki, got into the National Theater school, and became an actress.

The Colonel and Katri settled into the Border Guards' commander's quarters. The big timbered fortress across from our house. Hulda Häkki, the old maid who had taken care of the house since the Colonel arrived in Lapland, was already living there. The Colonel would come over to our house and us kids tiptoed around when he was there. Katri loved children and gave us wheat rolls and sometimes peppermint sticks that she bought in Sweden. We liked Katri. She had big, sad eyes and cried easily.

During the Lapland War in Tammisaari, the Colonel told me that he married Katri because he needed the company, and the free pussy, although hers was so sour that no seed would sprout in it.

Sergeant Alatalo, the Colonel's driver, talked to me about the Colonel and Katri quite a lot. He said he had seen Katri's face covered with bruises many times, and that her arms were so blue from the Colonel's grip that she practically never wore short sleeves. Katri often cried, and said it was because she had no child to hold in her arms. One summer Nyström in Petsamo gave the Colonel two bear cubs as a present. They were orphans and Nyström thought they could be twin pets for the Colonel's missus. Katri was quite taken with the roly-poly things and really threw herself into taking care of them. Sometime that fall she was out on some errand, and when she came back, she didn't see the bear cubs anywhere. Or the Colonel. She got very worried and looked for those cubs for a long while before she found them, in the woods behind the house.

They were both hanging from a pine bough by ropes around their necks. She had a psychological breakdown, and later got cancer inside her. The Colonel tried to comfort her, said he had to kill them before they killed him and her both. But it didn't help, and their marriage went downhill after that.

Mom had peddled the Colonel to Repekka for years after Dad died. She used to say, The Colonel's a good man, a respected soldier who can support a family. She didn't look askance even when there was talk in the village about how the Colonel's whores had a weird way of disappearing and his wives and lovers turned from blooming, strapping women into tottering, ghostly things. She wasn't even deterred by the fact that Repekka hated the Colonel. Or that he was married to Katri. Five years after they moved into the Border Guard house, Katri quietly took sick. Every day my mother would say, She could die any time now. But Katri didn't die. Finally the Colonel sent her to Helsinki where she lay in a hospital for six months before death took her tortured body away. The Colonel took a trip to Helsinki to look at her, of course, but he never said anything about it. She was buried quietly at Hietaniemi cemetery in Helsinki.

This is my past. This is how I remember it.

I'd been teaching school in Hirttojärvi for three weeks when somebody knocked at the window of my little teacher's lean-to in the middle of the night. It was the Colonel. I let him in. He smelled like cigars and shaving cream, just like my dad used to smell. We went straight to bed and lay in the moonlight fucking the seams off the Colonel's uniform until the early hours of the morning. When he pushed himself into me, gravity ceased. I floated in the air like a bird and forgot myself.

Morning peeped through the window, gray and cold. The Colonel squirmed and wheezed and breathed heavy all morning. He fucked me before I could even get my eyes open. I was sure I'd get pregnant, but I didn't. He said no woman's pussy ever smelled as good as mine and he proposed to me in German as he wiped his mouth on the flowered curtains.

We got secretly engaged in that little lean-to. First he lit a smoke, then he slipped a sapphire ring he'd got in Germany onto the middle finger of my right hand. It was engraved "Ruth 6-6-06". I was in heaven, although we were surrounded by reindeer carcasses. The summer heat had swollen their stomachs and they were quite black with flies. They stunk, of course, but they didn't scare me. They were dying of reindeer disease spread from Russian herds across the border.

We spent three nights and three mornings in the lean-to. We slept in each other's arms under the open sky, marveled at the northern lights, looked for constellations and found the Bear, the Pleiades, Cassiopeia, and the Twin Boats. I could feel the fresh winds around me. I watched

the Colonel wake up so sweetly, first yawning into his hand, his old man's body heavy and stiff, then grabbing me and sweeping me onto his big cock, already about to come. I admired his soldierly way of making love, his readiness to die at any moment. After one bout he took out his pistol, pressed it against my cheek, and said, Take this in your pretty hand and feel its weight. Then he told me to kiss it, and I kissed it, looking him in the eye all the while, and I started to laugh. He said, What are you giggling about? and I said, You're so different from other people. He took two hand grenades out of his pack and laid one on my panties, right over my cooch, and the other he put against my mouth and told me to grab the pin with my teeth.

The Colonel said we shouldn't tell anyone about our secret engagement—except for my mother because a widow needed comfort in her dreary days. I knew better, but I didn't argue. The Colonel himself drove us down to my mother's place in Rovaniemi. She wasn't the only one home; my Uncle Matti was there having coffee. She turned white when she saw us walk in the door hand in hand. The Colonel nodded toward the back room and he and Mom went in there together. I don't know what kind of negotiations went on, but when they came back out my mother's cheeks were a healthy red and she warmly congratulated me. She said, All is well and it won't leave the walls of this house until Katri is dead and mouldering in her grave.

Uncle Matti looked at us with a bad expression on his face, but he didn't say anything. Then when the Colonel had left to go across the road to get some work done, Uncle Matti's voice shook and he said, Girl, don't you remember when I told you, like a father, that the Colonel is a tyrant? And I said, There's no stopping love. And he said, There is if you want to. The edge of his mouth was twitching. And think about how much older he is, Matti said. And I said, Old friends are best.

The Colonel was just a few years younger than my father, but I didn't think about that. Age is just a number, the Colonel liked to say. And besides, Dad was twenty-eight years older than Mom, the same age difference as the Colonel and me. Uncle Matti tried telling me that he knew from his civil war days that being in the army in a war made men angry. You're not allowed to be afraid, and if you are, they'll execute you. He said a professional soldier has violence and aggression in his blood; he thinks it's a normal, perfectly ordinary way to be. He said, In addition to all that the Colonel knows that there is no God and no damnation, so he's prone to seek pleasure and given to the blackest of vices.

In spite of my youth, I had sensed, and had seen, an ecstasy of anger in the tight muscles of the Colonel's face, in his talk, the clomp of his boots, the way he moved when he sat down or stood up, how he paced back and forth and twitched and jumped, how restless he was sometimes. He didn't even try to hide what he was. It was all there to see, and that very fact drew me to him, because he was so odd and strange. I thought that his anger would stay on the battlefield, that it wouldn't come home with him. And would never come between us. That I could heal him with love.

Our engagement was a long one, and our happiness so deep that even Uncle Matti started to believe that the Colonel had changed. We often read aloud to each other in the evening from Axel Londen's *A Hunting Trip in the North*, A. E. Järvinen's *Wilderness Light* and *In the Great Forest*, and other books like that. Once I told the Colonel, during one of the good moments we had in the fifties, that I'd like to read a wilderness book by a woman. And he said, There aren't any—you should write one yourself. And I got excited and picked up a notebook and started scribbling. It was easy. The words gushed out of me onto the paper. I didn't have to think at all, I just let it come. It was like a dam broke and all the words that had been waiting behind it were

released. Long sentences that meandered up and down. I had been keeping a diary since I was seven and had hit upon the fact that I could put things down in it as they really were—or just the opposite. I could make up all sorts of things and describe people and places in a way they never were. Writing a book was as smooth as drinking water from a glass when you've got an awful thirst. I scratched away with the Colonel's purple pen, and in two days and two nights I'd written a whole story. When it was done I slept for thirty-three hours straight. Didn't even get up to pee. While I was asleep the Colonel read it and he praised it backwards and forwards. He sent the notebook to a publishing house and a secretary there typed it up nicely, corrected the mistakes, and the book was published. It was praised in all the papers. Then when I started writing another book, I noticed that the Colonel wasn't the slightest bit glad about it. He grumbled and didn't have a single pretty word to say. I asked him why he wasn't encouraging me anymore. He said that his little poetess would die if she took up writing in earnest. That a girl can certainly write one book, but not two. That it wasn't good that the writing took my thoughts away from him. And I said, That's true. When a person is writing she's someplace else, in her own world, and everyone else is sort of pushed to the background. But I didn't want to give it up because it seemed like the more the Colonel kept me down, the less there was of me. In the end the only time I existed was when I was writing. I started putting words to paper in secret, when he wasn't there to see me. If he was home I would take my notebook into the sauna dressing room. I wrote all my books by hand, right up until I moved in with Tuomas years later. By that time I could buy a typewriter. That machine was my best friend. Tuomas liked the click of the keys. He said that as soon as he heard the clatter of my keys in the evening he'd fall right to sleep.

The teaching job at Hirttojärvi ended and the Colonel established a border guard post at Inari and hired me on, with taxpayer money, as his private secretary. I was the only employee of

the post, and his bride-to-be, which meant that he could pop in from Rovaniemi whenever he wanted. I'd wait and pine for him till I couldn't eat. Every day without him felt like it lasted a year. And when we were together the hours quickly slipped away until it was time to part. When that time came, we always spoke German to each other. It was our language of love. And we would both cry like crazy kids. The sparkle of our love almost outdid the northern lights in the Lapland sky. We made love under a rainbow that ended on the purple horizon, in the rough winds at the top of Saariselkä, in the arms of an ice-clear Lake Inari night. We didn't stop when morning came, even if the Colonel was supposed to be at the garrison boot camp building boys into men.

I found myself in competition with the Colonel right in the first stretch of our secret engagement. We were on a fishing trip. We had started out in the middle of Lake Inari and then headed into a marshy cove. We were both using the exact same tackle. The Colonel said, Let's see how many fish each of us can catch in twelve hours' time. I liked the idea, because I was an experienced fisherman. In the first five hours I hauled in fifteen handsome perch and the Colonel caught ten. At the end of twelve hours the count was fifty-two perch for me and forty-nine for him. He got so mad that he threw me out of the boat into the ice-cold water and I had to swim to shore. Naturally it was a bit alarming. He acted like nothing had happened and helped me out of my wet clothes. He just said, You win, and I walked back to the fishing cabin stark naked. He thought it was funny. As for me, I was so in love with the old codger that I forgave him immediately. I was still wet behind the ears, I didn't understand that the Colonel always had to win, especially when it came to fishing.

Before the war, we used to go on treks together. He had learned back in boot camp how liberating the outdoors could be.

When it came time for one of these trips I was at the Kaurilovi farm helping with the rye harvest. The Colonel's car pulled up at the end of the field and Jaska Kaurilovi gave me a crooked grin and said, There he is, the biggest prick in Lapland, come to pick you up. I ran over and the Colonel swept me up in his arms and spun me around and said, Let's go to the woods. I said, I'm in my work clothes, and he said, It doesn't matter, you'd be pretty even if you had your head shaved and your ass tarred. Alatalo, his chauffeur, drove us to Ivaljoki, where we ran into Major Niilo Paassonen, a military doctor, who was there measuring the skulls of the Inari Lapps. A canoe for two was waiting for us. We packed up the food the Colonel had brought, waved at Alatalo, and set out.

It was a wonderful, cool Lapland night and we daredeviled it up and down the rapids. I screamed at the rough spots, but I trusted the Colonel completely, knowing he knew how to avoid the dangerous spots. We sped along like that for hours. I watched a hawk diving for fish. It got its claws on a whopper and the fish pulled it into the river and the hawk drowned. Around noon we found a nice little stretch of shore downstream. We steered the canoe there and got out. The damp leaves along the water were absolutely silent under our feet. We set up camp, built a lean-to, and made a little fire. The Colonel caught a monster trout along the shore with his bear hands and we roasted it over the flames. A long time after midnight, as darkness slowly spread over the sky, we went to lie down. In the very early morning I woke up and saw six-pointed snowflakes drifting down onto the ashes of the campfire. The Colonel pressed me hard against him and whispered that he was afraid. I asked what he was afraid of. The blasted sky, he said. Are you nutty? I said. He said It's been staring at us so angrily for hours. I calmed him down and

gave him a sip of liquor and pretty soon he was gently stroking my cheek. I realized then how timid and paranoid he was inside. It seemed like a good thing to me. My father had been brave and timid in the same way.

Our trip lasted ten days. We paddled and ported the canoe across untouched tundra all the way to Ivalojoiki. From there we could see Saariselkä, Kaunispää, and the southern slopes of Korvatunturi in the distance across still, gray hills and blue wilderness lakes with red boulders and yellow sands on their peaceful shores. Sometimes we were pummeled by hailstorms or drenched with sleet, but we just laughed. We lived on love, completely free from the shackles of the world. That whole trip the Colonel was like carrot soup, so soft and sweet that I was head over heels for him all over again. We skimmed along in our canoe over Näätamäjoki past the paradisiacal Sevetijärvi, where the Kolt Lapps were learning to give up herding. They knew all the good and evil of the world because they'd been cast about hither and yon. There was such a thick bed of lichen in those woods that the Kolts' reindeer were twice the size of the Inari Lapps'. The Colonel sometimes went for a swim, and caught a fish every time he did. Sometimes a whiskery pike, sometimes a fat perch.

We ended the trek at the Colonel's fishing cabin at Luusuanniemi. It was a mild summer evening, and I said I thought I'd take a swim. He said, Go ahead. When I got back he was nowhere to be found. I called. Nothing. I started to get nervous, wondering if he'd gone out in the woods to look for kindling and had a heart attack. I shot around the cabin calling for him. Finally I saw him, lying curled up on a rock at the tip of the point. I ran over to him, afraid he was dead, but when I took hold of his shoulder I could tell he was alive. He curled up tighter, his face twisted like he was going to cry, although there weren't any tears in his eyes. I asked him what

was wrong. After a while he managed to say that he was afraid of a war. I held his head in my lap and stroked his hair. When he had calmed down we walked back to the cabin holding hands.

He yearned for a new war, but at the same time he was afraid that if the Russians won and occupied little Finland, his head would be the first to roll. That was why he had those attacks, why he destroyed his papers, train tickets, old passports and photographs of himself with Commander Göring posing at a forestry conference or holding a deer carcass somewhere in Germany. Then the feeling would quickly fade and he would once again believe in the all-powerful Third Reich and Hitler's thousand-year reign. He would get all excited and go on and on about how Finland and the Third Reich had a common enemy: the cigar-smokers, by which he meant rich Jews, and the cigarless ones, by which he meant poor Jews, and Ruskies, and other trash. He believed that Stalin didn't understand anything about warfare, that the Russians were no match for us, they were subhumans who didn't even have proper guns to shoot with. But once the war began, he started to respect Stalin and called him a flexible dictator. At the end of the war he said that the Führer was a genius, but he didn't have any perspective so he didn't know when to quit, while Stalin was able to lead in whatever way was appropriate to the situation, to change direction, to plan his attack.

Commander Wallenius, who the Colonel always called the Idiot General, asked us over for lunch on the eve of the Winter War. He was, in principle, the Colonel's comrade from the days of the Ståhlberg transport, but he was also his greatest rival at every stage of the war. I'd been to Wallenius's house many times as the Colonel's girlfriend. It was always the same. First we ate and drank, then the Colonel and the Idiot General started a fight. Then we drank some more, and the combatants started to droop, until they eventually passed out. This time, during the first course of the meal, the Colonel pointed at me and said, This girl has the best pussy in

Finland, and she knows what to do with it, because I taught her myself. Everybody at the table went quiet and I felt proud, although I was ashamed, too. When we got to the main course the Colonel started talking about the coming war. Said that the Russians wouldn't attack, that they didn't have the proper equipment or weapons, or even winter clothes. That we would take them by surprise and beat them in a couple of weeks. Wallenius quickly made it clear that he had a different point of view. He said he'd seen with his own eyes how well the Red Army was equipped, that there were hundreds of tanks and attack vehicles and bombers and other primo equipment on the border, and all their soldiers walking around with such grins on their faces that it made your hair stand on end and we ought to start thinking about whether we wanted to take it in the nose. He was trying to be a friend and throw a stick of reality in the spokes of the Colonel's battle lust, but the Colonel just smiled and said the Reds were about to be salted like sardines, and nothing could stop the war, and we were going to show Stalin who was sitting pretty. Wallenius was no man of peace, but he said that there were about two hundred forty million Ruskies and less than four million of us. Coffee and sweet rolls were brought to the table. Nobody said anything. The Colonel was restless, he was so ready for the war to start. He slurped down his coffee in one gulp and walked out and slammed the door. I followed him. I said, Let's go to the woods. He said, If you want to. I thought the stark, simple peace of the pine bogs would calm him. But they didn't. We walked to the village, holding hands. We stood there quiet and wistful looking at the beautiful forest where the Germans would later build an airfield for Rommel, and Rommel would never land. We got to the flat clearing at the edge of the village and walked over the damp, rotting terrace of land to where the open marsh was spread out in front of us. In that light I felt naturally strong and red-blooded and saw the sparkle of a thousand and one eyes around me. A sight that should have been overflowing with beautiful, romantic

ecstasy seemed to him like a vast forest of looming war, a fertile field, burned and ready to plant, sod for harvest, a battlefield. He didn't get any peace from the woods like I did, and we quickly went home again.

After Katri died we had our first Christmas together. The Colonel gave me Katri's lovely old diamond ring. So we were officially engaged, and I was so happy. I was going to be a Colonel's wife and all. I thought that if I got pregnant I could have my wedding that much quicker. But I didn't get pregnant, though the Colonel petted me morning and night and brought me perfume and carnations and chocolate by the sackful and licked my toes and sucked on the tips of my fingers.

When the Colonel teased me and hurt my feelings I took it hard and felt like the rottenest person in Lapland and the whole world seemed like a dark, gloomy place. And sometimes when I was laughing and happy he would do his best to wipe the smile off my face and put me back in the dumps. And then he'd start comforting me and make me laugh again.

I was in paradise. There was hardly a woman on earth as sublimely happy as me. Or in heaven, for all we knew. I waited for the Colonel's proposal, but it never came. I asked once, in a vulnerable moment, when we were going to be married.

And he said tenderly, We're in no rush.

The Colonel sealed my fate when I was four years old. And this is where it led me.