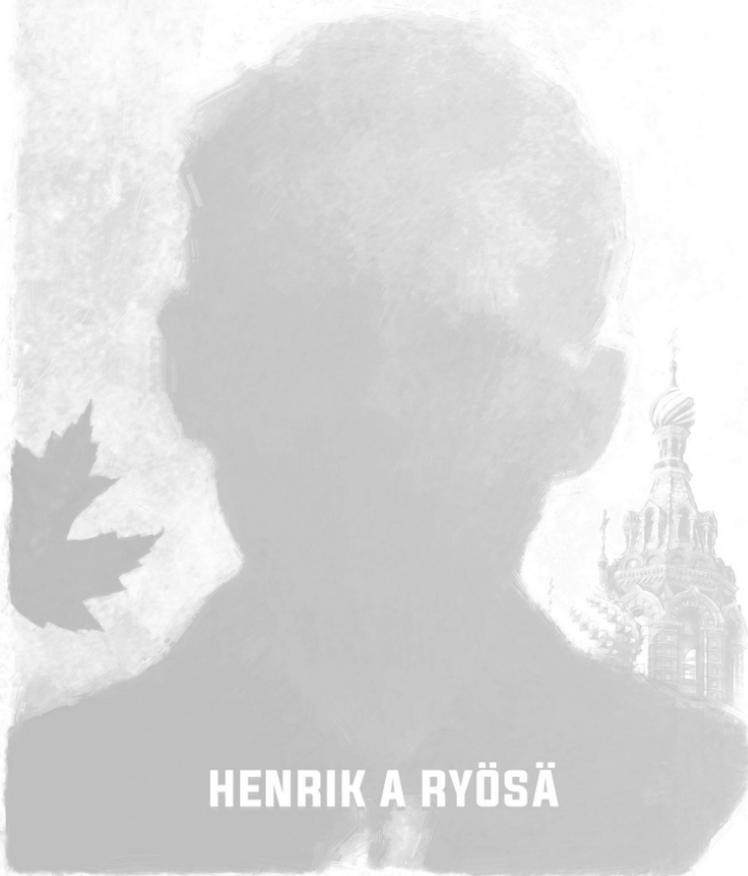


INGER



FATHER & SON



HENRIK A RYÖSÄ

Inger: Father & Son

First Edition

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Inger on the Web:

<http://ryosa.com/ingerbook>

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<http://youtube.com/ryosa>

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Contents

Introduction.....	7
Detective Work.....	13
Borderland Boy.....	37
F-100.....	57
Escapes.....	79
Trust.....	95
Nomadic.....	125
War Games.....	151
Mothers & Daughters.....	179
Perfect Getaway.....	197
Survival Run.....	209
Full Circle.....	233
Running on Empty.....	275
Dreams and Visions.....	295
Supplemental Case Report.....	317

Introduction

A viking proverb says “One man's tale is but half a tale.” This quote is found in the Icelandic saga of Grettir the Strong, which details not only the life and many battles of this outlaw warrior, but those of his father, grandfather, and even great grandfather.

Why are such stories valued, and why do they endure?

The particular “tale” I set it upon myself to write may be only superficially comparable to such a legend, but the idea is perhaps not so dissimilar; My own story by itself is a bit insignificant, I think, but when weaved with those of my ancestors, it becomes something rather worth telling.

As a young man I knew very little either about myself or where I came from. Nor did I know my father, despite living with the man for 25 years, and only ever briefly met a small handful of relatives on my paternal side.

Day to day I only saw that there was something haunting him, which seemed to guide his rough brand of parenting. The reasons behind the lessons were often less than clear, because he wouldn't talk about his past.

Only later did I really begin to feel that somehow I was missing something important, and perhaps as a result, inadvertently repeating his mistakes. It brought up many questions for me, about how much of what we do in life is “in our blood”, as it were.

After his passing, *Inger* gradually materialized as the embodiment of a quest to reveal what he'd been so afraid to talk about, and I felt I had the right to know.

When the quest became serious, I realized that it was much bigger than just me and my father, and would also become an account of an entire lost nation and culture.

It didn't seem possible that knowledge this relevant to our family could have eluded me for my whole life up to that point, but somehow it had. When I thought about the reasons for this, it then became entirely plausible that there were many others in the same boat as I - in other words, those who had no idea of the true complexity of the history of their people.

You see, up until that point, I just thought of myself as a plain old Finnish boy - not that there's anything wrong with that - and in a sense, that is what I am, but when I learned that this place called Ingria had existed and nearly became a nation just like Finland, and *that* was where my father came from, it put a bit of a different spin on things, you might say.

Something worth mentioning about the sagas of old, is that they are probably rooted in reality and actual events, but interpreted artistically through the eyes of the author. Such is bound to happen in particular with the passage of time.

Here too, I've had to interpret a certain amount, but have done so as faithfully as possible to maintain historicity, consulting countless records and accounts in the process.

A note on presentation: My choice is to present this book in the first person for the most part, for multiple reasons. One is to give me insight into how my father viewed the world. This helps me work through some difficult memories and experiences in a new light.

Another reason is that well after the fact of starting the project, I came to be in the possession of some more detailed writings of his regarding these periods of his life. Upon reading them I was greatly surprised and enriched.

In retrospect, it would have been a fool's errand to even attempt the book without them, even though I already had a small amount.

And so, it feels proper to preserve the tone with which he presented some rather difficult stories of war, death and hardship in early 20th century Russia. But to be honest, it just made sense from the start and thus was conceptualized this way very early on.

These accounts are combined with the perspective of another close relative, Sylvi, whose story overlaps my dad's and fills in a great amount of missing detail.

The information found in her memoir is invaluable to establishing the authentic tone of the Ingrian Finnish community as it was in those times. This is also possibly the first time that some details of what occurred there and in the labor camps of Central Asia has been revealed in the English language.

By the way, it will be helpful if you understand going in that terms such as “Ingrian”, “Inkeri”, “Ingermanland”, “Ingrian Finn” etc are all referencing basically the same people and territory. I chose to use “Inger” in the title as an Anglicized hybridization of all these names for simplicity. The differences in use will become self-evident as you read, so don't worry.

The sections dealing with my childhood and youth in the 1980s, 90s, and into the 21st century may be quite a contrast in many ways, as it not only takes place in North

America, but the world by then had also become a much different place in general, with different concerns.

I think that it shall nonetheless reveal something useful. Whether that is about the after-effects of these earlier world conflicts and practices, most notably embodied in the difficult relationship of a father and son, or by the mere nature of being a snapshot of our comparisons and contrasts.

It begins from my perspective, to give you some idea of the mystery I faced. Each chapter regarding my life is immediately followed by a similar phase of my father's.

Two chapters - *Mothers and Daughters*, and *Dreams & Visions* - are very special. They are a bit different from the rest but very important, too. Finally, the afterword reveals some key discoveries, so don't miss it!

This is at its core, the story of a family's journey, but it is also very multicultural, taking you through various periods and events the world over, from Russia to Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Canada, and even the Middle East.

It is my hope that you, the reader, find much to relate to regardless of personal background, and discover your own treasures to take from this “saga” of Ingrian Finns.

Henrik Ryösä
May 17, 2016

1

Detective Work

Exploring mysteries and getting to their root has always been a great source of satisfaction for me, as far back as I can remember. Perhaps it's because my own life never made much sense.

If I had to sum up that childhood self in metaphor, a good one might be “like a fish out of water”; I constantly struggled to cut through the dissonance in my immediate world. In those days, many different, often conflicting signals flew at me from all directions - from friends, adults, school, media... but most of all, from this enigma of a man who I lived with and called “daddy”.

To make sense of it all, I began to look at my entire world through a magnifying glass figuratively speaking, like my favorites, *The Hardy Boys*. One early summer morning circa 1987, my friend Scott and I met on the

street outside his house like we did most days, and made our way through the nearby auto yard to a hidden path that led to Wolf Creek. “Wolf Creek” was actually more of a pond or small lake.

Dew drops still hung from the tall blades of grass. It had just rained the previous night, and a sweet earthy scent lingered in the ionized air.

“So whaddaya wanna do today?” I asked as usual.

“Dunno,” Scott muttered, kicking a rock as we made our way along the muddy trail. He seemed distracted.

“You come up with something.”

“Ahh.. um... well, we could do some sleuthing.”

“Huh? What the hell are you talking about?”

As I looked up, his face just then told me everything I needed to know about my nerd-factor and social skills or lack thereof.

My parents were both Finnish immigrants, having arrived in Canada 15 years apart under different circumstances, both ending up in the Northern Ontario boom town of Sudbury. They married in 1968, had two daughters, and after a further 8 years came a straggler who they named Henry.

By now, as I approached age ten, the local library could no longer sustain the growth of this detective obsession. My sister Eva, the younger of the two and

always one to offer creative solutions, decided that she would help me to write my own stories cleverly titled *The Henry Boys*. They were typed out and bound in folders, and she would then create cover art depicting myself, Scott, and his older brother Calvin hot on the trail of some mystery.

AKA: Sleuthing.

I suppose it got to my head.

For those who don't know very much about Sudbury, I'll start by telling you a little about it, 'cause it's quite unique, as anyone who's ever been there knows. I think it will contribute a lot to the understanding of the reader.

The place is quite the hole. No, it really is. Long ago, a meteor hit the earth and left a nice big crater smack dab in the middle of the area that would later come to be known as Ontario. Some might believe that the meteor is responsible for Sudbury's eventual reputation as "The Rock". On the contrary, plenty of forests and lakes sprang up, and for thousands of years, people such as the Algonquins lived there in harmony with nature.

By the time of my childhood, the Algonquin name remained mostly in memory; I attended Algonquin Road Public School, "Home of The Braves".

In the late 1800's, the location where Sudbury now stands had turned out to be an opportune spot through which to run the Canadian Pacific Railway, and during its construction, the potential in the area for its unique mineral resources became apparent. As word spread and the town began to grow, people arrived from all around the globe including the French, Irish, Scots, Germans, Italians and yes, Finns too, who were experts in forestry and eager to escape their poverty in Europe.

Over the following decades, the town turned into the biggest producer of acid rain-causing chemicals in North America, completely destroying the native ecosystem and earning itself a reputation as a wasteland for much of the 20th century, with rock and slag dominating as far as the eye could see.

That is where the nickname comes from.

By the 1970's, in an effort to mitigate the damage, Inco constructed the so-called "Superstack". At 380 meters (1250 feet) in height, what it ironically succeeded best in was creating the tallest symbol of industrialization in the entire world at that time; even today, only one smokestack anywhere surpasses its size.

I remember how that big fat stogie dominated our skyline, spewing a thick cloud of sulfur dioxide and other chemicals which reeked up even far away neighborhoods

with the smell of rotten eggs. Some people say it still does. As far as mitigating damage, all they really managed to do was disperse it over the rest of the continent, making it more difficult to detect.

The story of its arrival has a very interesting twist. In August 1970 - on the final day of construction in fact - the worst tornado to hit the region in modern history bore down with six workers trapped at the top of the tower. It swayed violently in the storm, and the men, on a platform and fully exposed to the winds, were nearly blown off the edge. All survived, but the next day they all quit.

One is forced to wonder in events such as this, if a supernatural force might have been expressing its own dissatisfaction with this monstrosity man had thought to build and blemish the earth with.

My mother Helmi was at home then, with her newborn daughter, Helena, and Eva soon on the way. Eino, my father, was away working. They'd moved into the house he'd built in the south end of the city not long before, and up until just recently had still been using an outhouse in the yard. Helmi had asked Eino days ago already to move the outhouse over a couple of meters so she could bury the hole, but he'd always be busy with

something else. So she prayed for a solution.

The storm hit within hours, and when it died that evening, she stepped out into the yard to survey the damage. Remarkably, nothing serious seemed out of place - until she turned her attention to the outhouse, and realized that not only had it remained standing somehow, but it now stood exactly 2 meters over to the right... exactly where she'd wanted it.

"I'd better not pray anything like that again," she said to herself.

Yes, people called Sudbury a place of opportunity, but the immediate reality was that it could be a rough place to live; it's only in the past few decades that the ecology and its image have significantly recovered.

Canadian country & folk legend Stompin' Tom Connors had a well known song called "Sudbury Saturday Night" depicting life during just the very same decade that my folks arrived, as the Inco and Falconbridge mines became both the lifeblood and the bane of the lower working class.

As the lyrics went, while the girls went out for bingo every weekend, the boys were "gettin' stinko" so they'd "think no more of Inco".

There was also this sort of somber atmosphere, between all the slag and smokestacks, dead grey oaks dotting the countryside, and dank downtown streets

which befit the notion of strange and seedy occurrences going down on a regular basis. Kinda the *Twin Peaks* of the north.

Times may have changed a wee bit since then, but when it comes down to it, maybe not entirely.

A few years ago during a visit back home, I had to make a pitstop in Val Caron, and entered the local Tim Horton's donut shop. Several mine workers in greasy overalls sat all around looking incredibly sullen as they nursed their noon hour java. After some minutes, the thick silence finally broke.

"Ye know... I think there's somethin' in de air, eh?" one mused aloud.

His companions slowly grumbled their agreement.

Still, I love Sudbury. Maybe even for a few of the above reasons. There's really no other place anything like it.

* * *

One False Step

So like I said, I was a bit of a straggler early on. When I became old enough for activities together with other

children, I remember lagging behind a bit socially, rarely fully grasping what was going on, where I was supposed to go or what they expected me to do upon getting there.

My sisters felt that as the youngest of us, my parents spoiled me, but in my experience just the opposite could be said; I had no real solid guide or mentor figure. So I kind of wandered around aimlessly watching.

Someone put several sheets of paper and crayons in front of me, whether out of concern or to keep me busy, but it worked; I started scribbling away, trying to replicate how I saw things.

Socially, there may have been an even bigger problem. This being borderline francophone territory, the law required kids to learn French in addition to English in school, and learn something of the culture too.

Then at home and the church we attended, it couldn't have been more different. All Finnish, all the time, baby! Back and forth, back and forth I went, between these starkly contrasting worlds.

Well, that proved a little too much for that tiny lad to handle; I often accidentally answered the french teacher in Finnish or called her “äiti” (mother), creating much embarrassment. So what did I do? I gave up on speaking Finnish altogether, which helped me catch up a little bit in school, but no doubt at major personal cost.

The truth is that so-called “natural language” which is spoken or written didn't come naturally to me at all for a long time; I was a very visual child, and my thoughts very abstract.

When it did finally assert itself thanks to this sacrifice, and to the hundreds of books I read, it did so in full force. In grade 6 we had to undergo standardized testing. Subsequently, I was pleased to be informed that my english vocabulary and grammar were already at university level.

My dad Eino had been in Canada for about 30 years now, but his English remained poor, which meant in effect that he and I hardly communicated. The best I could do to understand him was often to just observe, and in doing so, sensed many complex contradictions, even if I couldn't explain such instincts just yet.

So, the emerging feeling was that I'd have to figure out a lot of things on my own, and learn to develop my own reliable road map to life.

I'll tell you a bit more about my parents. Eino wasn't an Inco employee like so many others, but got involved in construction projects around there every now and then. He worked in carpentry, and many years before that, he'd been a logger for a long time. When I was only a few years old he'd already hit his mid 50's, and it was

about that time, while working for a local contractor, that an accident happened.

His partner must've had his head in the clouds that day.

They were coordinating lowering a beam down from a rooftop, and Eino stood at the top of the ladder.

“Alright,” he instructed, “Don't lower your end before I signal.”

But the fool did just that, causing my dad to lose his footing and fall to the ground; in the aftermath, the man acted as if he was completely innocent in the whole affair.

Eino saw the doc and it turned out he'd fractured his spine, but he was the kind of guy who didn't let something like that stop him from going right back out there and getting back on the horse - or at least try; he found that he couldn't continue professionally with all that lower back pain.

So he stayed ticked off at that old partner of his for quite a while.

My dad had just one real option left, not being skilled enough in other things besides construction and logging, and that was to apply for compensation, which took some time and many trips down to Toronto.

It wouldn't be enough to keep a family of five afloat either, so my mom who had been a stay-at-home wife and mother up to that point, got a job as a housekeeper

for a wealthy family we knew. After that, though we weren't of that particular faith ourselves, she later became the head cook of a villa for Catholic priests.

Helmi originally wanted to teach gardening, but that didn't pan out. She sure could garden though; we grew everything imaginable in our backyard, from cucumbers to peas, grapes and apples, and even huge pumpkins. She made pickles and preserves and amazingly delicious dishes of all kinds, especially ones from the old days back in Finland.

It was all too easy to eat from that garden until my stomach ached.

I remember my dad being around a lot at home back then and very cranky much of the time, but I didn't understand why; by the time I turned five or so, I was always afraid around him. Everything I did appeared worthy of either a belt whipping or threats and intimidation.

“Finish your plate,” he'd often grunt at the end of dinner. I didn't know what he was talking about. To me it was empty. Turns out, he meant the sauce and crumbs and bits of meat left on the bone which were too fatty or otherwise unpleasant to the palate... gag inducing, even.

“But I'm full... I don't want-”

“EAT IT!”

I didn't get the big deal about leaving the worst parts of the food. As he reached down to release his belt buckle, staring intensely, I only knew that it was a *very* big deal.

So with tears welling up, I'd clean the plate as best as I could, lest I incur his wrath. But if it wasn't about food then he'd always find some other excuse to be angry, and if it wasn't leather he brandished, a fresh birch switch from the yard did just as well. He liked rotating for some reason.

Whenever I caught *the look* and any sign of him making for the back door, I knew it was "piiska" time as opposed to "remmi", and made a beeline for my room, slamming the door shut and locking it too, if possible.

The dread could be unbearable. Even at that age, though I didn't know much, I still had difficulty believing that anything I had done was actually worthy of that level of reprisal.

One day, I'd had just about enough - and while he worked out in the yard, scribbled on a piece of paper:

"Please stop. If you love me, why do you hurt me?"

Eino laid down often in his room and also spent a lot of time using an odd device he'd bought to massage his back. It looked like an electric shaver, but had a large

suction cup-like surface to which he'd apply some kind of gel which stunk up the whole house.

Knowing that he'd probably head there after returning, I placed the note on his bed, then ran away and huddled in my room again, hoping against all hope that that he would listen to reason.

Finally, he entered the house and I heard footsteps go to his room, just as predicted. A moment later came the sound of crumpling paper and a very dismissive “Aaaaahhh...”

No “I didn't know it affected you that much”, or “I don't hate you son, it's just discipline”, or even an “I'm sorry”. He ignored my feelings altogether, which scared me.

That incident was also my biggest cue about how my father dealt with personal relationships, and it stuck with me through to my teens and beyond.

Ever since that incident, I'd progressively do more and more behind his back. After all, if he insisted on doling out punishments for no good reason, then I may as well get something out of the deal.

Helmi became the balancing factor in my life, usually taking some degree of pity in the aftermath of Eino's brand of discipline, and generally just being the loving, nurturing one. I could confide in her, and that kept me sane.

Some of my first memories involve her caring for me and washing me in a metal tub in the sauna. It became one of my havens of peace in those days, the hot, humid air acting like a security blanket of sorts.

The ritual of sweating and then soaping and rinsing, and finally cooling down again felt so right, and it cleansed my soul as well as my body.

That sauna was my first introduction to actually *being* Finnish. It felt normal, and I was surprised upon learning that most people in Sudbury didn't bathe that way, and sometimes even thought it strange that I did.

I found the pictures which had been blowtorched into the wooden walls fascinating to look at. I'd always discover new details, and wonder about their origin and inspiration.

There were symbols of our culture of course, but also lots of images of horses and horse heads, wagon wheels, fish, and other assorted items which were harder to make out.

Anyway, the whippings did taper off, but the emotional scars didn't heal so quickly, and these would shape my thoughts, fears and actions for some time to come.

You wouldn't necessarily know that Eino was on disability from how actively he lived. Even if his career had become effectively cut short, the man was just a work-

holic, and always had to be in control of things.

Previously, he'd participated in the construction the Finnish church we all attended plus a number of other projects, while simultaneously completing our home.

It wasn't anything fancy, just a simple four-sided red brick slab. But it also had a greenhouse for my mom, a garage, and a sizable backyard with a red wooden double swing, the kind where two benches face each other.

Then after the back injury, he just kept right on building and serving the church and community. He was a highly religious man, but more specifically it often seemed like he was trying to atone for something terrible in his past.

I could see that there was the man he was trying to be, but also the man he had been and maybe remained. That's the side of him which I feared.

* * *

Eye on Crime

Whenever I got bored, I couldn't go to my dad for entertainment. His idea of doing stuff together was purely work, like it was all he knew how to do.

So I read a lot. I read my detective books, and comic books containing mysteries were good too. *The Hardy Boys*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, *Bruno & Boots*, *The Sugar Creek Gang*, *Sherlock Holmes* of course, and more. In the back of an *Archie* magazine, one ad immediately grabbed my interest:

Rouse School of Detective Training.

I signed up for the “course” it offered, which turned out to be little more than a stapled together booklet of basic and nonsensical information about how to hone your observation skills. That didn't matter; The package included a certificate with my name. I was now officially a detective!

Time to get to work.

“That's quite the imagination you've got,” became a regular comment whenever I mentioned to anyone that I'd noticed some suspicious behavior. Most people couldn't recognize a clue if it stared them in the face point-blank.

In 1990, I delivered *The Sudbury Star* to about 100 households, give or take, and began practicing on my customers. At one place, there lived a guy named Tom Mustard. Every time I went to collect payment, he was

with a bunch of other guys in the garage, stripping down snowmobiles, repainting bodies and such.

I wondered: *Where are all these coming from anyway? They almost certainly must be stolen, and these guys are turning them into new machines which can't be traced.* But although I had my suspicions, I said nothing.

One day, Tom asked me if I liked snowmobiles.

"Oh, yes sir," I replied, eyes brightening. "But my family can't afford one."

"Zat right," Tom squinted, taking a puff from his cigarette.

"Yeah, but I'd rather build a dune buggy anyway."

Some older kids were always driving one around, which made me incredibly jealous. I delivered to their place too and got to sneak peeks at it close up.

"Dune buggy, eh? Wow that's a big project for your age, kid. You sure you can pull that off?"

"Not by myself, no... but I've got some friends down the street to help me."

"Well I'll tell ya what kid... if you need a body for it, I've got this old chassis you can cut up." He nodded behind him to a cannibalized ski-doo body. "I don't need it."

Despite my gut feelings about what he was giving me, completely free and no strings attached, I went "off-duty" from being a supersleuth and had Eino haul the

chassis over to our yard, where it sat for the next five years behind our garage, untouched.

Speaking of the garage... when I was a little older, the old cinder block carport he'd erected was crumbling and no longer enough for our needs, so he began to build a new double car garage with a connected studio room in the back for Eva.

I helped, and marveled at how despite falling off a ladder and breaking his back, heights never did seem to faze him.

He went up on the house roof all the time too, even in winter, never wearing a helmet or harness; It was almost like a blatant disregard for safety.

I saw that Eino's recklessness and stubbornness sometimes strained his relationship with my mother. He loved the wilderness, and took any excuse to disappear for a whole day off in the middle of nowhere, such as to pick blueberries for some extra cash.

Often, he'd return well after sunset with Helmi nearly in tears. We didn't have mobile phones back then to keep loved ones up to date on our whereabouts or well-being. Even if we had, I suspect he wouldn't be the type to get one.

Together, the parents were the caretakers of the church, and when I got a bit older, I was their assistant. Week

in, week out, we'd go there each Saturday and clean the chapel so it would be spic and span for services the next day; if the lawn needed cutting, I'd often do that, too.

I wanted to get back home as quick as possible, since Saturday was supposed to be *my* day. No bullying to deal with, no homework, and no church with yet more teasing kids and more patronizing adults. So I would cut corners to get it done more quickly, but whenever Eino caught on, he never let me hear the end of it.

One time, dragging the mower up the side of the ditch, I saw hands waving wildly in my periphery, and cut the motor, figuring something terrible had happened.

“What do you call *this?!*” he snorted, pointing down a few feet to my right.

“What? It looks just fine,” I lied. There were tiny patches of taller grass here or there, but he must have had hawk's eyes to see it from all the way where he'd been standing a few moments earlier. It was hardly worth declaring a national emergency over.

My dad only shook his head, tugging the handle out of my grasp and kneeling down to adjust the blade height. “No matter how many times you're told, you *never* listen.”

“Well... I'm trying,” I offered feebly. “Am I supposed to be an expert??”

“I'm *trying*, I'm *trying*,” he mocked, yanking the

pullcord a couple of times. The mower roared to life again and he redid the entire thing as I stood fuming.

I sometimes felt that I knew as much about what it was like to be an adult, as to be a kid my own age. Maybe more. If I didn't always act like it, that's because I hated being forced to work so much and picked on when I failed. I didn't know what I hated more, that or school.

Though I didn't have many of what you'd call real friends in elementary school, there were still opportunities there for either fun or mischief. In the winter, sledding at recess kept things somewhat enjoyable, and if the weather got bad, out came the hockey trading cards.

We all dreamed at some point about becoming the next Great One.

This represented the time of Wayne Gretzky's prime, and new stars like Teemu Selanne were emerging. As a Finn, I was only too proud to be able to claim that Teemu hailed from my ancestral lands.

These days, whenever I tell someone I'm from Sudbury, their first reaction is a nod of recognition. "Ah yes, the Big Nickel," they say. The second reaction: "So ya like hockey?"

Maybe that's a testament to how deep in the blood hockey is in Sudbury specifically. There are few cities anywhere which have produced so many players, coaches and others at the NHL level. Over 80, all told.

So yeah, it was that type of environment. We had mini stick hockey at recess, floor hockey during gym class, street hockey after school, and sometimes excursions to a big rink.

My sister Helena's boyfriend at the time played in a beer league, and I either filled the role of puck boy or worked the scoreboard; afterward he might let me play Pro-Line with him to bet on NHL games. Hockey always popped up somewhere, even if I wasn't cut out for it myself.

A goalie was what I wanted to become most of all, and Helmi remained sympathetic but realistic: "We don't have the money to send you to play, Henry," she'd say matter-of-factly, but bought some used protective gear just so I could bumble around outdoors behind fogged up glasses.

One winter I tried icing over part of the backyard to create a mini skating rink like Walter Gretzky had famously done for Wayne. Turned out I just wasn't really very good at all on skates, and likely got myself a couple of undiagnosed concussions.

Oh well.

I still had *Hockey Night In Canada* to vicariously live that dream through, and at school, trading cards worked as a sort of social currency for awhile. The other thing I had

going for me in school was my art; the kids and teachers always said “you're going to do something special with that skill of yours someday!”

They made requests all the time. That's something which got me a little more respect, likewise with computers to some degree. The rest of the time, I fumbled my way through the education system pretty much blind.

When not at school, I tried to escape the burden of my father's slave driving as much as humanly possible. From five to twelve years old, this mainly meant spending time with Scott and Calvin down the street.

At first, we'd play Atari and watch *Star Wars*, cartoons like *He-Man*, *G.I. Joe* or *Transformers*, hold marble tournaments in front of their driveway, or catch frogs in the ditches and at Wolf Creek. Model rockets. RC racers. Completely tame, innocent kid stuff, but very fun.

Soon we met two older boys, Luke and Ethan, who it turned out visited their dad's place right across the street every couple of weeks or so. The rest of the time, they lived with their mom across town, who had remarried.

Luke heavily resembled the heroic Skywalker from the *Star Wars* films, right down to the haircut, and always

had a mischievous air about him. Ethan was considerably more proper and calm. I liked them both.

As we began to take cues from them, Scott, Calvin and I became a little more adventurous in conjuring up ideas; war games in the woods, hunting trips with bb guns and slingshots, tent-outs, and long hikes up into the hills which overlooked the city. You could see the Big Nickel from up there, several kilometers away.

Our territory expanded all the time, and we soon considered surrounding neighborhoods ours to do as we pleased with. Several boys from the next street over didn't take too kindly to that, and this turned into an honest-to-goodness turf war.

They challenged us to a fight scheduled for five o'clock after school on a Tuesday afternoon. The five of us faced off against six of them in the woods, armed with sticks and whatever makeshift "weapons" we could fashion on short notice.

These quickly broke and soon we rolled in the mud like pigs, exchanging punches until everyone lay heaving. Who had won? Luke took the opportunity to announce our victory.

"Like we said, this neighborhood's *ours*, and if we see you 'round here anymore you're *dead!*"

Everyone wearily got up and walked back home, and I

had to try to explain my black eye and bruises to the folks. But we had won... mostly thanks to Luke's bravado. The other kids never showed up around our spots again.

Ethan was more constructive in his activity choices and began a project to build a working go-kart from some two by fours and old lawn mower parts. We went around every mechanic and shop within a couple of square kilometers, asking them kindly for whatever they had laying around and didn't need - a valuable lesson in its own right, which later led me to believe I could build that dune buggy.

Even though I never actually did complete it, or even get the project off the ground for that matter, I still developed big creative aspirations in part thanks to that go-kart we did together with those older boys.

Eino eventually carted my chassis off to the dump.

And despite Ethan's best efforts, his brother kind of always managed to lead us back to flirting with sin and trouble I guess you could say... but it would be a while before I'd flip from budding detective to being caught on the *other* side of the law.

2

Borderland Boy

The summer of 1934 in Mertut arrived in its full glory, bursting with fresh fragrances. Most plants were soon in bloom, and we already got to taste the new season's potatoes by midsummer. Spring that year had been especially warm with plenty of rain, and so the vegetables all had an unusually good start.

It seemed as if Mother Nature wished to leave a lasting impression on those of us who would be departing. Unfortunately, there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity then to sit back and admire.

My mind weighed with sorrow and the uncertainty of what lay ahead, as for the first time in my life, I now had to leave everything and most everyone I knew behind.

Actually, in my relatively short existence, I'd already lost quite a lot, which only made this sting all the more. On the final day, I tried to put it all out of my mind and focus on the good memories as I finished the chores.

Even the cow, Mansi, could sense that something special was happening; I milked her just as I'd done nearly every day for the past several months, and this time when I finished, she took off faster than I ever knew a cow could go, straight towards the forest.

Startled, I tried chasing after her to get her turned around. I was supposed to take her to the custody of a family friend before we left, but there she went like a roe deer, deep into the brush until I only saw the tree tops shuddering in the distance. All the ill feelings came flooding back, and fighting away tears, I could do nothing but return home without her.

Mother Eeva comforted me, saying, "Dont worry Eino... Aunt Sofie will find Mansi, she knows where to look."

After a while, father returned and we drank straight from the milking bucket, because they couldn't find any

cups; all the dishes were already packed away.

Aleksander, or Santeri, my father, had been working for a Soviet collective farm for a while, but now all Finnish workers in the border area of the collective economy had to be transferred further inland due to the construction of the new border defenses, the Karelian Fortified Region.

Now came the turn of those in the Valkeasaari area. This had another name too: Beloostrov. Most places were like that - having a Russian name, and then the one we all actually used. Mertut, better known to us as Merituittu, was a Finnish village in the hills along the northern edge of Valkeasaari.

We were *Inkeri*, Finns who made up the majority of the rural population in the region of Ingermanland. In those days, during everyday life few among us used such names. Foremost in our own minds, we were Finnish speaking Finnish people, most of whom had roots here going back for many generations.

This area just happened to fall on the Soviet side of the border as a result of the war. In Stalin's new Russia, people like us were considered a threat. What would become of us depended on several factors. Class and education, flight risk, and of course, how useful we were as workers. It helped too, if you obeyed every order without question, and kept your head low.

Officially, we didn't "have to" join the collectives, but that's what Santeri had felt was for the good of the family. The OGPU, or Soviet Secret Police and predecessor to the NKVD, had plenty of "motivational methods" for us.

I'll tell you about my grandparents on my mother's side - their story is a good example of what happened to those who were too stubborn.

Nikolai and Hedvig Gunerus were middle aged potato farmers and still good hard workers. He was in his early 60's, and she, her early 50's. They had a large family with many kids, of whom mother was among the eldest. One funny thing is that their youngest daughter, Sylvi, was only three years older than myself; we behaved like brother and sister despite her technically being my aunt.

My parents and I often went over to their place. Being so young then however, I only have a few clear memories of it. Mother always talked about them though, and things that happened there during my early life.

What I *do* remember is that the main dwelling itself was a fairly plain and modest white building, but the garden rather beautiful, with many types of different flowers, and trees growing everywhere. Hedvig loved gardening.

A large barn building where many things were stored and animals kept in winter lay to one side of the

property. In summer, they roamed in pens surrounding the orchards. One time I got under a fence to stroke a foal, but the mother was rather protective, and wasn't about to let any stranger go and touch its child. She snorted and charged. Let's just say that if grandma hadn't gotten there in time to grab me, then things would have gone quite badly for this boy.

The farm lay a couple of kilometers off the main road. Once, grandpa Nikolai teased me about the length of the path to their cottage since my little legs were always becoming tired, saying, "Eino... Gramps will come up there to the road to meet you instead if you manage to hit him from there with a stone, ok?"

Not getting the joke, I became very upset and cried "No! I won't throw stones at you." And so grandpa had to take that boy onto his lap and wipe away the tears now streaming down his cheeks.

* * *

Deadly Engagement

I'd heard a few times that grandpa never even met his father, and didn't understand why. When I was older and

could read some Russian, mother slipped me a copy of an old newspaper clipping from Leningrad, which had a different name then. It read:

“26th of January, 1871. Murder Case: A Finn named Nikolai Kunerus left St. Petersburg by horse and carriage for Valkeasaari on the 16th of this month at 8 o'clock in the evening.

As he was leaving a hartschevno restaurant, Kunerus changed a note of 25 rubels. A Cossack who happened to be there noticed this.

At once after Kunerus left, the Cossack hastily loaded his rifle and started to chase the mentioned individual in a hurry, eventually catching up after about 13 wirst and shooting him in the heart from behind, so that the bullet pierced straight through and into the back of the horse.*

The Cossack is said to already be prosecuted. Even if he does not admit to the murder, he lost a spur from his boots there near the dead body, and the money was also found on him.”

*nearly 14 kilometers.

My grandfather, Nikolai Nikolainpoika Gunerus, was born on May 31, 1871, over four months later, and named after his slain father.

He must have been quite a suave guy, since he managed to charm Hedvig, practically just a girl at the time and several years younger. I heard he'd been a widower already by then; his first wife had died while giving birth to twins.

Hedvig's family was against the union. They told her she shouldn't marry someone old enough to be her parent - a slight exaggeration. There were something like 11-12 years between them.

Regardless, their marriage turned out to be a happy one, and certainly they always seemed jovial around us. The family being large, the atmosphere always felt full of life and activity.

* * *

While The Clock Ticked

Back in the first weeks of December of 1927, our rather large extended family got together to celebrate. I was not yet a year old.

Everyone had reason to hope for the future; though we Finns had long been caught up in all kinds of territorial struggles and wars, there'd now been ten years of independence in Finland. Ingria was also now growing and thriving and hoped to follow suit.

By that time, there were over 750 Inkeri villages plus around 250 mixed villages - that is, also containing other Finno-Ugric minorities.

All told, the Finnish population around Leningrad, known previously (and again today) as St Petersburg, was around 150,000.

Santeri and Eeva were in their mid twenties, and having recently married, lived together in a small farmhouse with their infant son (me).

On this December night, we gathered at the Gunerus farm. The two families did not actually like each other very much, or more specifically, Santeri and Nikolai did not like each other, as I will explain more later. This gathering was, in part, an attempt to smooth things over.

The mood began well enough, including singing of old traditional songs. Hedvig lit candles and placed them on the window sills, creating a little early Christmas season atmosphere.

Santeri's brother Jonne showed up with his wife, as did

Uncle Abraham 'Aapro' Villikoukku, husband of his older sister, with their son Paavo.

It wasn't until near the end of the meal that things began to go downhill.

"Yes, enjoy this fine evening and give thanks for it..." mumbled Nikolai between bites of bread.

Despite his constantly full mouth, the next thing he said rang out so clearly that it caught the attention of all:

"...there may not be too many more like it in our future."

All eating and singing stopped; the loudest sound remaining in that room became the constant tick of the old grandfather clock in the corner.

Aleksander refilled his glass of kotikalja, a traditional Finnish home brewed beer, stared at it resolutely for a moment, then downed it in one swift motion.

Not strong enough, he thought.

"Is this supposed to be an inspiring dinner speech?"

"No..." his father-in-law looked at him scornfully.

"Well, if you have some important news, don't just leave it there."

"I do have something important... just trying to think of how to best say it, that's all."

Everyone shifted to hear their host's words.

"Well sure, life seems to find us pretty blessed right now - for once... but you know how these things go. They're looking for... how shall we say it? Solutions."

"So..? What is this supposed to mean?" demanded Aleksander.

"*Kolkhozy*," Aapro blurted with a flamboyant gesture, met by a few giggles from the younger ones present.

"You know... the 'solution' to a problem that does not even exist."

Then his flushed face became stone serious again in an instant, as his eyes met Nikolai's. The two old timers appeared to be the only ones familiar with the Russian terminology.

"It means, that we give our animals, and our crops, for the 'greater good', and in return, become starved ourselves. *Sharing*."

The normally shy and quiet young Paavo protested at his dad from the corner. "Haven't you always said to help those with poorer fortunes?"

Nearly 11, Paavo had seen a lot of beggars around their property, mostly those who had stowed away on trains from Leningrad and jumped off the slowing cars, rolling down into the nearby fields before the actual station in order to avoid discovery.

Going from town to town in this way, the smarter ones

managed to survive during warmer weather, and the less bright were sometimes discovered frozen to death among the cargo during the harsh Russian winter.

These men tended to be gaunt and ragged, but were probably capable of getting the better of a boy as slight as him. He'd been warned, but persisted in sneaking them food occasionally, believing that his father hadn't noticed.

The mustached, greying man sat back and sighed heavily.

“It is not as simple as this. You have ideals, and an unspoiled heart. Do not change... but they do not think as you do. They're sneaky, and make it sound like a good thing to share when it's really for their *own* benefit, rather than the benefit of the people who work hard and try to live honestly.”

“But-” Paavo started, before being quickly cut off.

“Listen now!” announced Nikolai. “All of you should know this. They would choose for us what we give, and if they have it their way, we will give everything we have and more, until there are only bones and we beg like dogs for what we have already rightfully earned. They will use force without hesitation.”

He scanned the room, which was now still. Nobody ate.

“This is the reality of this so-called collective farming. Because it is the reality of the people behind it.”

The clan all stared grimly at their plates. Eeva pursed her lips tightly, as though trying to regain her composure. “So what are you saying? That this is going to happen for sure, and we’ll just have to go along with it?”

He offered only a shrug.

“So then if we don’t?”

Her father opened his mouth, then paused for a long moment before finally replying.

“I think, my dear... that we are all going to be forced to make some very difficult decisions soon.”

A strange look washed over Eeva’s face just then. “Excuse me!” she exclaimed, covering her mouth and running off to the bathroom.

“Well *that’s* a bit of an overreaction,” Nikolai said, straight-faced. Aapro guffawed at the scene which had just unfolded, burying his face in his right hand until he was fully red and shaking. Jonne and some of the other men snickered.

The women stared scornfully at all of them. Aleksander desperately tried to change the subject.

“Who knows *Our Land*?”

After the families had mostly dispersed for the night, Aleksander went over to the barn's stables to prepare their horse for the return home. Far behind him, the door creaked open.

"Santeri?" a deep voice bellowed. He ignored it.

"Good Lord it's dark in here, don't you want a lamp? You must have the vision of an owl." It was Nikolai.

"It sure is slippery out there," he puffed. "Gonna be tough going for you."

Aleksander adjusted a buckle on the harness without looking up.

"Santeri," Nikolai lowered his voice, leaning close to his ear. "I did not want to alarm anyone. But perhaps..." he trailed off again, as though he'd lost his nerve.

Aleksander finally grunted. "A fine job you did of that."

"Bah... so I was careless, but even so. You said yourself that they needed to hear it. Now... I didn't tell everything, and for good reason. But I will tell you. Perhaps you should prepare yourselves for the event that you may have to leave here. You have a baby. And maybe more soon," he winked.

"Isn't that exactly why we *shouldn't* leave? Where are we going to go? And how do any of us know this is as serious as you say?"

Aleksander felt as if his father-in-law was trying to get rid of him.

“Our whole life is here, we’ve sacrificed much to build it, and you want us to run away over collective farms? It’s ridiculous. We’ll manage.”

“You only have the word of an old coot to go on, but I am not ignorant, son. And I know we’ve had our differences. But Hedvig and I care about you both.”

He paused and watched as Aleksander continue to prepare the horse.

“Besides... you observed yourself that Aapro shares the same concern. Santeri... our position here is not as stable as it appears. I think that Stalin is not as agreeable to our presence as Vladimir has been.”

“So let him disagree then,” Aleksander snapped.

“What do we care?”

“You should. I know some who say that they are planning labor camps far out in the East. Siberia. And they suggest that it is we and other non-Russians who they have in mind to build them.”

Eeva stepped up to the doorway behind them. “Daddy? Is that you? What are you two talking about in there?”

“Just nonsense,” Aleksander replied. “The wagon is ready. If you’re feeling better, we should get going before it starts to snow.”

The couple climbed onto the wagon and began their departure. Glancing back toward his father-in-law, Aleksander nodded, and simply said: "I'll think about it."

He looked down at their infant son tightly wrapped up in blankets, cradled in Eeva's arms, and they exchanged a glance, then rode in silence for a while; only the grunts of the horse and hooves crunching in the snow pierced the night air.

"Santeri," Eeva began finally.

No answer came. He appeared distant, his thoughts elsewhere. Eeva put a hand on his leg, and he finally turned his head toward her.

"I didn't want to say anything until I was pretty sure..."

"What?" Aleksander furrowed his brow.

"You know how I got sick tonight?"

His jaw clenched and the reins tightened in his grasp, so much so that the horse suddenly stopped in the middle of the road.

How did Nikolai know before I did?

Aleksander began to consider the old potato farmer's words more carefully now. One way or another, it seemed that the future would not be easy.

* * *

Footprints Under The Window

The next Monday, early in the morning hours, Aleksander awoke to an urgent knocking at their door. He opened it to find a very nervous and battered looking Jonne standing there in front of him.

“Brother!” Aleksander gasped at the sight of him.

“Come in from the cold man... what *happened* to you? Let me put on some coffee.”

Jonne gingerly sat down on a wooden bench.

“Th-anks..” he croaked.

Aleksander could see that the man was in shock, and reached into the cupboard, pulling out a small flask. “Maybe you need this more than the coffee,” he said, looking his brother square in the eye.

Jonne gave a shaky half-nod and snatched the bottle. He soon relaxed a bit and began to explain that he'd received a surprise visit from the OGPU that night, who detained and interrogated him.

“And you came *here* afterward?” Aleksander asked incredulously, himself now peeking out through the

closed kitchen curtains for any sign of unwelcome loiterers.

“Listen to me, Santeri... I don't know why, but they seem to have a special interest in you. I had to come here, just in case you were planning on doing something stupid yourself, and warn you.”

“What?? What did they ask you?”

“All kinds of things.” Jonne cradled his head in his hands, mind racing.

“A lot of stuff about my work, my marriage, family members, what we did this week... they wanted to know who was at our dinner for some reason. And then, like I said, they focused on you, and Eeva.”

“This doesn't make sense,” muttered Aleksander.

“We've done nothing wrong.”

“Yeah, and that's what I told them. That you were good citizens, with a newborn child. Good with your hands, adept at working the land and fixing things. That Eeva delivers milk here in the community.”

Aleksander's knee became restless. “Give me that bottle.”

“That's a nice make-up job they gave you,” Aleksander nodded at Jonne's appearance; his left eye was black and purple, his lower lip split and stained with dried blood.

“I haven't had the time to look in a mirror... but this vodka hurts like hell to drink,” Jonne gingerly wiped his mouth against the back of his hand and laughed, before going into a small fit of coughing.

“I *wish* it was vodka. Give it a few minutes.”

“Santeri... they didn't get anything interesting, I don't think. They just stopped suddenly, and then let me go without another word. No explanations, no warning - nothing!”

“You're wrong, brother. It *is* a warning.”

“That's no good.”

“That's for sure.”

The pair passed the flask between them in silence until it was empty.

“You should really go home to your wife. We'll be fine. It'll be ok - for all of us.” Aleksander said, rising up. They hugged, and Jonne exited, soon disappearing into the grey.

Still feeling uneasy, Aleksander went outside to do some shovelling and release some adrenaline. Something felt out of place.

I don't remember leaving the shovel laying like that.

He went to pick it up, telling himself it had probably

fallen over in the wind. That's when he noticed a strange set of boot prints leading up to and stopping under the window.

Regardless, everything calmed down again for a short while. The next couple of years or so somehow passed without much incident for us. Our families continued to work their farms, and I enjoyed a little time with my grandparents.

My folks did hear of others in Mertut and surrounding communities being interrogated, and general harassment from the secret police became more and more common.

An undercurrent of unease grew, and every so often they'd hear about a family or a child disappearing.

Nobody knew where, but there were two main possibilities: Either they had been made examples of by the Soviets, in order to scare others - or they simply had the good sense to escape while they could.

All this made quite an impression on me when I later heard it - that some people could have that kind of instinct, like an animal who can smell the winds and sense danger coming... like a deer or rabbit - or even like that old cow Mansi.

How much courage and will power and just plain certainty one must have, to make the decision to leave

everything even when all others stayed and pretended that life could still be normal.

But surely, some kind of action had to be taken sooner or later; The rumor mill was heating up that something very big would soon be happening.

As for grandpa Nikolai...

Perhaps he should have taken his own advice.

3

F-100

It was with my neighborhood pals that I encountered most “sinful ways” directly for the first time. For example, the first time I tasted beer - accidentally, in this case. I couldn't have been much older than 7 or 8.

Poking around in Scott and Calvin's family garage, I found a case of empties left there by Dave, their “pa” as they called him. Without looking carefully, I picked one out and pretended to take a swig, quickly spitting out a mouthful of rather hot and foul tasting liquid.

From that moment on, I understood what the term “piss beer” meant.

Swearing's another thing I never encountered more than when I listened in on shop talk between Dave and his

buddies. On the one hand, I'd been very much taught to stay away from it, as these were the kind of things that led to hell, but on the other, I couldn't help but kind of think it was cool. They knew me as the son of some serious believers, too, so I decided to play with that any time I caught them doing it in my obvious presence.

“Sunofa-BITCH!!” Dave cried out one day while hammering some planks in their yard; he'd smacked his finger good and was sucking on it, when I marched up, staring fiercely at him.

“*WHAT* did you say?” I demanded.

Eyes still watering, his face turned even redder while he stuttered for a few seconds trying to figure something out.

“Uh, son... in a DITCH! Yeah, I was just remembering that one time, heh heh... run along home now,” he choked. My expression turned smug and I trotted off. It was fun to turn the tables on an adult, when I could.

My dad rarely swore openly, especially in my presence, but on one occasion when it was just the two of us driving down the highway in our old green 1970's Ford F-100 pickup, he surprised me - in the middle of a lecture, no less:

“You know, those boys can't be trusted. Luke's father is a drunkard, and they learn all kinds of shit from him. You should be careful.”