

The Marbles King by Kira Wuck

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Translation by Michele Hutchison

PART ONE

Anne

SUMMER CATS

Anne counts the snowflakes falling outside the window by following them with her finger. Snow is so nothingy but she still loves it. It hides everything people leave behind. In the countryside there are cats hidden beneath the snow, bought in the summer to keep children in the holiday cabins entertained and then left behind. Summer cats, they call them. When the snow melts, their emaciated bodies appear. Sometimes they are almost entirely intact. Anne often thinks of these kittens. Despite their cruel fate, she likes the way their youthfulness is preserved in a lump of ice.

Anne sits at the neighbour's kitchen table, waiting. Both she and the neighbour have their hands folded in their laps. The neighbour is waiting too, but Anne doesn't know what for. She tries to interest Anne in baking *piparkakku*, Christmas biscuits, in the shape of cats but Anne is waiting for her father. He'll appear once she has counted forty more snowflakes.

When he's finally at the door, he calls out, 'We're going to build an igloo!'. Anne quickly pulls on her bright yellow wellies over her bare feet. Dad lifts her up into the air. The neighbour clutches Anne's long skirt in one hand, as though she doesn't want to let her go, and a cigarette in the other, between her yellow-stained fingers.

'Victor, her coat!' she cries, but they've already gone. Nothing can happen to Anne, she feels safe on her father's shoulders. He sings Jingle Bells as they lurch down the stairs.

Outside the cold stabs right through her arms and legs but she doesn't say anything. She stands up to her thighs in the snow, her boots filling. They roll enormous snowballs and pile them up in a semi-circle. Every once in a while her father deliberately falls down. 'Come and rescue me!' he cries, and Anne rushes to pull him out of the snow. Once the igloo is finished, Dad fetches a lantern from the neighbours and they sit in it to shelter from the wind.

'Make sure the Russians don't see you, Anne,' Dad says as he pulls her to him. His wool coat smells familiar and safe. 'It's time to warm up,' he says, bringing a silver flask to his lips. After that he talks about the war. He often does this when he has drunk from that flask. Anne sees the neighbour standing at her window. Smokes dances around her.

'We Fins have *sisu* – determination and courage. It took the Russians weeks to take a small strip of land, while they had all the equipment and manpower they needed. We didn't have anything at all, barely enough clothes to keep us warm, yet we stood our ground. We fought with our bare hands until we dropped,' Dad says as he holds up Anne's fist. 'A Fin never gives up even when the situation seems hopeless. Sometimes that can be a bad thing and it's better not to hold on for so long. Like with your mother, for instance.'

Anne doesn't feel the cold, in fact she doesn't feel a thing anymore. This is what it must feel like for the summer cats, she thinks, with their frozen fur. Calm and without any fear. As she slowly drifts off, all she hears is Dad's voice. He tells her how Grandad risked his own life to save him from the clutches of the Russians when he'd stolen a sack of wheat as a young boy. He's told this story before, but that doesn't matter. Her eyes half-closed, Anne is able to picture the Russian uniforms.

'I'd do that for you too, Anne. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me.' Dad's voice sounds more and more tinny. Anne dreams that she's lying in a chute slide, rushing downwards.

OPERA SINGER

When Anne wakes up, she's wrapped in woollen blankets on the sofa. Her body feels as though ants are crawling over it. She can't stop her teeth chattering.

'Are you with us, child?' Mum asks, relieved. 'Your father should never have taken you outside with him.'

All Anne can do is moan. She rolls her eyes.

'Stay calm, do you want some cocoa?'

Anne nods. 'Dad?'

'I've no idea where he's got to.'

The television is on with the sound turned down, an opera singer in a big dress comes onstage. She's sad, like most opera singers. Mum sings along softly as she goes into the kitchen.

A couple of hours later, Anne wakes up again. She's lying in her own bed now and warmth has taken hold of her body. There's a mug of cocoa next to her bed that has gone cold. She stumbles to the sitting room. Her body feels so light it's as though she only consists of her head. Mum is leafing through the newspaper while Dad snores in his chair. She can only see him from behind, there's a full ashtray on the armrest about to tumble off at any moment.

'Hurry and put on something warm.' Mum cries.

Anne lets herself sink into the soft sofa next to her. Mum lays her hand on Anne's forehead. 'She has a high fever,' she says. When there's no response, she aims a kick at Dad's chair. The ashtray falls from the armrest. Dad jolts awake and picks up the longest dog-end from the floor with shaking hands and lights it. They dress Anne in warm clothes and Dad carries her up the stairs. He smells of alcohol and cigarettes, his face looks worn.

'Harmaa's fur?' Anne manages to say with great difficulty. 'Where is it?'

Harmaa is the grey cat of her mother's friend who lives in the countryside. Anne loves the cat so much she always carries a plastic bag of its fur around with her.

Mum hurries upstairs to get the plastic bag and presses it into Anne's hands. Now she has Harmaa, she knows that everything will be alright. They drive to the hospital in Dad's van. The back seat is covered in vacuum cleaners, garden furniture and things you would never think you'd need until you did, so Anne sits up front on her mother's lap. Dad sells the stuff all over Finland, sometimes he is gone for days. Maybe he talks to his customers about the war too. 'We didn't have garden gnomes yet during the war. We live in an age of wonders, ma'am.'

Dad stops outside when they reach the ER. His hands shake, making it difficult for him to light his cigarette. He says the cigarette will make him better and winks at Anne before they go in through the glass sliding doors. The tip of his cigarette lights up from time to time. Anne likes the look of smoking, it seems to induce a kind of patient resignation. When she grows up, she wants to smoke too. She sits curled up in a plastic chair while Mum argues with the receptionist. There are group of noisy boys in the waiting room, one of them holding a bloodied handkerchief to his head. The others are laughing at him and struggle to stay in their seats. The youngest keeps looking at Anne and running his tongue along his lips. His hair is so greasy it sticks to his head. Her mother hasn't noticed. Anne rolls her eyes at the boy and hopes she can quickly lose herself again in her fever dreams.

THOSE WHO EAT SURVIVE

It turns out that Anne has double pneumonia. The high fever makes her hallucinate. Breathing hurts and her ribs are sore from the coughing. There are times when she thinks she is dying. Something

has so fully taken over her body that she operates outside of it. Mum makes porridge and fresh bouillon every day, but Anne keeps her lips firmly pressed together.

‘Those who eat survive,’ Mum keeps saying. ‘You were born because we managed to get enough food during the war. We are survivors. You’ve seen Grandma’s healthy cheeks in the pictures.’ Anne’s grandmother does indeed have a full figure, her head seems to be directly attached to her trunk, but in all the photos she wears a sullen, severe expression as though life is an obligation and certainly mustn’t be a pleasure.

‘You’re not going to throw in the towel now.’ After the third forced spoonful of porridge, Anne dashes the plate to the floor. Mum is furious and forces her to eat the porridge from the floor. When Dad comes in, he cheerfully begins to scrape up the porridge with Anne’s spoon. ‘Mmm, yummy,’ he says. Anne laughs in relief, but Mum storms out of the room.

Dad has been away more often recently, sometimes Anne sees him sitting in their igloo.

After a month, she is well enough to go back to school. The school yard seems different. The voices of the playing children suddenly sound frightening. They echo loudly through her head.

Anne begins to read and loves spending hours roaming around another world, just like in her fever dreams. Within a few weeks she’s read all of the books in the school library.

When she is nine she smokes her first cigarette, together with her best friend Kirsi. When they’ve sucked the smoke into their cheeks, they make each other jump because being startled helps to suck it in deeper. Anne copies her father, he always smokes calmly, taking in his surroundings like a film star.

Two years later, Anne discovers her mother's medicine cabinet. She doesn't know what the pills are for but they make her feel more relaxed. They lay a pleasant haze over reality.

When Anne turns twelve, her father gives her a tape player and a Cliff Richard tape. They're the first people in the block of flats to have one. The whole neighbourhood comes to listen to the sound coming from their speakers. Anne lays her ear against a speaker until her mother pulls her away from it. She feels the bass reverberating through her body. Children dance in the sitting room and Dad apes Cliff Richard. He's been drinking from his silver flask again. He sways his hips, a cigarette in his mouth.

Otto

MUTUAL ENEMY

Otto is fighting with his two brothers and four sisters around their mother's hospital bed. The children scream and pull at each other's clothing to secure the best spot. Otto's faded T-shirt, a hand-me-down from his brother Ernst, clings to his skinny chest. His shorts keep slipping down. His brothers' clothes look like they've come out of the dressing-up box too. Nothing quite fits properly.

Otto's youngest sister Dina doesn't stand a chance of getting close to their mother, her hands can barely reach the bed's metal railings. She whines the loudest of all of them. Her mother is weak, she has a tumour in her head the size of a ping-pong ball. Last week Ferry threw a ball like that up in the air to show how big it was. He'd heard the doctor say it.

Otto had run away and later found himself regularly picking up the little ball. When no one was around, he'd smash it into the wall as hard as he could, but the ball never broke.

Mum rests her head fall into her hands and stops responding entirely. Then Otto manages to climb over Regina and Else into her bed, like a little monkey. He smiles triumphantly and leans into her, he doesn't know why but he longs to be held in her arms like a baby again. Mum's face brightens up and she kisses him on each cheek.

'You'll be alright. We've got the same long eyelashes, you know that?'

Otto looks at his mother's dark eyes. 'Will you take good care of your brothers and sisters? And give your father a bit of space.'

Otto nods and pulls Dina up into the bed by her little arms. She's almost three. Mum strokes her spiky black hair. In the meantime, Ferry is showing off his new magic trick, which he's been practicing for days, but their mother gazes absently into space. He repeats his trick several times but isn't given any attention. He throws his home-made construction onto the floor in disappointment and thumps the next bed. A skinny man is lying in it with a wide-open mouth and closed eyes. He doesn't respond.

Dad shows up. He has a tendency to stamp and walks as though he is trying to scare away wild animals. Ferry tries to pull Otto from the bed, but he kicks out at him. 'I think your magic trick is stupid too,' he says.

All the children stare at the floor, no one dares to look at him. They're not allowed to look aggressive farm dogs in the eyes either. Otto feels his neck grow hot, his brothers and sisters stiffen.

'Into the corridor, be gone with the lot of you!'

Now it's a matter of getting out of Dad's line of sight as fast as possible. Otto lets himself slide from the bed, pushing Dina ahead of him. But he's not quick enough, Dad's claw lashes out and grabs him. Otto feels his upper arm being squeezed hard. 'I'm keeping an eye on you,' he says. Fortunately Mum tries to say something and he loosens his grip on the arm.

The corridor smells of swimming pools, the floor is slippery. Otto, Ernst and Ferry take a run up so they can slide along the corridor. Otto is still holding Dina's hand, but she falls and starts to cry. 'Don't cry,' Otto says desperately. A nurse bends over Otto and asks how old he is.

'Six,' he says proudly. 'We've come to fetch Mum.'

The nurse nods and looks at Otto's brothers and sisters who have sat down on a bench like good children. 'There are a lot of you,' she says. 'And the people on this ward don't get fetched.'

Otto gives her a mistrustful look. Dina tugs at his arm and whines in the meantime.

'Is she staying here then?' Otto asks fearfully.

The nurse sighs.

Only things that are really broken don't get picked up, Otto thinks. He's learned this from his father.

'Is Mum coming?' Janna, Otto's oldest sister asks, as their father comes out of the room.

'You lot have exhausted her so much she has to stay a little longer,' he says.

He pulls Dina up onto his shoulders as they walk to the exit. Otto quickly runs into his mother's room, she's lying on her side and smiles when she sees him peering around the corner.

'Mum, are you broken?' he asks.

'What makes you think that, sweetie?'

Only then does Otto notice how big her eyes have become.

'Hurry on after your father before he notices you've gone.'

The man lying next to his mother is in exactly the same position. He must be dead, Otto thinks. He's sure of it.

NEW HOME

The children have all crammed into the car. Ferry has to sit in the front next to Dad. When Dad slaps his thigh encouragingly, he winces reflexively. His head disappears between his shoulder blades.

'You're all going to stay somewhere for a while because I have to go back to work tomorrow.'

'Until Mum's home again?' Elsa asks.

'You've made her very, very tired,' Dad says.

No one dares to ask any further. Otto and Ernst kick each other when their father isn't looking.

Ferry and Ernst are dropped off at the children's home. It's a stately building with a large fence around it. A group of boys wearing uniforms are marching in a neat row through the courtyard. Otto is glad he doesn't have to get out. He pulls a face at his brothers and sticks out his tongue.

'Your mother pleaded with me not to put you in the children's home. You're lucky,' Dad says to Otto in a stern voice.

Together with Dina he is dropped at his aunt and uncle's house. They already have two children. Their aunt hugs them and they're allowed to sit down at the dinner table right away. The

air in this house doesn't feel as sticky as at home. Here he can breathe freely. Otto shovels the rice and beans into his mouth as though he hasn't eaten for weeks. It makes his aunt laugh.

For the first few days he and Dina are especially spoiled. There's no fighting for food here because there is always enough. Otto plays with his cousin Irene, they make up a secret language and build huts behind the house together. They don't talk much but understand each other perfectly. [...]