

KARKSI HOUSE

I feel more at home in Karksi now than I used to. In those first years when I came to Estonia and especially to my father-in-law's place, I felt a bit lost and off balance. There was a famous scene in a Woody Allen film called *Deconstructing Harry* where one of the characters becomes out of focus. The rest of the images in the scene are clear, but this character is blurry. In those early years in Karksi, I often felt blurry and out of focus. I was out of context. Some American guy. I wasn't supposed to be there, yet I was.

I'm still here.

I am here in the kitchen where Andres, my father-in-law, is dipping his fingers in the šašlõkk sauce. The TV shows a bicycle race. Potatoes boil in a cauldron set atop a black iron stove, beside which stands a rusted bucket full of potato water skin and some greasy crinkled copies of *Maaleht* and *Õhtuleht*. Summer is šašlõkk season in Andres's house. The grill is always smoking, the fat sizzling. These are cubes of pork marinated with vinegar, sugar, onion, garlic, and many other seasonings and syrups. Andres dips a finger into the bowl of raw meat and licks it. "Needs more salt," he grunts.

Tiiu, his wife, doesn't say anything, but fetches the bag of salt and pours some in the sauce. Andres stirs it with a wide spoon and scratches his neck. Then he tastes it. "Mmm," he groans. "Better!" He actually seems happy for a moment. There's an added bounce in his usually deliberate movements. Tiiu ferries the bowl outdoors to the grill where Priit is minding it. We'll eat well soon.

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It's hot in the kitchen from the summer and the wood-burning stove. Some flies flit around and land in a puddle of spilled milk on the kitchen table. The table is covered with a laminated tablecloth that has images of strawberries on it. I look around and try to make some summer conversation.

"So, Tiiu, are you still working at the tourism farm?" I ask from Tiiu when she arrives back in.

"Yes," she answers. "I am."

"How is it going? Do you like it?"

Tiiu shrugs a bit and starts washing some plates in the sink. End of conversation. I reach for a battered and greasy copy of *Õhtuleht* so I can read more about the exploits of Anu Saagim. She's fifty-something now, but still seems like a fun-loving girl with Hollywood blonde hair, an exuberant expression and a revealing dress. I get kind of grossed out by all the fake celebrity pics at Tallinn parties though. All the makeup and swanky clothes. Estonian celebrity life is like masturbation. They do it to themselves. They're their own paparazzi. And what for? For this moment when I crumple up their images and feed them into the fire. That's city life, I sigh. So far away from Karksi.

From the windows of this house you can look out on an ocean of prairie. Flat and expansive. It extends to a distant road. Sometimes you can make out a truck as it steers along it. That's all. The drive in is all dirt and gravel. There are some greenhouses and gardens in the front yard. A clothes line. Sometimes I catch Andres looking out wearily on that land, like a captain eyes the sea. He's got this vacant, light-gray-eyed stare. It must be weird to have gray eyes, I think. They're like mirrors.

Andres is shorter than me, but he's built like a barrel. He has some wispy white hair, and those incredible eyes. I guess you

could say he looks a bit German, if you count mountain dwarfs among the Germanic races. He wears blue overalls and a work jacket almost every day of the year. If he's not in his work duds, he's got on a T-shirt that almost makes it over his belly and a pair of loose-fitting pants. He likes to sit on the deck and has a soft spot for animals. "Here, *kiisu, kiisu*," he will say. Then he will stroke one of the many cats behind the ears or on their soft underbellies. The cats always look grateful.

Andres has a builder's hands, which is to say he's all thumbs. I remember what happened to my hands when I worked in construction, how the skin would peel away, and then one of my fingernails would go black, and I couldn't even clench them into a fist because they ached so much. I remember one of the older builders trying to sell me a 1967 Gibson electric guitar, mint condition, at a great price. "But why do you want to get rid of it?" I asked. "I've been working as a builder for 40 years," he said. "And I can't play the guitar anymore." He attempted to twist his clubs of hands into a bar chord. Couldn't do it.

For some reason Epp has her parents' wedding rings from 1974. Her mother Aime's ring is tiny and dainty. Andres's ring can fit around my thumb, and yet, as I understand it, it is now too small for him. It looks like a piece of metal plumbing that's been sawed off. She was 19. Andres was 21. The same year Andres had his first born. Both of Andres's brothers – Titi and Toomas – were fathers at that age.

In the evening we have šašlõkk on plates in the garden. In the morning, Andres's thumbs are at work again, doling out spoonfuls of pancake batter into a buttery pan. Tiitu has already left for work. The children ring the table and Andres adds to the heap of pancakes. The pancakes are eaten with homemade jam. The

children all want the strawberry or raspberry, but I am content with the bitter lingonberry stuff. This jam is thick and it seems like it's been in the cobwebbed cupboard for years.

Epp fills some old glasses with milk from the bag. The children are peaceful in this setting. The TV is still showing that bicycle race. If it were winter, it would be skiing. Skiing, skiing. Always. The TV is always on in the Karksi kitchen, and yet it doesn't distract from the main course: breakfast. I eat the pancakes, too. Andres is sweating a bit and the flies are still dancing between his brow and the window. There are about a hundred dead flies scattered in the windowsills of this house, especially upstairs. No one seems to be worried about it. Feels like everyone here is content. Andres doesn't say anything, he's just making the pancakes, but I detect some empathy radiating from his chest this morning. His mirror eyes have a bit more marine moisture to them. He's not going to cry, but he looks alive. It's like he doesn't know how to say that he's happy we are here, but he does know how to make good pancakes, so he focuses on that. I understand you, Andres. I also like to make pancakes sometimes.

Except that my pancakes are terrible.

"See, Justin, this is how you make pancakes," Epp says. She has done her hair up in a very intricate braid and is wearing one of my old T-shirts. "You have to use milk that's gone sour, and lots of eggs."

"I do, but they always come out too stiff."

"And lots of oil too. And a bit of baking soda. See, that's how my father does it!"

I glance at the big man sweating over the wood-heated stove. "I'm taking notes."

"I don't know what it is you do that makes them so stiff. The other food you make is good though."

"Thanks."

"Mmm," Epp yawns and sips some more so called student's coffee. This is Karksi coffee, coffee made not by a machine or in a French press, but by dumping one or two spoonfuls of coffee into a cup, pouring boiling water on it, and waiting for the grains to drop to the bottom. Then you add some milk to it. It's strong, and the coffees are made nearly round the clock in the kitchen. This is the first of the day. She makes one for me too, and one each for her brothers. "Do you want one, father?" she asks.

"*Ei taha*," he grunts, shakes his head, stirring up more batter. "No, I don't." And that's all he says.

This big guy. He seems so tough. But what he loves most is petting kittens and making pancakes.

I may have grown up on the other side of the ocean, but I had been in houses like this in New York. My friend was the only son in a family with about four or five daughters. It was a chaotic and bohemian house, with rusty lawnmower parts and gardening tools strewn around the yard and boyfriends sleeping on the living room floor. For breakfast, they put out bowls and cereal boxes and you helped yourself. Flies flitted around the kitchen. In the garage, there was a fleet of old bicycles. I remember asking my friend which bike was his and how he seemed confused by the question. They were all just bikes, and you took the one you wanted! Each of his sister's rooms was a dung hole of laundry, hamster cages, and posters of The Cure. Each of those girls was a mystery to me.

In Karksi, I sometimes think of that house and how out of place I felt there, and yet liberated at the same time and real comfortable, as if I had just been kidnapped by the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*. *You mean we can eat whatever cereal we want? You mean I can ride whatever bicycle I want? My childhood house was spotless, and every day brought with it another round of vacuuming and spraying and cleansing. I couldn't even make toast without my father swooping down on me to remind me not to leave any crumbs. Then he'd be there with the paper towel and spray, wipe, wipe, wipe. Not that living in a clean house is a bad thing, but it didn't have that lived in, crumbly, greasy newspaper Karksi feel. There weren't open tins of screws and bolts just lying around the entrance, as there are in Karksi, or a ladder leaning up against the outside of the house that's been standing there for seven months.*

Epp never lived in this house as a child. They lived up the dirt road and across in a cluster of postwar houses and apartment buildings. That's the real Karksi, where the streets are paved and people have fine yards with apple trees. That's where the collective farm buildings still stand, including the halls where they once had community events. In the mornings, Epp, her sister Elo, and cousin Helina would get up, even before their parents awoke, and walk all the way down that dirt road to Longi School, wearing their uniforms. But first, the radio alarm would go off and a woman would announce something in Russian. Then an Ivo Linna disco song would come on and Pritt would sing the whole melody: "*Aeg ei peatu, ei ei*," which means, "Time doesn't stop, no, no." At least that's how I imagine it all.

When their brother Pritt was old enough, he went to school as well. While all of the kids look respectable in the photographs,

other snapshots reveal a bohemian house with a lot of cats as well as Epp's pet rat. It reminds me so much of my friend's house from my childhood, of all the mystery girls with their posters and pets. There was tension sometimes between family members though. Once, Prit tried to break down Epp's door with a chair. Or was it an axe? I don't know exactly why he did it but Epp had ticked him off. Too much Ivo Linna? We all have our breaking point. I know that part of the destructive tool sliced through the door. There's a reason Andres has that sea stare.

The old wooden schoolhouse is located beside the plot of land that Andres and Aime bought and set to work constructing what would become their family house. That was later, when the kids were teenagers. There is a bit of a ravine and a creek between the house and some trees that obscure the view. Today the Longi schoolhouse is a summer home for some family from Tallinn, including a boy named Teodor. I know this because I can hear them yelling his name through the trees. "Teodor!"

The backside of the Karksi homestead is bordered by a forest so dense that it's hard to enter. The trees are stitched together by brambles and broken timbers. It seems like the kind of place where one might encounter grizzly bears even though I've never heard of any bears near there.

I thought I saw a bear once. I was waiting by the berry bushes in the yard when I heard a strange rustling sound and some odd growing too. I noticed the branches bend a bit and steadied myself so as not to make any noise in this nature moment. Then, through the berries, emerged a huge, barrel chested form. It was Andres, stuffing his face with red currants! He had dropped a few on his shirt.

The settlement of Karksi-Nuia, as it is known on maps, combines the village at Karksi with the larger town of Nuia, a few kilometers to the south. This is the last big stop before the winding road to Latvia, a forgotten belt of Estonia with almost zero foreign tourism. It's also August Kitzberg territory and a monument to the writer of the classic story *Libahunt*, "Werewolf" sits on the edge of Nuia, overlooking the valleys. For Andres, Nuia is the closest civilization. If you need something – gasoline, ice cream, some superglue – then you go to Nuia. There is a supermarket there, some shops, a high school, gas station, library, doctor's office, and, in early July, a sleep-away camp.

In winter, the area takes on an Alpine feel, with its angle-roofed homes and racks of skis in front of the school, but in the summer, Nuia is dusty and lethargic. People swim in the lakes at the base of the town, or hitchhike west to Pärnu to bathe at its beaches for the day. Our daughter Anna likes Karksi in summer when she's there for camp though. Andres works in the garage next to the camp, and when she sees him, she cries out "*Tere, Vanaisa!*" – *Hello Grandfather!* - and wraps her arms around his waist. Andres usually says "*Tere*" back and strokes Anna on her yellow head. He seems surprised by that big hug.

Anna is actually the only person whom I have seen hug Andres.

A few weeks later, and I am back in Karksi again. It's Tiit's 55th birthday. Her *juubel*, her jubilee. For Estonians, every five years is a *juubel*. Tiit's friends sit around tables covered in platters of potatoes,

sauerkraut, pork schnitzels, and pickles. There are also deviled eggs, sprats, and cucumber salad, as well as layer cakes and chocolate-dipped kringels. Tiin has her hair curled for the event, and I didn't even recognize it was her at first. Her friends are also made up. Her daughter Kristi is there with her young son Markus, and so is her son, Tanel. Thirty-something Tanel walks over to the stereo in the corner and puts on a CD: Modern Talking's smash retro hit, "Cherry Cherry Lady." Tanel has had a beer or two and starts to dance robotically – in jest – to the electro disco rhythms.

He's the only one dancing.

Andres has been silent for most of the *juubel*, and halfway through the song, he gets up and heads out for some fresh air. Anna and I are the only ones who came to the party from our family – Marta is in America and Maria is sick and Epp is at home with her – so I leave Anna with the older ladies and a plate of schnitzels and head outside too.

But Andres isn't outside the building and he's not in the big parking lot outside the community center where the *juubel* is taking place and where Tanel is dancing. Instead I catch a glimpse of his bear-like figure crossing the street. He's holding another, younger man in a loose shirt by the arm and has another of his paws on his back. There is nothing friendly about the scene. He escorts the man across the street. Then I see him talk to him with his finger. His body language says something like, "Now get out and stay out and don't come back."

"What happened?" I ask Andres when he comes back from across the road. As he gets closer, I can see that his face is a bit ruddier and he's out of breath.

"There is a home here in Nuia," he says. "For people with psychological problems," he twists a finger at his temples. "He

was making a scene. Annoying the kids. Somebody had to do something."

I know that my father-in-law supports the conservative Isamaa ja Res Publica Luit political party. In the kitchen of the Karksi House, where the smell of grease is heavy in the air, there is an IRL calendar on the wall. Each month comes with a patriotic image of runo folk singers or moving panoramas of agrarian landscapes with windmills and tractors. I have wondered sometimes if maybe I am not his ideal son-in-law because I am not an Estonian, because I am still a little blurry, still a little out of focus here in Karksi-Nuia. Today, I realize that Andres probably doesn't care so much where I've come from or why I am here. I am just here with him and I don't have any psychological problems and I'm not dancing upstairs. And I've come out here for the same reason Andres has.

To get some fresh air.