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*On kuu
kui kuldne
laev*

The Moon is Like a Golden Boat

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Every time Keete looks at pictures from her childhood where she's holding her teddy bear Pätsu in her lap, she wonders what life would have been like without war. Her parents would certainly have been able to keep working as teachers without living in terror of the communists deporting them to Siberia. The whole family could have spent nights without having to hurry to the bomb shelter or see their precious hometown in ruins. In peacetime, she could have kept living on the second floor of their cherry-red home instead of setting off on a harrowing journey across the Baltic Sea to Sweden. Years and years later, Keete thinks about how lucky today's kids are to grow up without war. And she still cradles Pätsu in her arms – a teddy bear who helped her get through life's perils.

Awards:

2020 Annual Children's Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

2020 Good Children's Book

2020 Raisin of the Year award for the most remarkable children's book of the year.

2020 Viru County Literary Award



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As the gale gathered strength that night, all the passengers on the fishing boat—maybe seventy or eighty altogether—crouched in the hold like in the belly of a whale. Only a couple younger men stayed on deck to lend a hand to the captain and first mate. Men were scarce on board in general; there were mostly just mothers and children. And the kids of all ages numbered more than anyone else.

Being in this ship is like being in a bomb shelter, Rein thought. You had to stay quiet so as not to disturb the others. A baby was crying somewhere in a corner, but the other children were nice and still, as if trying to hear someone creeping around.

Whenever a kid felt they had to go potty, they'd whisper into their mother's ear and she would shout out: "Where's the pot?"

It would then appear from the darkness, passed along from one person to the next. Everyone had to share a single potty with the picture of a cat on the side.

When the container started to get dangerously full, the bravest and most daring of the mothers would take it under her arm, climb up the ladder, and empty the contents into the sea. The captain was irate when he saw this.

"What the devil are you doing running around up here? Do you want to fall overboard with that pot?" he thundered. "Stay down in the hold, otherwise we'll capsize in this gale!"

Nevertheless, the bravest mother managed to empty the pot and make it back down safely below deck, where the essential basin embarked on its next round. The journey continued with only that one tiny babe occasionally wailing in a corner. Ellen comforted her children, saying: "Did you know that in Sweden, which is where we're headed now, there live a king and a queen and princes . . ."

Reet and Riina, the youngest of them all, both gasped. "Princes?!"

"That's right, real princes. Three of them. And the Swedish king wears a crown on his head," Ellen said. "A crown made of gold!

You'll be out for a Sunday stroll and the king and queen might walk right past you, wearing their crowns."

"Where are the queens?" another child next to them asked.

"In Sweden. That's where we're going!" Reet explained excitedly. "Real princesses wearing crowns! And three princes might walk past you all at once on a Sunday! All of them with gold crowns on their heads."

"Will they come to meet our ship when we get there?"

"Of course they will!"

The rumor of the crowned kings and princesses who would come to see them when they docked spread around the dark belly of the ship. And incredibly, even the little wailer stopped crying. The children and their parents forgot about the terrible danger they were in, if only for just a moment, all thanks to the Swedish king.

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It might have been just before dawn when the storm finally subsided. The sea, which had seemed so furious, became a little calmer.

The rescue boat wasn't leaking as much anymore, as the wood had soaked and thickened. A spell of relaxation came over the passengers. The air grew crisper, the sky cleared, and stars twinkled above.

"The Moon's a golden ship and the star a silver oar!"

Joosep the soldier started humming a song he'd heard somewhere once.

"If only—oh, if only I could reach your side once more. The Moon's a golden ship again, the star a silver oar, whenever at night I hear your laughter echo from the shore."

"It's not so hopeless at all anymore, is it!" the old fisherwoman grunted.

"It certainly isn't" the old fisherman agreed. "If we could survive that gale, then we can make it to Gotland, too!"

"The Moon is kind of like a ship," Keete, who was bundled up in all kinds of sheets and clothing, said to her mother Juta.

"Yes, but how can a star be an oar?" Juta

Reading sample

asked Joosep.

"Oars slide through the water, and the stars slide through the sky," he replied meaningfully.

"The stars are our guide," Uncle remarked. "They help us to navigate."

"How so?" Joosep asked curiously.

"First, you look for the Big Dipper," Uncle explained. "And using that, you can find the Little Dipper. The North Star forms the top of its handle. Once you know which way is north, then it's not hard at all to figure out west; right, Jaan? North, northeast, east, southeast . . ."

"South, southwest, west, northwest," Jaan continued enthusiastically.

"Which means that west is that way!" Uncle said, pointing. "And that's just where our ship is headed."

Wedge between her parents, little Keete craned her neck to look up, too.

"There are several bright stars to the west of us right now," Uncle continued, scanning the sky. "Look, that bluish one is Vega, and to the left of it is the constellation Cygnus, which our ancestors used to call the Big Cross. We can set our western course by that very constellation."

Keete also tried to find the Big Cross in the sky. She may or may not have seen it, but believed she did, at least.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to a glimmering light on the horizon.

"Those are the fishing boat's running lights, I believe," Uncle replied. "We're making our way together!"

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Morning dawned with bleary light. The sea rocked the vessels rhythmically. The fishing boat, the sailboat, and the motorboat were all within sight of one another. Then, a plane appeared in the sky.

With a low, droning roar, it approached them and circled overhead.

"It's the enemy!" the captain of the fishing boat cried, and ordered everyone to take cover.

The sailor raised a white flag with a red

cross to the top of the mast, which was meant to communicate a clear message to the pilot: there were refugees and sick people on board, not soldiers.

The enemy plane appeared to zoom away from them, but then arced and began approaching again.

"They won't shoot at us. It's obvious that there are women and small children on board," the passengers whispered to one another, waving to the aircraft.

But that's just what the pilot did—shoot at the fishing boat with the plane's machine gun. Bullets splashed in the water and hit the side of the hull, making strange thumping noises.

What will become of my children if I'm hit . . . Ellen thought in panic as she shielded her tiny daughter Riina.

"Can't you see these are kids?!" a woman screamed at the plane, even though the pilot naturally couldn't hear her. He might have seen her shaking her fist. The plane buzzed past, but instead of leaving the refugees be, it swung around and attacked the rescue boat.

Uncle revved the engine up to full speed and tried to escape the hail of bullets. The water frothed, Irma screeched, and the sudden jerk caused the bigger of the fisherwoman's bags to tumble overboard.

"Duck! Keep your heads down!" Uncle Olev roared as the plane sprayed the waves with bullets. "Get down!"

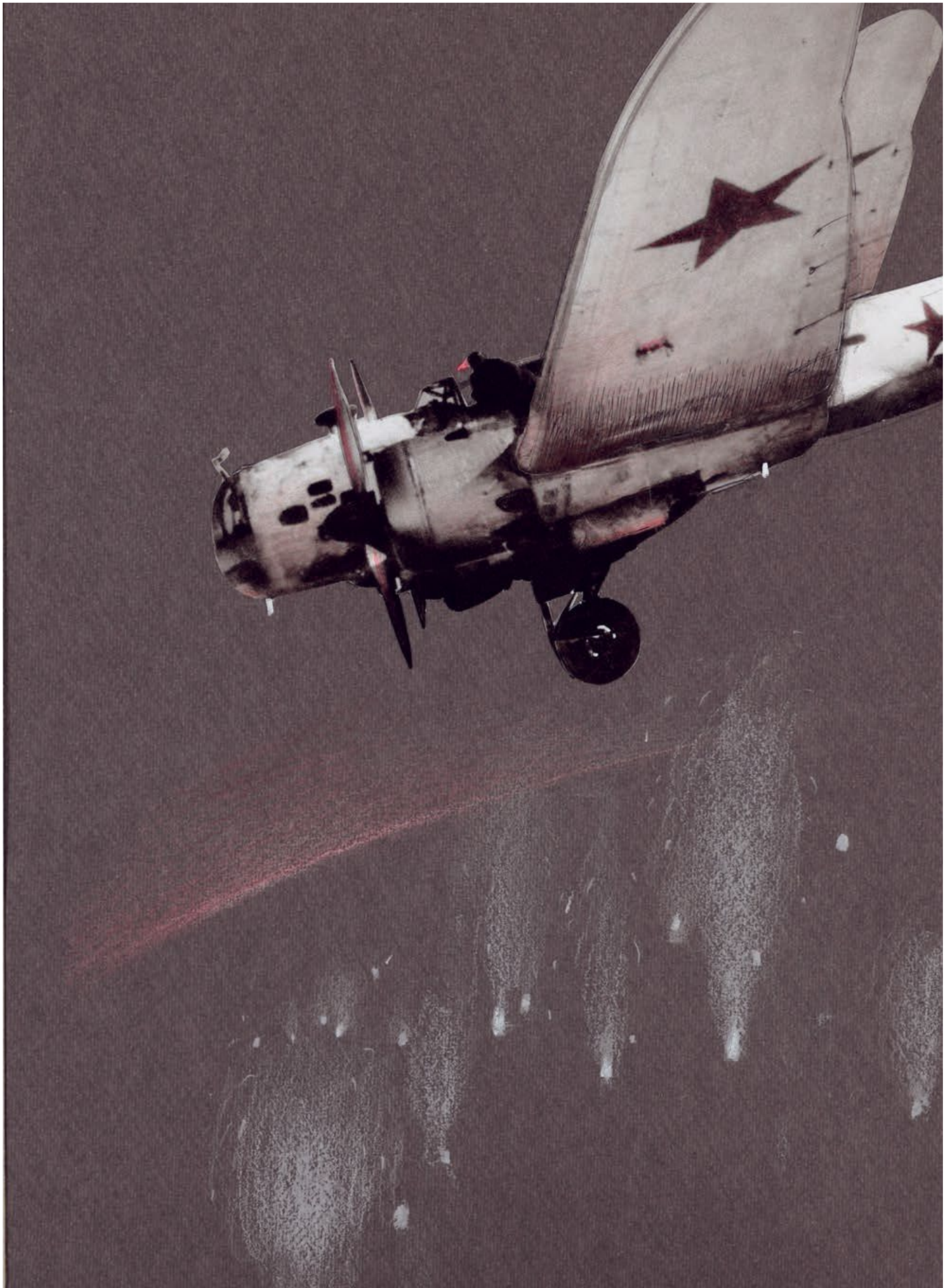
Juta held Keete close and whispered into her ear: "Everything will be just fine. Nothing bad will happen to us!"

Joosep the soldier pulled a pistol from his pocket, stood up, and started shooting back at the plane: *bang, bang, bang*. When the clip was emptied, he reloaded and shot again: *bang, bang*.

Though Joosep's shots probably weren't the actual cause, the enemy plane—red stars painted on the undersides of its wings—abandoned the rescue boat and set its sights on the sailboat instead.

The overcrowded sailboat had no powerful motor or its own pistol-wielding Joosep. It had no defenses at all, and the passengers couldn't even hide below deck like

Reading sample



Juhani Püttsepp. *The Moon's a Golden Ship*. Translated by Adam Cullen

Reading sample

on the fishing boat.

Opening fire, the plane's machine gun made the water around the sailboat bubble. The shopkeeper yelled: "We've been hit! Water's coming in. We've got to care for the wounded!"

The passengers clung tightly to one another, but the plane kept on shooting until the sailboat sunk.

Inside the cabin, Maret suddenly had a vision of her mother and a warm, crooked ray of sunlight on a colorful rag rug. She gradually felt herself melt into the cozy light.

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On the rescue boat, a new problem had arisen. One that not even Jaan's uncle could have foreseen.

The man had indeed worked as a harbor captain, but he'd also sailed in Mediterranean and African waters in his younger days, spending weeks and months at a time at sea. A simple trip to Sweden might have seemed insignificant in comparison—nothing more than a hop, skip, and a jump away—but that was far from the truth after weathering a gale and being attacked by a fighter plane.

He noticed that the fuel tank was running empty only by the time that perhaps a couple buckets of diesel had already leaked out and were sloshing around with the water in the bottom of the boat. It took a while and more lost fuel before Olev and Eedu finally managed to tip the barrel in a way that stopped the leak. As it turned out, a bullet had punctured the side.

We're lucky it didn't catch fire, Uncle thought.

Now, they needed to get the reeking liquid out of the boat.

"It's such a shame to have lost all those things that went overboard in my bag," the fisherwoman sighed.

"Ah, at least you're still breathing. You can thank your lucky stars for that," Uncle grunted. "Think of the souls who went down with that sailboat."

The old fisherwoman went silent.

Indeed, there was no sign of it in the wake of the air attack. The fishing boat was still visible though, rather far away.

Uncle turned the motorboat back around, hoping they might make it in time to save some of the passengers. But not a single person could be seen floating in the waves. Only a splinter of wood bobbing here, a basket there ...

Maybe the fishing boat managed to save some? he wondered. *Though I don't imagine such a big vessel would make it to the scene so quickly.*

Perhaps half an hour had passed since the plane's attack.

"Nobody!" Olev groaned at barely a whisper.

"We lost a lot of time messing around with the fuel tank," Eedu remarked. "Men wouldn't be able to stay afloat in these swells for so long, much less women and children and elderly people!"

"Did Maret drown?" Keete asked her mother.

"We don't know for sure," Mom replied.

Uncle circled the scene once more, but they didn't spot a soul.