



Shoe # 41

Written by Jaanus Vaiksoo
Illustrator: Katrin Kaev
Ärkel 2022, 190 pp
ISBN: 9789949727261
storybook, fiction
Age: 10+

Paul Fifth and his best friend Minna are on the roll again. This time they are visiting Paul “the shoeman” Bachmann and his fiancée Katja in their freshly purchased country house. As expected, there won’t be any lazy summer days in the sun on the beach. Rumours about poisoned bees are spreading and Paul and Minna dive into the investigation. They stumble upon hand-written letters from Siberia as well as a piece of plywood with “Shoe # 41” burned on it. Are those two in relation to the poisoned bees? That’s what the kids need to shine the light on, asap.

Shoe # 41 is a third book in a sequel. First in a series, Shoe # 39, won The White Ravens award on 2020 and the Annual Children’s Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia



Reading sample

[pp. 75–87]

11.

The sun was shining and only a few tufts of cloud drifted lazily across the midday sky. Paul and Ats unrolled an old rug beneath the apple tree, flopped down on their backs, and let themselves unwind. Paul was on his phone. Ats took out a packet of serial stories clipped from old newspapers that they'd found in a folder in the old house and was about to delve into *In the Footsteps of the Vikings*. Alas, the blissful summer idyll didn't last for long: Minna emerged from the threshing barn with a sickle in one hand and an axe in the other.

"Enough lollygagging!" she declared resolutely. "We're not running a holiday home. Time to get to work!"

Paul and Ats stared up at her, bewildered. The sunlight disappeared and was replaced by Minna's threatening shadow.

"Around here, we don't let women do the work while the men all sunbathe. Paul, you go and cut down the nettles next to the barn and Ats, you clear the aspen brush from around the house."

"You're a tough old gal," Ats groaned as he sat up. "I was just about to start studying here."

Minna raised the axe.

"I'll show you an old gal! And first, you're going to study clearing brush from the yard."

Paul leapt to his feet and tugged his friend's sleeve.

"Cut it out, that's not funny! Women are in charge these days."

Ats set the clippings on the rug to get up, but a sudden gust of wind scattered them across the yard. All three rushed to catch the pages before they blew away.

"Check out what I found!" Paul exclaimed. "It's an old letter."

"Here's another!" Ats said, picking up two yellowed papers.

Minna carefully fished a third from the lilac bush. It turned out that the folder had contained someone's old correspondence in addition to the newspaper serial. Fortune smiled upon the boys as Minna's zest for yardwork dissolved in a flash. She collected all of the letters, sat down on the rug, and started poring through them. Ats and Paul tried to get the serial pages back in order.

"Read it to us, too," Paul said.

"The handwriting's just awful. I think it's written in pencil," Minna murmured, trying to decipher the writing. "Hello, Vallo! I'm in far-

away Siberia now. We spent two weeks in cattle wagons to get here. There were 45 people in each. All we were given to eat was some gruel-like soup. You and I will never see each other again. They read the sentence after we arrived: life-long exile. Snow is still on the ground here. The place is called Ashtak, in Novosibirsk Oblast. We were brought here on a big motor sled. It's a lumbermen's camp deep in the forests of the taiga. My mother and sister and I live in a large barracks. There are eight other people in our room. There is nothing to eat. We're hungry all the time. In the evening, my sister and I play with the deck of cards you gave me for my birthday.

How are you? Summer break is coming up soon. I don't know if I'll ever be able to go to school again. Have you already caught pike in the river? Say hello to Juku and Meelis for me. Rein. May 15, 1949."

Minna set the letter aside and everyone was quiet for a while. None could have expected anything like that. It was sent seventy-three years ago to the same Vallo Tagamets whom Ene had mentioned earlier.

"So, that means Rein was deported. He was genuinely writing about being taken away to Siberia!" Minna said, shaking her head in disbelief.

It was incredible to be holding a letter once written by a boy who was deported so far from his home.

"Wait, so they even deported little kids?"

"Of course they did!" Ats snapped, irked by Minna's question. How could his friend not know such things!

"I told you about how my grandma was eight when she and her mom and her brothers were taken away. Grandma said there was even a woman with them who gave birth to a son in the cattle wagon."

Minna leapt angrily to her feet.

"What?! Sending a pregnant woman to Siberia? That's awful! What kind of people could do such a thing?"

"Grandma always said that Stalin wasn't a person, but a monster."

Paul was impatient to hear what else this boy Rein had written. Minna sat back down on the blanket and tried to cool her nerves. There were six letters total and she read them in order.



Hello, Vallo!

I received your letter. I reread it several times. I long so much to come home. You're going into the fifth grade this year. I want to go to school, too, but I don't speak Russian. We moved from the taiga to a village called Skala. We live in a sod hut. The walls and roof are made of turf and clay. A Russian man and woman live with us. They also have four little kids and an old woman here. I shepherded all summer. There are 30 cows and one sow in the herd. It's fun to ride the sow. The pasture is next to a big river. I've already caught three graylings. We don't have that fish in rivers in Estonia. The best bait is grasshoppers. One day, I fell asleep against a tree and the cattle disappeared. Luckily, the sow was sleeping next to me. I jumped on her back and she took me to the herd. They weren't very far away. I whittled myself a wooden chess set. Please send me the chess guide by Paul Keres that I lent you. I'd like to start playing. Write more letters to me.

I hope you're well!
Your Friend, Rein
August 19, 1949

Hello, Vallo!

Thank you for the Christmas package your mom sent. The salted lard was especially tasty. I haven't had lard in ages. It was mouthwatering! We are very hungry. I got the chess guide, too. It is very cold here. I've never seen snowdrifts in Estonia as tall as the ones here. The snow is already several meters deep and piled up to the roofs. I'm attending fourth grade in Izhyrak. All the classes are taught in Russian. Now, I can understand a little bit of the language and am able to speak it. But studying is very hard. I keep getting Ds on my assignments. There are three Estonian girls in my class, too. The school is three kilometers from Skala. One day there was a heavy blizzard, and you couldn't see a thing. I dug a hollow in the snow and crawled in to get out of the wind. I started getting awfully drowsy there. Mom warned me never to fall asleep outside, otherwise you might freeze to death and be covered up by drifting snow. Then they won't find you till spring. I finally made it home, though. It's been 40 degrees below zero for a few days now, but class is still held. I look forward to your next letter!

Be well!
Your Friend, Rein
January 8, 1950

Hello, Vallo!

Have you been writing to me? I haven't received a letter from you in so long. Are you well? The weather here has been absolutely frigid for several weeks. It's been more than 40 degrees below zero. The Russians brought their chickens and calf indoors. The chickens live under the stove and the calf in front of it. I can't sleep at night because the chickens constantly cluck and the calf bleats. Mom goes into the woods to log with the men. It is very hard work. She has to chop down huge trees with a frame saw. Then, she saws the trunk into disks and those into blocks. The blocks are used to heat an oven in the back of the truck, which makes fuel for the engine. Yesterday, I went down to the river to fetch water. Two wolves came and sat on the opposite bank. It was already dusk. I chopped a hole in the ice with an ice pick and filled the buckets with water. Luckily, I made it back up the steep bank. The wolves were still sitting in the exact same place. It was 40 degrees below zero, but I was drenched in sweat. Have you seen wolves in our woods back home? I very much look forward to your letter.

Happy birthday!
Your Friend, Rein
February 24, 1950

Hello, Vallo!

Have you received my letters? It's finally spring here. The snow melted very quickly. School is already over. I was sent to work on a collective farm. We had to burn off the uncleared hay left on the fields in autumn. They don't pay wages for the work. I received a quarter of a loaf of bread per day. The mosquitos are terrible and attack in gigantic swarms. My face is completely swollen and I've scratched my legs raw. There is very little to eat. My sister and I gathered wild onions by the river. I made myself the same kind of spear we used to catch pike at home. I've already gotten a few. Have you been fishing, too? Mom was very sick for a while. My sister and I were afraid she was going to die. She's getting better now, though. She's working again and was made the caretaker of the collective farm's chicken coops. Please write to me. Did you receive my letter?

Your Friend, Rein
April 24, 1950

Hi!

I got your letter. I understand. I won't write anymore. Take care of yourself!

Rein
May 27, 1950

That was Rein's final letter. What did it mean? Were these all the letters that Rein sent, or were there more? He'd stopped getting replies from Vallo for some reason. But Vallo still held on to Rein's letters and placed them in a folder for safekeeping. What an intriguing tale.

Minna couldn't get her mind off the mystery. For her, the most painful thing in the world was when someone hurt another person for no reason. Again and again, she flipped through the letters, reading some passages aloud to the boys.

"This is absurd! How can anyone do something like this to a fellow human being?"

"It was even way worse for a lot of people who were sent to Gulag prison camps in Siberia," Ats commented. "The way Stalin stayed in power was by locking up thousands of people or exiling them to the far end of the Soviet Union and keeping everybody afraid. Those who got to stay home no longer dared to speak up or do anything about it; they feared for their own lives."

"I know what we'll do! Let's go track down this Vallo in the nursing home," Minna announced.

"What, right now?" Ats asked. "But then when are we going to cut down the nettle and clear the brush?"

Minna shot him a glare.

"Please stop asking such stupid questions."

Paul snorted.

"Okay, okay. I was just joking."

Minna was already walking to the shed to fetch her bicycle.

"Maybe we should have some lunch first," Paul proposed. "It's fifteen kilometers to Iisaku."

"What kind of men are you, anyway?! Just think about little Rein, who had nothing at all to eat in Siberia."

Minna was in a feisty mood and Ats and Paul both realized that resistance was futile. On top of that, they also wanted to find out the story behind those letters and the answer to the most curious question of all: Who was Rein?

12.

Iisaku Nursing Home was a little two-story yellow building on the edge of a park. It was quiet inside and there wasn't a soul to be seen in the hallways. An older woman in a blue dress descended the stairs and stopped to stare quizzically at the children. When she heard that Minna, Ats, and Paul were looking for a man named Vallo, a grin immediately spread across her face.

"Oh, how nice! So you three are Vallo's new neighbors. This will certainly be a big surprise. He doesn't have any friends or relatives left to come and visit. My name is Maike; I run the home."

She ushered the children back outside. Beneath the trees a short distance away was a man in a wheelchair. It was Vallo.

"Vallo, dear! Look: I brought your neighbor-children to visit," Maike announced loudly.

The old man eyed Minna, Ats, and Paul suspiciously. He had snow-white hair; a pale, thin face; gray eyes that were sunk deep in their sockets; and veiny hands resting on the wheels of the wheelchair.

"What neighbors? Who are you?" he asked in a dull, hollow voice as he stared quizzically back at the caretaker.

"We're the new residents of Ülejõe Farmstead," Minna said, also at a higher volume, and gripped Vallo's hand in greeting.

Once again, Paul was amazed by how boldly Minna acted in such situations. He himself was reluctant to deal with any elderly people who were grumpy and withdrawn.

"New residents?" Vallo echoed, squeezing Minna's hand ever so slightly. "Where are Viktor and Luule, then? Did they pass?"

"No, they're alive. They moved to Tartu. They sold the house to Hugo and Katja," Minna explained.

"Fine, if you say so. But I don't know you," he grunted, pulling his hand free and looking around.

"Vallo, dear, don't be so ill-tempered with the children," Maike scolded, trying to smooth things over. "They'd like to get to know you. Think of how nice that would be: young friends! You all have a polite conversation here and I'll let you have some privacy – if you need anything, then just come and call for me."

Wordlessly, Vallo watched Maike walk away. It appeared he wasn't at all pleased with unexpectedly being left alone in the company of three unfamiliar youngsters. Minna, Ats, and Paul sat down on the bench across from him.

The old man regarded them with open curiosity before turning away and muttering, more to himself than to anyone else: "I only ever had one friend, and he's been gone a very long time."

Minna glanced at Ats and Paul. She could guess whom he meant.

"Was it Rein?" she asked, leaning in towards Vallo.

He twitched and his dour expression became a shade gloomier.

"I don't know any Rein," the crotchety man grunted.

“Are you sure?” she pressed.

Vallo didn't respond.

“Don't be mad,” Ats said, stepping in to help. “We don't mean any harm, we just wanted to talk to you. About Rein and... in general, you know.”

Perhaps it wasn't the best moment to confess that they'd poked around Vallo's house and discovered the folder containing Rein's letters. But they also had nothing to lose. The kids launched into their story about ending up living in Ülejõe, who Hugo and Katja were, and how they went swimming in the river, which led to Paul coming across Vallo's house on the opposite bank. Counter to their expectations, the old man didn't seem very cross anymore. On the contrary: the more excited their storytelling became, the more his expression lightened.

“Have you already caught any pike?”

Vallo interrupted.

“Pike?! Are there really pike in the river?” Ats exclaimed.

“What kind of question is that!” For a moment, a boyish glint sparked in Vallo's eyes. “It was teeming with them back when Rein and I fished there. Especially in spring.”

Minna steered their conversation towards Rein's letters. She explained how they'd found the folder containing the newspaper serial and come across the letters stashed between them by pure accident. It was thanks to this fluke that they read them and found out about Rein in the first place.

“So, we were wondering – who was he? What ever happened to him?” she asked.

Vallo's cheerful expression turned grim again. His chin sunk to his chest and his shoulders started to quiver. The old man was crying. He searched his pocket for a handkerchief, wiped his eyes and mouth, and couldn't speak for a couple minutes.

“It was my fault. I'm to blame for everything,” he finally moaned over and over again. “I betrayed my very best friend. I'm a bad person. Very bad.”

Ats, Paul, and Minna didn't know how to react, but after a while, Vallo regained his composure. He stared straight at the children, though there wasn't a speck of malice in his sad eyes. Softly and haltingly, he began to speak. As boys, Vallo and Rein were neighbors and the very best friends that could be. Rein lived in the same Ülejõe Farmstead that Hugo and Katja later purchased. Rein's father built it with his own hands. But then, Russian soldiers crossed into Estonia, war soon broke out, and hard times arrived. Vallo's and Rein's fathers hid in the woods to avoid fighting for either side but in the end, it was no use. Vallo's was shot by

a Russian destruction battalion there beneath the trees. Immediately after the war ended, Rein's father, who had previously been a parish elder, was arrested by the Soviets and sent to a prison camp. The boys attended school together for several years until a fateful day dawned: March 25, 1949. Rein, his younger sister, and their mother were deported to Siberia. In the middle of the night, armed men showed up in a truck and took them from their home. No news came for a very long time but finally, Rein's first letter arrived. Vallo was overjoyed and greatly pained by it simultaneously, because his friend told him they would be forced to stay in Siberia for the rest of their lives. He wrote a swift reply and tried to console his friend, saying he was sure they'd meet again soon. In every letter he wrote, Vallo tried to encourage Rein, asked him to stay strong, and described how he and his mom were taking care of Rein's house and garden. Then, their correspondence ground to a sudden halt. Vallo was called to the principal's office one day, where a stranger in a leather jacket was waiting. The man was holding Vallo's latest letters to Rein. He asked what the boy meant when he wrote that they'd definitely meet again soon. Was he trying to say that he and his mom wanted to travel to Siberia to be with Rein, too? The man pulled a revolver from his jacket pocket and casually placed it on the principal's desk. Giving Vallo a stern glare, he recommended that the boy carefully consider if it was really a healthy choice to be friends with the son of an enemy of the people; with a boy who'd been found guilty of subversion and was sent to prison for it. When the principal tried to defend Vallo, praising him as an outstanding student and Pioneer, the man barked at him to be quiet. The man called Vallo a wolf-pup in sheep's clothing and vowed to keep his eye on him. After the man left, the principal forbade Vallo from ever writing to Rein again because it would only bring woe upon them all. Vallo was filled with rage and dissent. He went straight home to grab a pencil and paper and write a very long letter to his friend, but as he was approaching the house and saw his mother hauling buckets of water to the cow in the pasture, something inside of him broke. He was suddenly terrified to lose his home and be deprived of it for good, just like Rein. So, Vallo told Rein that he unfortunately couldn't write anymore because it wasn't 'healthy'. When Rein's final letter of only a scant few words was delivered, it cut to the quick. He realized that their friendship was over. Rein had been offended by his friend's cowardice, because Vallo was his sole tie to Estonia and to home.

A few years after Stalin's death, Estonian exiles to Siberia were gradually allowed to



return home, but Rein's family didn't show up. New occupants were assigned to their house and Rein stayed clear of the vicinity. His family moved to the far end of the country instead – Läänemaa, the western county. Vallo attempted to contact him a few times, but Rein never replied. Even after Estonia regained its independence, Rein never returned to his childhood homestead or tried to get back what his family lost. Vallo hadn't heard any news about his friend in the last twenty years. He blamed himself above all for Rein becoming so stubborn and refusing to bury the hatchet for so many years. Vallo believed that he had robbed Rein, his very best friend, of the boy's last shred of hope in distant Siberia. Rein no doubt wished to simply erase any memory of his fair, carefree childhood so it would finally cease to hurt.

Vallo trailed off, stared ahead blankly for a few moments, and sighed heavily.

"I'm tired. Take me inside," he softly requested.

Paul pushed Vallo's wheelchair while Minna and Ats walked on either side. No one uttered a single word. The whole affair shocked them to the core.

When they reached Vallo's room, he paused by his old bathrobe that was hanging from a peg and pulled three chocolates from its pocket.

"I've nothing else to offer you," he said apologetically. "Go ahead and indulge your sweet-tooths."

Vallo smiled and waved goodbye to the children.

