

For more information or copyrights, please
contact: ulla.saar@elk.ee



Herring Disco

Written by Kairi Look

Illustrated by Ulla Saar

Puánt 2023, 112 pp, 172 x 235 mm, hardcover

ISBN 9789916968291

Short stories, humour

Age: 7+

No doubt you've at some point considered how to invite a squirrel and a seal to your birthday party or wondered about ways to coax spring into arriving ten times faster than normal. Maybe you're still working out what firefighters and Pop Rocks have in common. You may have even wracked your brain over why Grandpa's trips to the grocery store take longer than anyone else's and when the next herring disco is set to happen. Readers will find an array of familiarities and mundane miracles in Look's stories, but also an intention to make our ordinary world a cozier and more sensible, livable environment.



Reading sample

THE KING WHO DIDN'T LIKE HAVING A BATH

Once upon a time there lived a king. The king lived with the queen and their princesses in a huge castle that had just one bathtub, and dined daily on cake served on golden platters. Life was pleasant and full of sunshine.

One day a stranger called at the castle looking for work. He said he did a special job and that the king needed his services right away.

"And what is it that you do?" the king asked, tickling a cake crumb into his mouth.

"I'm a bug-catcher," the man replied. "I can cleanse your castle of all its creepy-crawlies."

"Who are the creepy-crawlies?" asked the king with a scratch of his behind. "Not that I'm interested in any case. There's none of them here. The only people living here are me, the queen and our two beautiful daughters. And the servants."

The bug-catcher sniffed the air and said, "Bugs are insects that love dirt. They give people bites that leave itchy marks. Where there's folk that don't have baths, there's bugs. Tell me, your majesty, when did you last have a bath?"

The king scratched his back and pondered. "I don't recall," he announced. "I definitely had one last Christmas some time, that I do remember."

The bug-catcher looked at the leaves falling to the ground outside and shook his head. "I see," he said. "Last Christmas some time."

The king glowered and pawed at his armpit. It seemed to him that the bug-catcher was a very nose-y man and he decided to send him away from the castle. "Leave me!" he cried and summoned his servants. "This man is disturbing my cake-time. Take him away immediately!"

The servants seized the bug-catcher and took him far, far away. The king returned to his dining room and sat at the table with the queen and princesses. There were back-scratchers on every chair. "Very strange," mused the king, as he scratched his back with a backscratcher. "There are no creepy-crawlies in my castle. There's just me, the queen, the princesses and the servants. And we have baths whenever we want."

The whole family nodded and had a scratch. And they all lived itchily ever after.



THE DAD WHO WAS UNLIKE HIS CHILDREN

Dad had two children, Karl and Marta, and the three of them had nothing in common. Mum had fair hair and a button nose like the children, but dad had dark hair and his nose was long and straight.

When Dad, Karl and Marta went to buy ice creams, they never chose the same flavour. Dad like strawberry ice cream, Marta liked chocolate and Karl liked toffee. Dad would never lick his children's ice creams. But he'd demolish strawberry cornets in the blink of an eye, leaving only a line of pink drips behind him. This was fine with Marta and Karl. And it was easy to find him; they just had to follow the ice cream trail.

When Dad, Karl and Marta had a free day, they could never agree what to do. Marta would want to go to the skate park, Karl would want to go swimming and Dad would want to sleep. Occasionally he would take the children and sit nervously by the pool or on a park bench. "If Dad goes in the water he'll sink like a stone," warned Mum. "And keep him away from the skates, I'd never get the bloodstains out of his clothes."

When Dad, Karl and Marta got dressed in the morning, they never looked remotely similar. Karl liked blue tops, Marta preferred yellow ones and Dad liked black trousers. In addition to the black trousers, he wore a black jacket and topped it all off with a small, black hat. Karl and Marta liked colourful clothes and never wore black.

When Dad, Karl and Marta were angry, they never showed it in the same way. Dad would sit in a corner by the window and look outside without moving for hours on end. You could bellow at him but he wouldn't answer; only his eyes would move. When Marta was angry, she would begin running around slamming doors and yelling. And when Karl was angry he would say NO to everything. NO, everything's fine, NO, I won't go, NO, I'm not hungry, NO, I won't calm down. And Mum would do a bit of everything: sometimes she'd slam doors, sometimes she'd say NO and sometimes TOO RIGHT. TOO RIGHT, I'm angry! TOO RIGHT, leave me in peace! TOO RIGHT, you're driving me mad!

When Dad, Karl and Marta were happy, they would all act differently. Marta would jump up and down or dance. Karl would wander round with a big grin on his face. Dad would give everyone a call. "Guess what happened today," he'd say. "Yes, fancy that! 'Whatever next?' I wondered! He can't be serious!" Mum would do any number of things in a happy mood, but would never phone anyone.

One father's day weekend the family went to visit grandma and grandad. They ate lunch together – pudding was strawberry, chocolate or toffee ice-cream, and then decided to go for a walk.

The forest trail was narrow. Mum went in front, followed by Dad, Marta and Karl. And right at the back came grandma and grandad.

"Isn't it funny how different they all are," murmured grandma, looking at Dad with his dark hair, all dressed in black, and the children with their fair hair and colourful clothes. "There's nothing they have in common"

Grandad looked at his son and grandchildren. They were all walking with their hands behind their backs, with a slight forward lean, dragging their feet.

"Yes, it really is," he replied, with his hands behind his back and a slight forward lean. Grandma nodded, hands behind her back. The forest track was covered in the footprints left by the feet that had been dragged along it.



HERRING DISCO

24th February* was always the herrings' party day. Everyone attended. The Tallinn herrings were first to arrive. They climbed out of their tin, combed their hair and entered the party room. They arrived with tomato sauce on their tails and walked on tiptoe so as not to make a mess. A boat ferried the herrings from the island of Saaremaa to the port, they were all there, every last one of them. As were the Baltic herrings – it was a family party when all's said and done! The old school sprats sat at their own table, pipes in their mouths and sticks in their hands. All the younger, fresher herrings came straight from the sea. They had broken a hole in the ice and climbed out. They wore sweatshirts bearing the words BALTIC SEA.

When the hall was full, the head herring, who wore a bow tie, tapped his glass and rose to his full height.

"Fellow herring!" he announced. "Another year has come to an end and we are another year older. Or, if you will allow, another year wiser, another year stronger! Not so long ago our forefathers rose up and fought for their dignity."

The head herring paused. There was thunderous applause.

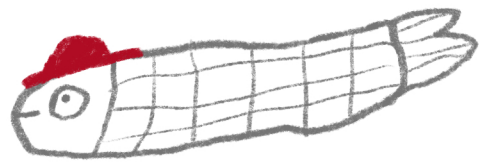
"And that is our reason for having a party," the head herring went on. "We have our own place here on the globe. We are needed. We are recognised. We are respected. Without us there's no real party. We are few in number, but we are unique. We are the herring!"

"We are the herring!" the words filled the hall. The sound of banging came from where the Saaremaa shoal was sitting and a burly herring jumped onto the table. "Yes! Being a herring is a good and noble thing!"

"Good and noble!" echoed the hall.

"Excellent," said the head herring. "The speech is over. Let's party!"

There was no need to say it twice. The herring dashed onto the dance floor and started busting some moves. The young Baltic Sea herring jumped up and down and their sparkling scales made the older sprats dizzy. The Island herring danced on the table, jingling the plates. And the Tallinn herring had learned a new dance that the others didn't know.



"Everyone come and join in the Jenka!" they shouted. "Our Finnish friends taught us it. Come on over, we'll show you!"

"What's this Jenka you're on about," grumbled the oldest herring. "We've got our own Estonian dances. The Kaerajaan, and the Tuljak and the Labajala Waltz!" He seized the fins of a grey haired sprat at the table and began twirling her round, singing at the top of his voice, "Oh, Kaera Jaan, oh, Kaera Jaan, jump up and see!"

And they jumped, every one of them! The Tallinn herring and the Baltic herring and the Saaremaa herring and the Baltic Sea herring, even the sprats – they all jumped up for the Kaerajaan. Even the head herring in a bow tie twirled until his back was damp and it hurt to sing. In between they ate cake and stuffed eggs and then they danced again. The herring party was in full swing.

It was the early hours before the herring had tired themselves out and set off home. The captain of the Saaremaa herring was steering the boat full of flaked-out, sleeping herring out of the port when suddenly he frowned and put his fin over his eyes. "Oh, what a donkey I am! The main thing! I forgot the main thing!"

“What thing?” asked a herring who had woken up.

“The shad!” wailed the captain. “I promised to take him to the party. Bother, blast and banana bubblegum! I even forgot to pick up a slice of cake for him. What can I do?”

The water lapped against the side of the boat and the head of a shad emerged from the sea. “Don’ worry,” said the shad. “I like being in the sea more, already been on dry land. And forget about the cake, I’m more of a savoury chap myself.” He clapped the herring on the shoulder and disappeared into the waves.

The Captain sighed with relief and set the compass for the west. Another year could begin.

* 24th February is Estonian Independence Day and an occasion for parties. For Americans, Thanksgiving means turkey, and for Estonians, Independence Day means herring sandwiches!

