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Me and August

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Chapter book, fiction

Topics: history, tragedy, becoming of age, romance, friendship, politics

Age: 13 +

Heinrich is a country boy who grows up in the 1930s. By the time he's just a teenager, he's caught between competing forces and made to decide how to act when no one is in the right, but neither is anyone explicitly wrong.

Should you listen to your heart or local rumors? Which is stronger: first love or ruthlessness? Does being human mean acting like a person or like a god, deciding whether others live or die? Is anyone ever totally correct? Is anyone a truly good person through and through, or are we all just victims of fate? The plot was inspired by true events and persons in Estonia's southwest Mulgimaa region in the years 1933–1934, a time when conflicts sprung up with ease. Hunger made people mean, as did the fear of losing what they'd achieved through grueling labor and sacrifices. Admitting one's own faults is the hardest thing of all – the other person wasn't completely right, either, and I wasn't the only one to blame! It's much easier to speak loudly about things that went right and softly about things that we didn't do 100% correctly, even if it was at least done in good faith. What's more, we tend to keep silent about things we knowingly did wrong out of a thirst for revenge, to ease our pain, or to force someone else into silence.

Reading sample

[pp. 19–22]

6.

*Sunday April 30th, 1933
That same day.*

THE CLOSING OF THE YOUNG EAGLES' CEREMONY*

“Hey, I’ve got to go home,”
August says almost apologetically
when the two of us are finally standing
alone
in the shadow of a big aspen, its leaves
rustling in the breeze,
after the ceremony was over.
We rolled up the folders the
schoolmaster gave us
and stuck them into our jacket pockets.
Both of us were dripping with sweat,
the rough wool collars of our college
jackets
uncomfortably chafing our necks.
Our eyes were glued to the bustling
throng outside the school,
resembling the time in the woods
when we lifted the top of an anthill on
a shovel
to see how it was constructed.
To find out if there were caverns
and tunnels
and passageways
like August’s grandfather had told us,
or if it was just a jumble of twigs and
needles
that ants clambered around like worms
in a fisherman’s tackle box.
The panicked ants scrambled to and
fro, trying to do something
as their nest was destroyed;
attempting to save whatever could be
saved.
The panicked occupants of this human
nest were also trying
to issue final instructions,
to make last agreements before
summer break.
They run around in circles so as
to not forget anything,
to not have to search for anyone again,
to not need to come back,
and to make sure everything was done
in a single go.

The cacophony in my ears includes a
woman’s shouts for someone,
another person’s roaring laughter,
a baby screeching somewhere and
someone cooing it to sleep,
the squeals of kids playing tag,
and the whinnies of horses
made restless by horseflies and hot
weather.

The whole hamlet
and people from every nearby village
have come together—
an opportunity to be used for making
pacts
and asking how others are doing.

“My mom’s whipped up a huge feast
and invited the whole extended
family,”
August awkwardly explains.
“I understand,”
I say.
We don’t look into each other’s eyes,
or even at each other.
Joining the Young Eagles is a big deal.
A step towards manhood, as August’s
dad said earlier
as he proudly gave us both a pat on
the shoulder.

My dad just grunted
and spat at the ground with contempt.
I’ve learned how to read his thoughts
and moods.
I knew what he was thinking:
these damn weaklings are doing it all
for show,
just to avoid hard work and play their
silly games.
Lazybones!
Good-for-nothings!
Breaks are to be taken
when it’s raining,
not when it happens to be Sunday.

“I bet your parents have some kind of
a party planned, too,”
August says, putting on a jolly and
carefree face.
Still, he’d also much rather toss his
jacket aside
and run off in his normal clothes,
not sit at a table with old folks who
drone on and on,

* The Young Eagles is a youth organization that is run by the voluntary Estonian Defence League and offers young people opportunities for development through patriotic education.

nodding and laughing
at their remarks,
agreeing that, yes, he sure has grown,
and looks more and more like his
father—
he'll be a man before long and will
need to find a wife.

"Yeah..."
The 'yeah' didn't mean that
the table was no doubt set and waiting
at home.
The 'yeah' didn't mean that it's a big
thing for my parents
to see their son becoming a man, too.

The 'yeah' meant
I understand him.
August's family believed it was
imperative
that their son be made a Young Eagle.
Because their family isn't like our
family.
Their family celebrates birthdays.
Invites guests over.
Laughs together, not at each other.
Speaks instead of screaming.
Bakes cakes and gathers at the dinner
table because
their son is becoming a man.

I was born right in the middle of the
busiest haymaking season.
That sin was bad enough
to last the rest of my life.
Simply by being born, I ruined a good
haymaking day,
sent a pair of able hands to lie down
on a cot
and made others double their hard
work
to rake up all the hay
before the rainclouds came.
It was enough to give me my name –
Heinrich.
Hay for the shed.
Hay for anger.
Heints for short.

That sin was enough
and never again in haymaking season
was the fact of my birth marked with a
good word.

Not one present,
cake,
or happy birthday.
Just a slap on the back of my skull and
a bark:
"Lazing around with your mouth
hangin' open again?
Sittin' around daydreaming again?"
Dozin' with your eyes open again?
The hell you doin' lollygagging, huh?
There's hay to be got into the shed
before the rains come.
How damn dozy can one miserable boy
be?!"

[pp. 78–83]

29.
Sunday July 16th, 1933

EITHER NOW OR NEVER!

For two weeks, I gathered my courage,
telling myself I'd definitely do it next
Sunday,
but then finding myself too tired from
the day's work
or my clothes not clean enough
or the weather poor and rainy—unfit
for a walk in the woods.
But this time, I took deep breaths,
straightened out my shirt,
adjusted my trousers,
and wet my hair against my head.
I had to go and do it, once and for all—
ask Elviira out for a walk.
Either now or never!

Maybe she didn't see me throw up
all over the dancefloor on
midsummer's eve.
Maybe she'll forgive me if she did.

The road flies beneath my feet as I get
farther from home,
kilometer after kilometer
along paths that wind through the
trees
until finally, I reach a ditch
that leads straight to Elviira's house,
every step growing slower and more
hesitant.
I stand hidden in the brush for a long
time, staring at the house.

Elviira's mother walks around outside,
doing this and that,
then disappears indoors.

My heart thumps in my chest,
my legs tremble beneath me,
my throat is dry and scratchy.
But then, Elviira emerges from the
house
and starts hanging up laundry to dry.
Either now or never!

Elviira's shadow flits behind a hanging
sheet.

I stand behind it for a moment.
The crown of her head rises and bobs
as she leans down to grab more from
the tub.

I clear my throat
and Elviira squeaks, dropping a clean,
damp shirt onto the grass.
I rush to help her and we both bow
and take hold of the shirt
at once,
then quickly straighten up again,
both our hands still grasping it
together,
both lost in each other's eyes.

Suddenly, Elviira starts to laugh
and blushes modestly,
and I laugh along with her.
The laughter is freeing and uplifting;
it's something that we share just like
the damp shirt
that we're still holding onto.
I finally let go
when Elviira's gaze lowers to my hand.

"The thing is...
I wanted to come and ask
if you might, perhaps, have the time
and the inclination to go for a walk?
But you appear to be busy here, I see,
so don't worry
if you can't,"
I stammer.

"No, no,"
Elviira insists, waving her hands.
"I was just finishing up.
We can go in a minute—
I'll just let Ma know first
so she doesn't start worrying
about me."

Elviira hangs the last shirt on the
clothesline
and hurries into the house.
When she returns,
there's a shawl draped over her
shoulders
and she's ready for our walk.
We stroll along the road to the church
and the cemetery,
chatting about the weather
and haymaking.
Finally, I muster my courage
and take her hand.
It is tiny and soft
and her fingers press against mine.
I'm so happy, as if we're walking
through clouds,
that I don't notice Dad riding up in his
wagon.

"Whoa!"
he cries to halt the horse.
"Boy, into the wagon this instant!"
he commands.

"But Dad..."
I stammer pleadingly.
"Go, go ahead,"
Elviira encourages me.
"I can get home fine on my own.
Don't you worry about me.
It's not as if we're in a strange city."

My throat tightens with such
overwhelming disappointment
that not a single word can escape.
Dad whipped the horse the whole way
home,
jaws clamped and teeth gritted,
storm clouds gathering behind his
eyes,
lightning bolts ready to strike
the moment I dare to make a peep.

When we arrived, he tethered the
horse to the stable door,
shoved me inside,
and ordered me to sit
and listen to my old man
for once in my life.

"Boy,
you keep away from those
communists,"
Dad warned me gravely.

“They’re only out to cause trouble.”

“Why can’t I love
whomever I please?”
I protested.

“Elviira’s never done anybody any
harm.”

“You sit down with them
and you’ll end up becoming one.
Our ancestors were born and perished
on these village streets;
our fathers tread them day after day
and now, you want to let bastards run
loose on them,”

Dad ranted and raved,
spittle flying from his mouth.
“Keep away from them
or you’re no longer my son.
I’ll disown you and would rather give
the farm to the first soul I meet
than to a limping lacky;
to a communist bootlicker.”

“How is what I do with my own life
anybody else’s
business?”
I screamed back at him.
“I’m not your slave here.
I’ve got my own life to live.
Keep the farm for yourself if you
want—
I can get by fine
without it!”

Dad snorted scornfully
and stormed out of the room,
slamming the door shut behind him.

“You’re saying things and asking
questions
that can only be answered with
quarrels and anger,”
Mom warned me softly.
“Just let things be the way they are.
Time heals all wounds
and I’m sure this feeling will pass
when you meet some
other nice
girl.
No first snow
or first love
has ever lasted long.

They melt in the first rain.”

[pp. 180–182]

71.
Monday April 23rd, 1934

NIGHT WATCH

“A true Young Eagle does everything
in his power to fulfill his duty
to the Estonian fatherland,”
August announced.

“And therefore, we must go out on a
reconnaissance mission
to determine where the enemy lies
and the number of enemy forces.
Only then can we know
how many rifles we the Young Eagles
need
so we’ll be ready when the werewolves
attack.
And before that, we’ll run drills in the
woods
to make sure no idiot blows up his face
with a misfire again.

Damn it.
As if you’ve never heard that
you have to account for recoil when
you fire,
press the butt of the rifle firmly against
your shoulder
and spread your legs and brace.”

“What if somebody spills the beans?”
Ülo asked doubtfully.

“Anyone who can’t hold their tongue
loses it.
Dog-heads need no tongue,”
August barked directly.

No one else had any questions
and the night watch agreed on its first
shift.

Ülo said he couldn’t go out that
week—
his family was celebrating a baptism
and guests were coming and going
every day.

Ulrich said his father threatened to hit
him so hard there’d be welts
if the boy didn’t do better on his

homework,
and what's more, he needed the
allowance
that his father paid for good grades—
he wanted to buy a bike.

August and I.
We're the ones
who track every move that old commie
acquaintance of ours makes
every night that first week.
We'll pay with our lives if we must
to find out where he goes.
Whom he meets.
Who else goes to hear forbidden fairy
tales underground.
The identities of those
who keep tearing up real life with fairy
tales.