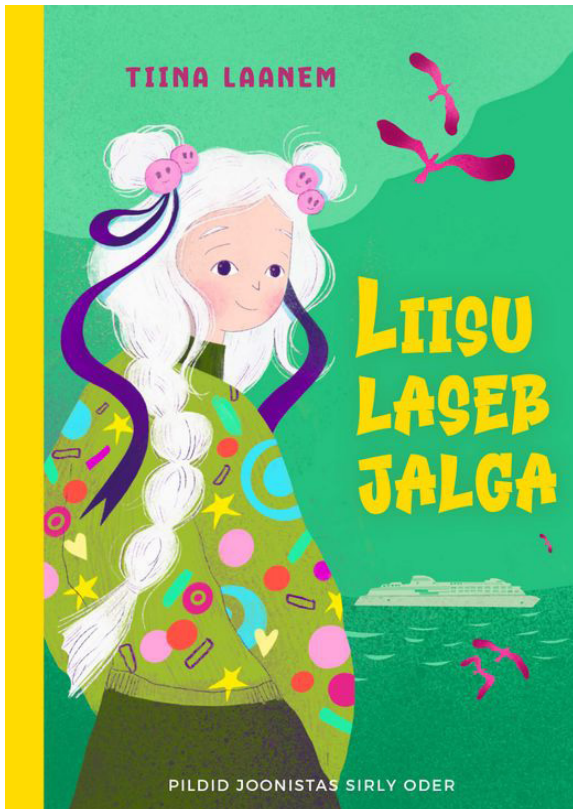


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Liisu Runs Away

Text by Tiina Laanem

Illustrations by Sirly Oder

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Age: 5+

To Liisu, it seems like adults are always able to do exactly what they want while kids have to do whatever grown-ups say. Take for example when her mom, who has been galivanting around Europe, suddenly returns home and wants to take over raising Liisu, who has been living with her grandma, a.k.a. Mamma. Or when her dad only starts showing an interest in his daughter after his athletic career comes to an end.

Obviously, her mom can move to one end of the country and her dad to the other, and she has no choice but to bounce back and forth between the two. Yet, the last straw comes when her dad invites his girlfriend and her sons to move in. Liisu wants to go back to live with Mamma: Mamma always has time for her, Mamma understands her, and Mamma always discusses things instead of yelling. Liisu knows that she and Mamma can manage anything together. The only question is how to get back to Mamma's home in Finland. Not even that is an obstacle, however, because Liisu has a plan and several friends who will help her carry it out.

Liisu Runs Away gives many young readers the opportunity to discuss and reflect on children's rights topics both independently and with their families. And that is exactly what a good children's book should do.

- Oskar Helde Bookblog

Liisu Runs Away is both fun and adventurous on one hand, yet very sad on the other, prompting readers to reflect on what and who are most important to us in life.

- Anne Kõrge, book ekspert



Reading sample

[pp. 5–20]

“We’re moving to Japan this autumn,” I announced cheerfully. “Or actually, at the end of summer. I don’t remember what day, exactly. Sometime in August. It’ll give me time to find my way around there before school starts. Tokyo is huge. Lots and lots of people live there, and there are skyscrapers everywhere. People scurry around them like ants.”

Sitting next to me is a lady wearing big glasses. Her eyes go wide in amazement. She looks like a cyclops, though she has two eyes and cyclops only have a giant one.

She opens her mouth to ask something, revealing yellowish teeth, but I continue before she can speak. She gulps in air.

“No, I don’t speak Japanese,” I admit, “but I’m going to start studying their hieroglyphics so I can watch movies and read comic books. There’s so, so many. I could sit and stare at them all day long if I didn’t have to go to school. Some kids there don’t even go to school or anywhere else. They’re called hikikomori and they just sit around inside. People deliver food right to their door. It’s weird because there are so many amazing things in Japan and all they do is lounge around at home.”

The lady flashes a yellow smile, and I think that there’s got to be a toothpaste in Japan that would whiten her teeth again.

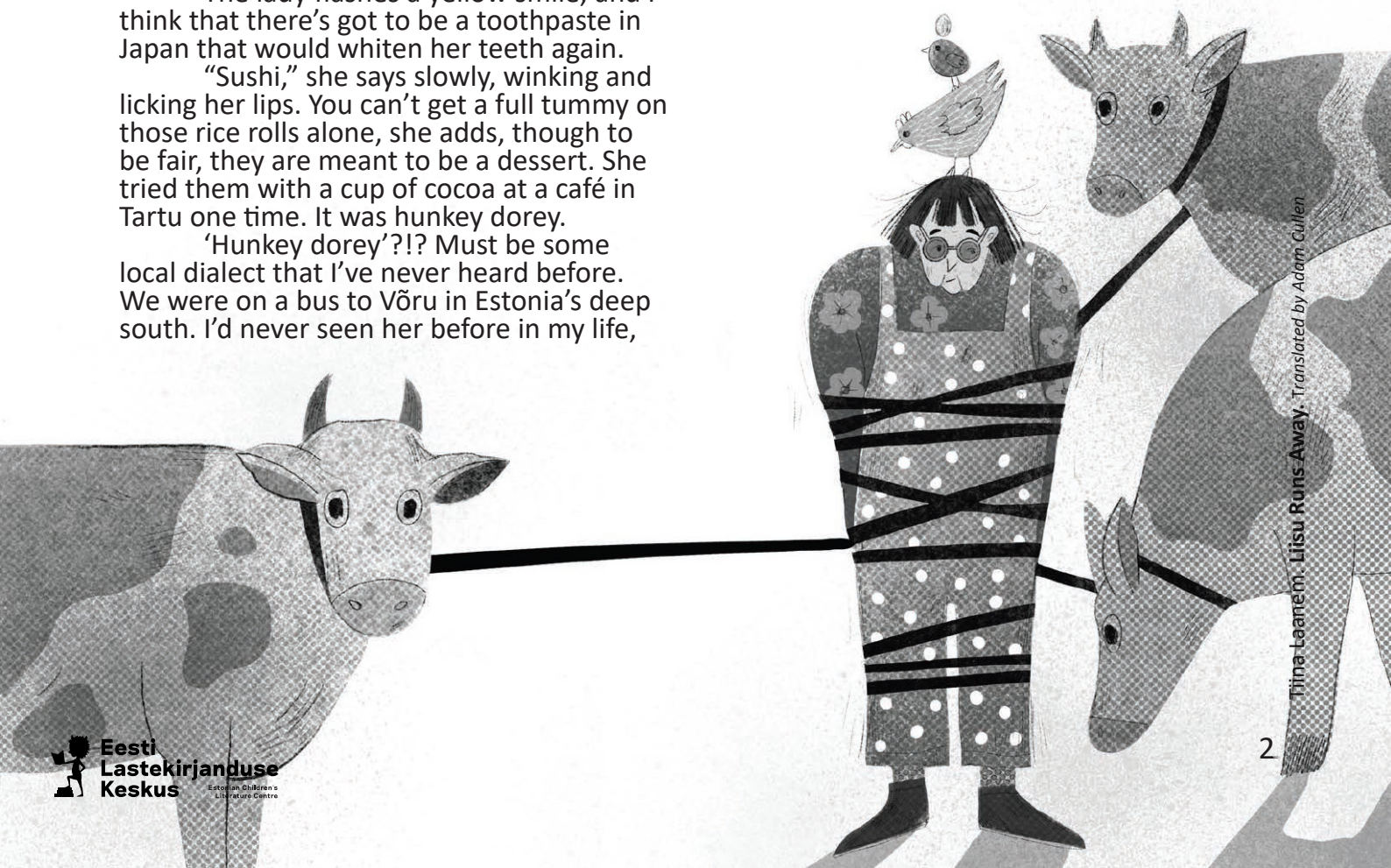
“Sushi,” she says slowly, winking and licking her lips. You can’t get a full tummy on those rice rolls alone, she adds, though to be fair, they are meant to be a dessert. She tried them with a cup of cocoa at a café in Tartu one time. It was hunkey dorey.

“Hunkey dorey”?!? Must be some local dialect that I’ve never heard before. We were on a bus to Võru in Estonia’s deep south. I’d never seen her before in my life,

but we were chatting away like old friends. I was talking more, of course, because she didn’t have anything interesting to say. Her cows prevent her from ever going traveling. She said they never take a day off. They keep her constantly busy with their milk and never rest from making more. She looks pretty exhausted. I won’t ask why she decided to get such selfish animals in the first place. She should’ve gotten a cat, fish, or a turtle instead.

“Japanese food is the best in the world,” I continue. The lady nods, though she probably doesn’t know a thing about them. My dad went to Japan and couldn’t stop talking about the cuisine. His go-to meal at home is potatoes and sauce while he raves about sushi and soba noodles.

“I’ll be going to an international school in Tokyo where they teach in English,” I say, filling her in on my future. “But I won’t stay there long. As soon as I get the hang of Japanese, I’m going to have them enroll me in a local school, because maybe I’ll live there forever, you know. And I’ll become an artist, a singer, or a geisha. No, probably not a geisha. They paint their face white and walk around in weird shoes and everybody photographs them all the time.”



Tiina Leameim. Lõis Runn Away. Translated by Adam Cullen

The woman nods thoughtfully and asks what my parents might think about me staying in Japan. I shrug. "They'll be moving back to Estonia in four years. That's when Dad's ambassadorship is over. But I might stay if I want to. They respect my wishes and let me have a say in family matters," I proudly proclaim.

She nods a little sadly and adjusts her glasses. I can understand – her cows don't respect her wishes at all. It'd make anyone jealous to hear about somebody living the way that you'd like to live but simply aren't allowed. Your life is constantly dictated by others.

Just as I'm about to lift the lady's spirits by telling her all about the Japanese cherry blossom festival, she starts getting ready to leave. I see houses outside. We're pulling into Kanepi, the village where she lives. She pats me on the shoulder, tells me I'm a brave and clever girl, and wishes me a nice life in Japan. And she adds that hopefully, I'll come back. It'd be a shame if such clever girls stayed abroad. She presses something into my hand. Something round. Then, she waves and hurries off the bus.

I study the egg she gave me. The lady apparently has chickens in addition to cows. I suppose they don't give her any peace, either, but lay egg after egg. Strange. Why would a grownup live a way they don't want to? Is someone forcing her to? Who? Her parents, husband, kids, cows, chickens? It seems like a trap. I thought that when you're an adult, you can live exactly the way you want to, whenever you want. Does that mean some adults can't?

My thoughts drift back to Japan. I imagine its streets, cafés, and stores. Then its music, cartoons, robots, and rice. I think about slurping your food, which was meant to show that it's tasty. Oh, how amazing it'd all be!

But that sweet feeling evaporates when I look out the window. We'll be arriving soon. I don't want to even admit it to myself, but... I made up the whole story. I've done it before. It was a total lie. From beginning to end.

I'm not moving to Japan or going to study at an international school in Tokyo. I won't be celebrating cherry-blossom season in spring. And my dad isn't an ambassador, but a coach. He used to play basketball and now he coaches others. And Mom... I

don't know what she is, exactly, because she's always doing something different. Right now, she's running a bliss studio and playing the ukulele. It's kind of like a guitar, only smaller. She even has her own band. It might sound cool to some people, but not to me.

I'd really like to move to Japan, but I'm shuttling back and forth between Tallinn and Võru instead. Why? Because my parents don't live together, and my life is dictated by everybody else. Just like the lady with the cows, only she doesn't appear to have any escape plan. Unlike me. I'm going to use a little of my cleverness and braveness to get myself out of this mess. I can't quite manage to pull it off on my own, but luckily, I have my friend Nette. She's not afraid of anything. And she helps me whenever I ask. I just have to wait until she gets home from dance camp and pretend to be delighted to have come down to Võru until then.

Aleks Is Always Joking

I get off the bus and don't see a single familiar face. I stay calm. Spaniards tend to run late. You can't bet on them getting dressed faster or guzzling their coffee just for you. "Has anybody ever seen a Spaniard hurry?" my mom likes to ask. I sure haven't, though I do only know one and probably shouldn't make judgements about a whole nation based on him.

After a while, I hear a familiar voice call out, "Hola, bella!" It hasn't been long enough to get irritated yet, so I flash him a half-smile.

The guy, who's wearing sandals and a tank top, pats me on the shoulder. "You're so preeetty, like kitty cat in the ciitty," he croons, launching into the weird compliments that he can produce by the hundreds. He recently told a saleswoman that she's "as pretty as a potato", adding that "your locks are anything but old socks". Mom had to apologize profusely and explain that he was still learning the language. And using rhymes to help.

He measures me up and laughs.

"Why so faaat, in suuummer, dearest braaat?" he asks and beams like the sun, proud of his newest rap.

"It's cold," I mumble, zipping up my jacket. He's referring to my clothing, not my

weight. Whenever he talks about my weight, he usually calls me “as thin as a pin”.

“You should be brooown in suummer, then you’re suuuper-cool,” he says, patting me on the shoulder again. I get the feeling he dreams of being a comedian but is stuck giving online Spanish lessons instead.

“I don’t want to be super-cool,” I reply, and he bursts out giggling. You can say basically anything, and it’ll still make him laugh.

There are even tears in his eyes from laughing so hard.

“Liisu-Liisu, little kiisu,” he says, calling me a kitty in Estonian as he dries the corners of his eyes. We start strolling towards his car.

Alejandro is Mom’s new husband. His name should be pronounced the Spanish way, Alehhhandro or something, but nobody says it like that. They just call him Aleks or Al or Shortie. The last one is what my dad uses. Alejandro really gets on Dad’s nerves, and calling him Shortie helps to lower his stress level. Aleks is short, Dad is tall – 197 centimeters, to be exact. I guess I get my height from Dad. I’m 12 years old and the last time I was measured, I was 163 centimeters tall, which is definitely pretty decent.

We reach the car, but Aleks doesn’t get in. He leans against it and turns to face the sun. I know he just couldn’t wait for summer to come. All winter long, he walked around in a light jacket and shivered, but he still wouldn’t dress in anything warmer. He believed the sun would come out any minute. I suppose it does in Spain, but he had to suffer through the cold for six months here in South Estonia.

“Your life is not eeeasy when you’re sooo whiiite,” he joked, and started laughing again. Hilarious, sure!

I wrinkle my nose and wait for him to unlock the doors. “My life isn’t easy,” I say gloomily. How does he manage to take away my sense of humor all the time? It’s a total mystery.

“Should we gooo for a swiiim?” he asks instead of getting behind the wheel.

“A swim? Where?”

Aleks gestures towards Lake Tamula.

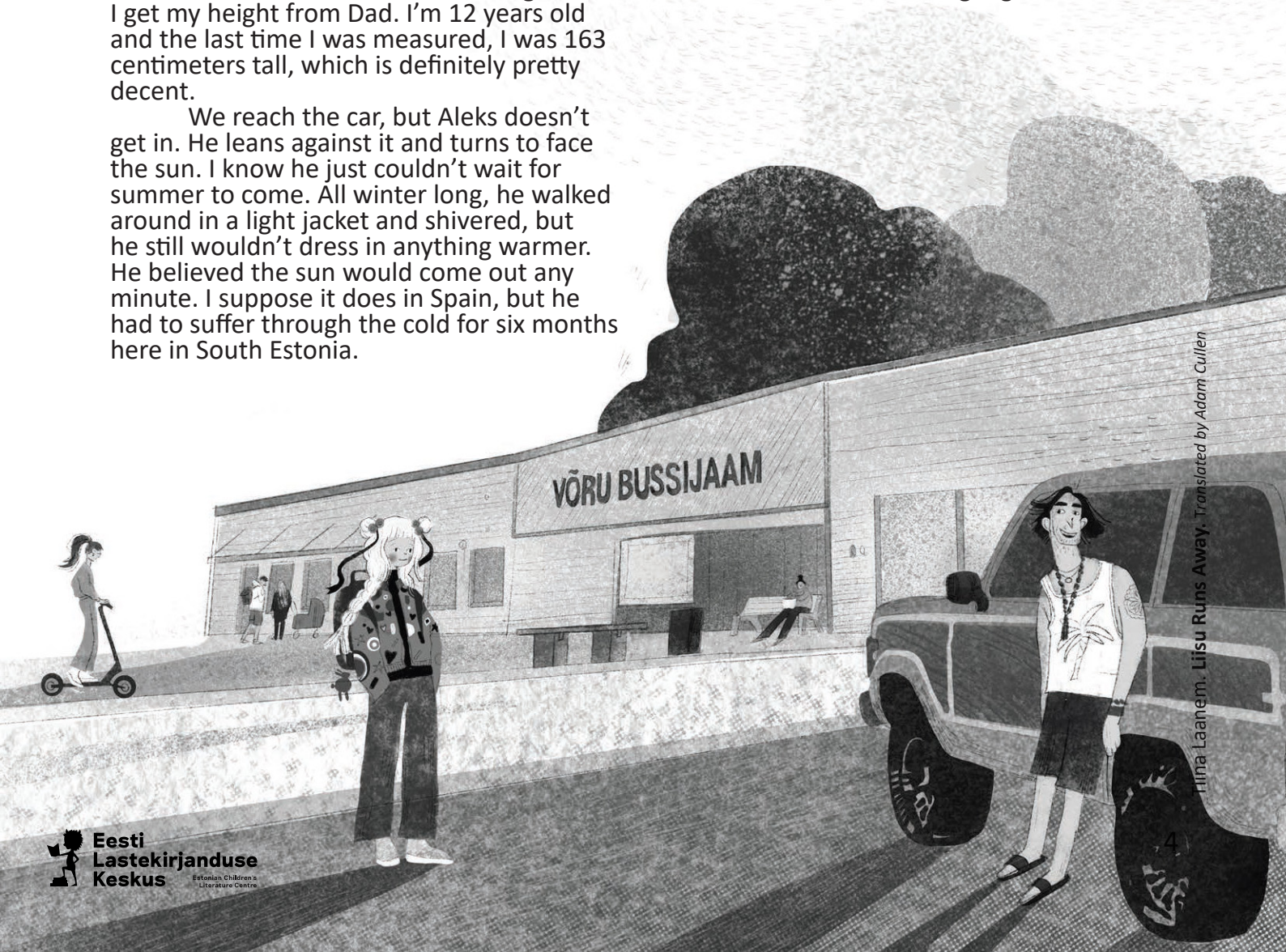
“In the laaake, siiilly.”

“Are you crazy?” I gasp. “It’s, like, 16 degrees Celsius outside! You can’t go swimming in this!”

He seems totally unaware of the weather. I guess he looked outside, saw the sun was shining, and ran out in nothing but a tank top. What’s more, he wanted ice cream!

“Maaaybe we should have a coooool treeeat?” he proposed, trying to sound like a young person.

I nod and start to feel sorry for him. He’s trying to be as friendly towards me as he can, learn the local language, and not



complain. Last winter wasn't easy for him. It was cold and dark. Living in an old house that he should fix up but doesn't know how. Add to that a three-year-old kid who starts screeching the moment no one pays attention to her. Plus my capricious and totally unpredictable mother.

I shrug and smile.

"Okay, let's get ice cream," I say in a kinder tone.

"And cooffee and cocoa," he adds, obviously wanting to go to his favorite café. It's right around the corner.

We start walking. Fast. I keep my arms wrapped around my body to protect against the cold. Aleks pulled a fishnet shirt over his tank top, but it's mostly made of holes that I don't believe provide any warmth. I can't even look at him! Luckily, we make it to the café before we freeze into frozen treats ourselves. The smell of cake and coffee fills my nostrils as soon as we walk in. It's like a huge gathering of Aleks's friends. His list of buddies grows at an astronomical pace – he seems to make new ones the second he steps outside. Whenever he spots anybody he's chatted with before, he cheerfully calls out, "Hello, my friend!"

When I tried to explain that you can't call everybody a friend in Estonia, he stared at me dumbly. Why not? Because they're just acquaintances, I explained. That's crap, he replied. Big crap! You can even call the traffic cop who's writing you a parking ticket your friend! Maybe he won't finish it if you do!

My dad would rather take care of his car, not try to buddy up to the traffic officer. But he and Aleks are very different. Dad has a couple of friends, and that's enough for him. He doesn't call his colleagues or workout partners "buddies". Though maybe he should?

Aleks's phone is blinking on the table, but he ignores it.

"Hey, Mom is calling," I say, showing him the screen. He's chatting with a couple of women about music. They're in some band.

Aleks interrupts his conversation for a second.

"Yaaa, I will call baaack," he promises before blabbering away again. He's always got an awful lot to say to everyone.

"Look, now she's calling me," I say, showing him my phone.

"Let meee talk," he says, grabbing it. I swallow the rest of my cocoa in a single gulp, assuming we're leaving.

"Hola, mi amor!" Aleks crows cheerfully. The band members stand up, wave to us, and walk towards the door.

"Si-si, we are ooon our way alreeeady," he says. He tells Mom that my bus ran late and I asked for ice cream, and then he had to exchange a couple words with some buddies at the café out of politeness. Just a couple words, honest!

Later, driving home, Aleks looks very serious. He's thinking and even seems a little sad. That's rare with Alejandro.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" I ask sincerely.

He just stares at the road and doesn't immediately say anything.

"Oooh, nooo," he finally drawls sulkily.

"There's got to be something," I guess, because he wouldn't be pensive for no reason.

Aleks sighs. Dramatically.

"Aaauntie Laine is veery sick," he explains.

"Oh," I said, nodding. Auntie Laine is the babysitter who sometimes watches my little sister Hanna. Hanna recently turned three and someone has to keep an eye on her at all times.

"Our own Auntie Laaaine, whose face is otherwise shiining," he continues in rhyme once again.

"Sounds like a rare catch," I reply with a smirk.

"She sometimes comes ooover, just like the Mars rooover," he added with another depressed sigh.

"I suppose that means she's not coming today."

Aleks shakes his head.

After a couple more rhymes, I piece together that there's a local folk musicians' event happening tonight. There'll be bands playing, dancing, and singing. Aleks would go even if he had pneumonia, but they can't leave Hanna home alone. Auntie Laine was supposed to babysit, but she'd gotten sick. Sick? In summer? Madness! Aleks could never have imagined something so ridiculous in even his worst nightmare.

In an ordinary family, the parents would just stay home. But we don't have an ordinary family. Not one bit! Lots of things are topsy-turvy in ours, and it's far from being great.

The news cheers me up this time, however. Their party fits my plans perfectly.

"I can keep an eye on Hanna," I generously offer. I hope they'll go to the party and give me the chance to start looking for a certain box. It's my mom's, and I've got to find it! I nod energetically.

For the next five minutes, Aleks pretends to be someone who doesn't care much for parties and would rather stay home. He says maybe he'll do some renovating and then go to bed early. The party means a lot to Mom, not to him, he explains. There'll be time for parties another day. It's Mom playing with her ukulele band tonight, not him.

I nod, but I know that the ukulele gives Mom a chance to get away from home. Everyone in a band can say they have to play that evening, and nobody will dare to make a fuss about it.

I think for a few minutes and come up with an idea.

"You could give us the computer password. To watch cartoons, that is," I suggest. Aleks stops championing the benefits of home renovation but still seems unsure.

"Mom suuure wouldn't like thaaat," he says thoughtfully.

"Then let's not tell her," I say, shrugging.

"Yeah?" Aleks asks hesitantly. I bet he's thinking about his own mom, who lives in Spain and calls him all the time. He tells her every thought that pops into his head. I feel envious when I hear them chatting sometimes, even though I don't understand Spanish. I can still tell that they get along really well.

"Hanna's already three years old," I remind him. "And I've babysat her before."

"But not so laaate at niiight."

"Late's good. It means she'll just sleep," I insist, and see a grin spread across his face. He can never stay serious for more than fifteen minutes.

"Liisu-Liisu, little kiisu," he says, laughing again and back to his old self.

"So, it's a deal? Honey for you, money for me!" I exclaim positively.

"What hoooney?" he asks, totally lost. He gives me a silly look.

"Oh, that's just something people say," I explain. I keep myself from mentioning that Dad is the one who uses the expression and I have no idea what it means.

[pp. 36–40]

Old-House Smell

I'm lying in bed. Hanna is snoring softly beside me. She smiles in her sleep and smacks her lips. I suppose somebody offered her ice cream or sweet pastries in her dream, her favorites. Or she's adventuring in one of the cartoons she just watched. She wouldn't hand over the laptop until her head dropped onto the pillow. I carried her into bed, put the laptop away, and cleaned up. I was suddenly in a really good mood. And I knew exactly why.

Because everything is going smoothly, and I'll be at Mamma's house soon. And once I'm there, we'll think up something together. Something that will help resolve this dumb situation. I've just got to be patient and make a proper plan.

I've always wished that my parents would get along better. That they wouldn't tense up when the other comes up in conversation. And that they'd speak more than a couple sentences to each other. But now, I'm overjoyed because it means that I'll be able to travel to Finland. One will think that I'm in Võru, the other that I took the bus to Tallinn. They won't call each other or dig any deeper. Whatever I tell them will be enough.

I won't be allowed to board the ferry all by myself, of course. That's why I'm inviting Nette and we'll talk her brother into coming, too. Robin is 21 already and even finished his military conscription. We'll have no problem getting there with him – he's a grown adult.

Nette and I are no babies anymore, either. Especially when we put on sunglasses and lipstick. There's always the chance of bumping into someone we know who'll recognize us and start asking questions.

I'm so excited about my plan that I can't fall asleep. I toss and turn in bed. It doesn't help that I don't like the way the house smells. The musty stench. You don't really notice it in the daytime, but it seems to seep from every wall when you're lying in bed at night.

Maybe I'll get used to it after a while. Though that depends on how long Mom stays here. If it's very long, then I might

finally stop noticing it. But if she moves somewhere else, then it'll start all over from the beginning. Maybe not if she were to move into a new building, but she doesn't have the money for that. Plus, she likes to move because she can't stand living in one place for very long. She gets restless and starts to feel like it's not right for her at all.

Once she gets that feeling, it's impossible to get rid of. She has to find a new home! That's why she travelled all over the world. She could feel with every atom of her being (that's the way she described it) that neither Tallinn nor the apartment where Dad and I still live was the right place for her. The apartment is certainly no dream mansion, but it's not as bad as Mom felt it was. There could be less traffic noise, more space, and newer furniture, but Dad and I make do. At least we did until just recently, but that's another story.

Back while I was living with Mamma, Mom wandered through the Netherlands, Denmark, and Spain. The longest she spent anywhere was on Ibiza, a Spanish island. It was the best corner of the Earth she could find. That's where she met Aleks, and I have no idea why they ever left. Did she run out of money? Or not find work? In any case, they arrived in Estonia before Hanna was born and Mom decided to actually start raising me. Seriously and on the double. There was even a threat of me having to change schools and move in with her in Tartu. That's the city where she lived before moving to Viljandi and from there to Võru. It's not easy finding your place in the world. Luckily, Mamma stepped in and disapproved of "dragging the kid around" from one place to another. She said that kind of a life isn't good for a schoolchild. Mom and Mamma always got into arguments whenever they got together or discussed anything. It was awful!

I guess I'm fortunate that Dad quit competing at around that time and wasn't away at training camps all the time anymore. I was able to stay in Tallinn, but I did have to move in with him because he got a real hankering to start raising me, too.

And until just recently, that's exactly what he did. He taught me how to cook and helped me with my homework. That is, until things got weird. I started to suspect that he planned to go back to being a professional athlete. He went to more and

more practices and competitions. At least that was his excuse when he came home late in the evening or at night. I thought that sport was the reason, but it turned out to be something totally different. A woman! What a bombshell! It came out of the blue.

When Dad broke the news, it was like a monster jumping out of the cupboard. You can't believe it's sitting there, and then – bam! Dad finding a girlfriend was totally insane. And that wasn't all! This lady has two sons. Twins! Both huge giants who are really into sports. There'd be no way for us to all fit into Dad's apartment.

I suggested that they could keep living in their own home, but Dad thought it'll be more fun to move in together. I couldn't believe my ears! It'd been enough for Dad to have just a couple of friends not so long ago, and now, he wants to start having mass gatherings at home. For me, that'll mean three strangers, yet another move, and probably a new school. I don't want that! I want Mamma! I hate having a life that can randomly change at any second and I've just got to deal with it. It sucks! It really, really sucks!

I try to push the bad thoughts out of my head and calm down. If I keep this up, then I'll never fall asleep. I roll over and squeeze my eyes shut. Then, I hear the front door swing open, followed by laughter and hushed voices. They grow louder until Mom finally goes, "Shhh!"

"Suuzi-Suuzi, give me a muuusi!" Aleks begs, asking Mom for a kiss in his drawn-out Estonian. He calls Mom Suuzi because it's shorter than Susan. They laugh. They're on cloud nine. Mom tries to shush him again. "Quiet! You'll wake up the kids!"

I don't know if Aleks gets his kiss or not. I'm upstairs. Hanna is still sleeping, and I keep my eyes shut. I pretend to be asleep because I can hear them climbing the stairs. Aleks giggles; I guess we look hilarious to him.

Mom adjusts the blankets over us and stands quietly next to the bed. I can tell she's studying me. She's probably amazed that I've gotten taller again. Mamma says that the kids you rarely see seem to grow like weeds.