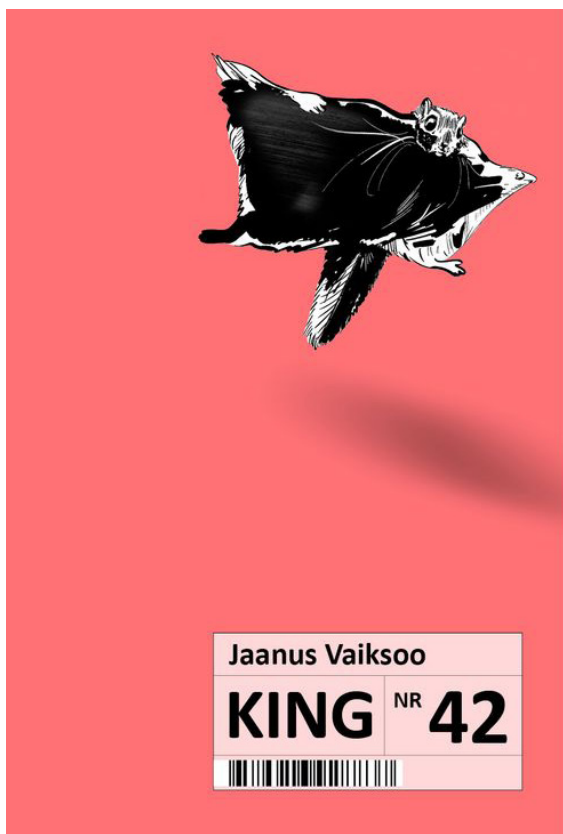


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### Shoe nr. 42

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Illustrations by Katrin Kaev

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picturebook, fiction

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mystery / theft

Age: 10+

Paul Fifth is baffled why he didn't turn down Hugo's proposal to spend spring break on a trip searching for flying-squirrel nesting sites with a local professor of zoology. It's nice to hang out with Ats and Minna, of course, but tramping through a dense forest and hunting for yellowish droppings under big aspen trees isn't quite his cup of tea. Then, he discovers a little silver heart amidst the moss. None of them has any idea how it could have ended up so deep in the woods. When the kids also find strange ropes tied to the trees and size-42 boot prints nearby, they have no choice but to open a new case file.

Shoe nr. 42 is forth book in an award winning series.



## Reading sample

[pp. 81–96]

“Ergo, someone wearing a size 42 shoe was wandering around here in the woods and lost a silver heart,” Ats concluded.

“Good job, Ats! There’s hope for you yet,” Paul joked.

He studied the map on his phone. About a hundred meters from the aspen tree was the same dense grove of spruce, beyond which they’d stumbled across the gym yesterday, or what had Minna called it? A place for cali...?

“Calisthenics,” Minna reminded him.

“Right! When #42 Shoe left calisthenics practice and went to climb the flying-squirrel tree, then they must have passed by this one.”

Paul glanced at the map and started walking towards the spruce grove. It was dim among the thick evergreen branches. Everyone suddenly fell silent. It felt eerie to press further when the jewellery-store thieves might have been up to no good somewhere nearby. Luckily, Valter was with them.

“Let’s see if the coast is clear,” Paul whispered, creeping cautiously forward.

Soon, they could make out a clearing among the spruce. They stood in the trees’ shadows for a while, inspecting their surroundings. Valter looked at each one of them in turn. What happened? What were they all waiting for?

There were no signs of life in the clearing. Everything was exactly as it’d been the day before. No one had visited the teepee, either, though there was a matchbox lying on the bench. Paul got down on his hands and knees and circled around the bench, studying the ground to see if there were any fresh signs of digging beneath it.

“Search, Valter! Search!” Minna ordered the dog.

Valter trotted to the bench and poked his nose beneath it. What was Minna telling him to search for? It smelled like burnt sausages. Valter sniffed a little further away and found a chunk of sausage that had rolled under the bench. It had probably been lying there for a few days already: the meat was soft, slimy, and smelled delicious. Valter bit into it and chewed with pleasure,

enjoying the sour taste.

“Hey, if there’s sausage lying around, then that means someone must have been here recently. Otherwise the mice or squirrels would’ve gobbled it up ages ago,” Ats deduced.

“Definitely,” Paul agreed. “Let’s inspect the site.”

Paul, Minna, and Ats looked for signs of digging everywhere in the hopes that maybe the stolen jewellery had been buried. But the longer they poked around, the more hopeless the whole endeavor felt. Not even Valter could be much help this time. He sniffed around the site before padding into the teepee and flopping down next to the fire pit.

“It’s very possible that the thieves didn’t hide their booty here at all,” Ats sighed, tiring of the search.

Minna noticed that Ats’s earlier gusto was starting to fade and decided now was the right moment to get him on her team.

“I said right at the start that there’s no point wasting time. Let’s take the heart we found to the police and call it a day. There’s no point hanging around these woods.”

Paul didn’t argue with Minna this time. He knew all too well that they didn’t have a good plan for solving the crime and that if they kept the information about the silver heart to themselves for too long, the delay would actually be helping the thieves.

“Fine, let’s go home. We can take the bus to Iisaku and tell the cops everything we know.”

They started walking back down the path in the direction from which they’d come. When they reached the flying-squirrel tree, Ats studied the trail camera attached to a birch trunk. His phone showed that the camera was working, but the only thing missing was the flying squirrel itself.

“Maybe it’s not actually a nesting tree,” Minna suggested. “Kristjan said, remember, that you can sometimes find flying-squirrel droppings under other trees, too.”

Paul walked around the aspen, craning his neck to stare up. Without binoculars, he couldn’t tell whether there were any hollows in the trunk into which a flying squirrel could crawl. To the right of the aspen was the tall alder with a rope tied to

one of the branches. A second rope dangled from a thick birch branch about a dozen meters away.

"I can't figure out how you'd even use these ropes," Ats said thoughtfully. "They're crazy high."

"You were the one who showed us how that guy swung past the trail camera," Paul said. He walked from one tree to another. "Here, you've probably got to climb up this spruce, jump and grab the rope, swing to that big aspen's thicker branch, jump, grab the rope, and then use it to swing to the last aspen and climb back down."

"Pretty hardcore!" Ats said.

"Extremely hardcore, I'd say," Paul agreed.

"We should give it a try," Minna said. She walked up to the spruce and started climbing.

Ats and Paul exchanged glances before both sprinting over to try and stop her.

"Minna! Minna! You can't really be serious!" Paul exclaimed.

She simply ignored them and shimmed higher up the tree.

"Cut it out!" Ats shouted. "You're not a flying squirrel!"

Minna reached the height of the rope tied to the birch, which dangled two or three meters away. If she didn't catch it, then a five-meter freefall came next.

"Get down from there!" Paul begged. "We're out of time; we have to go to the police."

"Don't be such a baby," Minna said, laughing. "It's not as bad as it looks from down there."

And before the boys could say anything else, Minna leapt and grabbed the rope, swung at full tilt to the aspen, and clung to the trunk.

Paul's jaw dropped.

"Wow! You're incredible!"

"A real chimpanzee!" Ats whooped.

"Thanks!" Minna said with a smile, and pushed herself up to sit on the thick branch. "There's a pretty good view from up here, by the way."

Ats took out his phone.

"Hey, the trail camera is working! Great! Your legs are in the frame now, too."

Paul gauged the distance between Minna and the next rope. It was even longer

than the first.

"Minna, please don't take that second leap. You tried it out, now come down."

Minna sat on the branch, her arms wrapped around the trunk, and swung her legs back and forth.

"No. I'm not coming down," she teased.

There was a sizeable woodpecker hole in the alder's trunk, right above her head. Minna noticed something inside. Cautiously, she released her left arm and pulled a rag from the hollow. It wasn't a rag, though, but a t-shirt in good condition!

"Huh! Look at what I found! I wonder what kind of animal dragged it up here?"

Minna tossed the shirt down. It cartwheeled through the air and fell at the boys' feet.

Ats scooped the shirt up and stretched it out.

"Street Workout Club Kohtla-Järve! You were right – there are some kind of workout freaks running around here."

Paul's heart started pounding wildly.

"Minna, check and see if there's anything else in there, would you?"

Minna shoved her hand deeper into the trunk and removed a tin box.

"Here you go – chocolate-peppermint cookies for everyone!" she declared, gleefully holding the box up for them to see before prying open the lid...

"Minna...! What's in there?" Paul called out.

She stared at the box in her hands for several long moments, forgetting that she was high up in a tree.

It was filled to the brim with gold and silver jewellery.

## 12.

Minna had never run so far so fast in her life. The path was familiar, but she still had to leap over fallen trees and ditches and push her way through the undergrowth. She'd let go of Valter's leash so they didn't get each other caught on anything. At that wild pace, Mina would definitely have won the school's spring cross country competition, but now, much more was at stake than some running match. She'd discovered the stolen jewellery in a hollow in a tree just minutes before, and now,

she needed to act as fast as she possibly could. They couldn't call the police from the woods – nobody's phone could pick up a signal. Minna, Paul, and Ats had agreed that the boys would stay in place and keep watch just in case while she called the police the second she found cellular service. Ats stashed the cookie box containing the jewellery in his backpack.

Valter ran out of the woods to the road and started greedily lapping up water from the ditch. Minna quickly caught up and took out her phone to check the signal, but... the battery was dead. Dang it! She could barely hold herself back from angrily flinging the phone into the ditch. How hadn't she noticed it earlier!? Running back to Ats and Paul to get one of theirs and then running here again – that would only waste time. Or what about returning and getting the boys to come back with her? Was there any point in lurking around the woods, waiting to see if the thieves showed up? What was the best move to make? Valter also stared at Mina questioningly.

"Well, Valter? What are we going to do?" Minna asked, scratching him behind the ears.

Valter thought for a moment before jumping over the ditch and climbing up the side of the road. That was their decision. Minna ducked behind the willow bushes where they'd hidden their bikes. Right now, it seemed smartest to pedal home as fast as she could and call for help from there. She tried to reassure herself that the half-hour of lost time wouldn't make any difference, anyway. The crooks had hidden the jewellery in the hollow days ago and it was hardly likely they'd return to get it now, in broad daylight. The police would certainly have time to dispatch a patrol car and nab the thieves when they showed up.

Minna started pedaling towards the village. Luckily, she had the wind at her back, the sun was shining, the weather was pleasantly warm, and Valter was trotting steadily alongside her. Minna unzipped her windbreaker and felt much more relaxed.

"Everything will be fine, everything will be fine, everything has to be fine," she sang to herself.

Paul and Ats spent a while searching the woods for a good hiding place that had a clear view of the tree where the jewellery

was stashed but would still keep them from being seen. Finally, they came across a clump of three spruce trees with dense branches going all the way down to the ground.

"Let's post up here," Paul proposed. Ats squatted next to him.

"I hope Minna can make the call quickly. I really don't feel like hanging around here for very long."

"You scared? Don't get your panties in a twist. I don't reckon anybody will show up here in such a short amount of time, but we should keep our eyes open just in case."

Ats took out his phone.

"Zero bars."

"We're in the middle of the woods, what did you expect?"

"Come on, this is the 21st century! If it were up to me, then the country wouldn't have a single square meter with no service."

"What a go-getter!" Paul joked.

"I am. I'd make it happen right away if I could, but unfortunately, I still have to go to school."

Ats picked up a pinecone and studied it.

"Look, the perfect database. Just imagine all the information that's stored here."

"What do you mean?"

"See, lodged between these scales are seeds that'll grow into huge spruce trees, and if they're lucky, they'll live for a hundred years. So in fact, this pinecone already contains the whole next century's information."

"You're crazy!" Paul exclaimed. "How do you..."

"Now, what little get-together are we having here?" a raspy voice interrupted.

Ats and Paul jumped to their feet. Behind them stood three men wearing

ski masks. One was a towering giant, the second looked like a burly wrestler, and the third was gnome-like but had sinewy muscles. They were all dressed in identical black track suits and had thick gold chains around their necks. The black ski masks concealed their faces.

The giant grabbed Ats by the scruff of his neck.

"What are you doing here? Why are you two wandering around the woods alone?"

“Are we not allowed to? Anybody can go for a walk in the woods,” Ats shot back stubbornly.

“Oh-ho-ho! That’s how you talk to your elders,” the man growled, twisting Ats’s arm behind his back with a sudden movement.

Ats groaned in pain. The wrestler grabbed Paul by the chest, shoved him against a tree, and demanded that he answer.

“You not hear us, huh? What’re you doing here? Nobody just wanders into these woods.”

There was no doubt that the masked men were the jewellery thieves. Paul broke out in a sweat. Had he and Ats really needed to stay behind? He’d made the call even though Minna thought it was a dumb idea.

“We’re looking for flying squirrels... er, flying-squirrel nests,” Paul mumbled.

“What? Flying squirrels?!” the giant shouted. “Don’t play stupid! What frickin’ flying squirrels are there out here?”

“The boy might not be lying,” the little gnome said, stepping in. “I’ve heard that people do go around the woods searching for flying-squirrel crap in the spring.”

“Where’d you hear that nonsense?” the wrestler snapped.

“On the radio.”

“There’s loonies everywhere,” the giant rasped.

He released Ats’s arm, yanked the backpack from his shoulders, and dumped out its contents. The tin cookie box rolled out of his sweatshirt. All three men froze for a second before rushing to grab it. Paul took advantage of the opportunity. He nudged Ats and started to make a run for it, but they were a split second too late. Before they knew it, the wrestler and his crew dove for the boys’ legs, knocked them over, and twisted their arms behind their backs.

“Easy there, boys. We’re we off to in such a hurry?” the wrestler asked, pressing his knees into Paul’s back.

The giant picked up the box and pried it open.

“This is an awfully familiar tin, guys,” he mocked. “Let’s see if a flying squirrel soars out of here, too... Huh, what do you know – there is no flying squirrel! There’s just a handful of treasure! Maybe you kids are gold diggers instead, hm?”

The men roughly yanked Ats and Paul up from the ground and demanded to know how they found the box way up in the tree.

Wiping moss and dirt from his face, Ats pointed at the tall aspens.

“We saw the ropes hanging up there in the trees and just wanted to try it out. That’s how we found it.”

The men were extremely doubtful. It couldn’t be possible that a couple of runts dared to make the leap and catch a rope so high up, or used it to swing to the big aspen.

“Which one of you found it?” the giant barked.

“I did!” Paul quickly replied.

He wanted to take the blame because all in all, it’d been his idea to go on a hunt for the stolen jewellery in those woods.

The men then began a proper interrogation. They asked whether the boys were with anyone else and whom they’d already told about their discovery. Paul and Ats swore that they were totally alone because their professor was lecturing in Tartu, and they hadn’t called anyone because there was no cell service in the woods.

“That damn professor!” the wrestler cursed. “Sending out all kinds of brats who only know how to get into trouble. Was that really necessary? What’re we going to do with them?”

“No other option – toss ‘em into a bog lake,” the giant resolved. “Ain’t the first time somebody’s disappeared out there.”

Paul felt his legs go weak. He looked over at Ats, who closed his eyes. It was all over. The thieves had no qualms with deciding to simply swat them like flies on a wall.

“Maybe we should take them to Bear Hill first and decide what to do with the runts there.”

The giant wasn’t a big fan of the idea – why waste time? Still, as the wrestler was also in favor of Bear Hill, he finally agreed with his buddies.

“Okay, but on the double! Take the boys’ phones and tie their hands together.”

The wrestler and the gnome carried out the giant’s orders. He appeared to be the boss of the gang. The men then ordered the boys to walk. The wrestler took the lead while the giant guarded the end of the procession. Paul’s and Ats’s hands were bound tightly behind their backs with rope.

They had to constantly watch out not to trip and fall while climbing over mounds and fallen trees.

Suddenly, Ats stopped.

“What now?” the giant barked.

“I’ve got to pee.”

“Piss your pants!” the giant shouted back, sniggering crudely.

The gnome giggled as well, then punched Ats in the back of the neck and shoved him into motion again.

Finally, they arrived at the vast barren bog. Ats recognized the place. He’d come across it by chance and found cranberries there on the day he and Kristjan went into the woods. The ground turned wet and spongy and started to bob beneath their feet.

The wrestler stopped, picked up a long walking stick, and ordered the gnome to untie the boys’ hands.

“There’s no escaping here. Keep close. If you step off the path, you’ll sink in up to your neck.”

“I told you there’s no point messing around with them,” the giant growled irritably.

The group continued in a single-file line.

“There’s Bear Hill,” the wrestler said, waving his walking stick towards a distant clump of tall trees that towered amid the otherwise bare bog. “It’s a grim place. I’ve seen four bears there with my own eyes – a momma and three cubs. And I’ve lured wolves there in autumn, too. One time, my howls almost brought a young alpha male right up next to me. He sure turned tail the second he realized I wasn’t a wolf.”

“Quit your incessant blabbering and keep your howling to yourself!” the giant snapped.

The wrestler fell silent. Still, his rambling had calmed Paul down a little. The guy didn’t seem as cruel as the giant. At least he didn’t look like a murderer. Now, it all depended on how fast Minna could get the cops to the woods. It was impossible to give her any sign. The men had taken both his and Ats’s phones and turned them off. If Minna called, she’d just think they still had no service and wouldn’t suspect anything was amiss.

Minna and Valter finally reached Hugo and Katya’s farmhouse. She leaned her bike against the wall, ran inside, jammed

the charger cable into the bottom of her phone, took a deep breath, and dialed the emergency number when it turned on.

Meanwhile, Valter stretched out in front of the house. It felt luxurious to lie down after their long hike through the woods, the sun heating his fur nice and warm. Valter rested his muzzle on his front paws and kept watch over their surroundings. The grass had already turned green, blue liverworts blossomed here and there at the edge of the yard, and tiny leaves had sprouted on the lilac bushes. A light breeze carried the reek of cat urine from somewhere, but he couldn’t be bothered to lift his head or go off in search of where the source of it might be hiding. It was nearly impossible to keep his eyes open. An annoying fly started buzzing around the dog’s head. He snapped at it a couple times, but his teeth only clicked together on empty air. The fly went away and for a moment, everything became so still that he could even hear the scratching of a tiny black insect as it crawled out of the ground right in front of his snout. Valter watched it scuttle along, but his eyelids grew heavier and heavier until finally, he was fast asleep and snoring softly.

Minna walked out onto the stoop, stared at the road, and listened. She tried calling Ats and Paul again, just in case, but both phones were still outside of service. A dark car approached between the fields. Minna hollered for Valter and went to meet it at the gate. The dog was startled from his sleep, stood up, yawned, and cocked his ears. What now?

The navy blue Škoda stopped in front of the gate and a young woman in a police uniform stepped out. Valter ran out of the yard and started barking. Minna was home alone and to be protected at any cost.

“Cut it out, Valter!” Minna commanded. “You don’t bark at the police.”

The officer walked up to Minna and extended a hand. “Hello! I’m Senior Detective Siiri Tihane from the police’s youth department.”

“Hi! Minna Raudsik. I made the call.”

Valter wouldn’t stop barking. He positioned himself in front of Minna and followed the officer’s every movement alertly.

Detective Tihane gave the dog a stern look, wagged her finger at him warningly,

and declared: "That's it, you're coming with us!"

Valter's curled tail instantly drooped. Her backed away into a lilac bush and growled softly.

Siiri Tihane laughed.

"Did that scare you? Don't worry. But we'll take you along anyway. There's a place in the car for a dog."

"Do you really mean it?" Minna asked.

"Of course. Valter is a hunting dog and can be a lot of help. But let's go, every second counts. We can talk more on the ride."

Minna ran inside to get Valter's leash. Valter jumped into the trunk of the car while Minna sat in back next to Siiri Tihane. The driver was a young man with a moustache – Junior Detective August Viigipuu from the crime bureau.

Valter couldn't understand what was happening. Moments ago, he'd been enjoying a wonderful afternoon nap in the sunshine and now, he was speeding away in some unknown direction. All he could see through the back window was an endless cloud of dust. Where were they going in such a rush? Who were these strangers? Why had Minna gotten in the car with them? The only thing Valter knew for certain was that he'd never been in a vehicle driving that fast. Soon, they arrived at the edge of the familiar forest. Waiting for them there was a black Toyota Land Cruiser, and leaning against it was a plump man in a long gray coat and a flat cap, puffing on a pipe. It was Commissioner Manfred Talvik, a detective who'd worked in the crime bureau for the last twenty-five years.

"Boss showed up in person. Of course he did," sighed Detective Viigipuu.

"Guess it must be a serious case, then," Siiri Tihane reckoned.

"I suspect he just gets bored sitting around the office every now and then."

"Don't let it bother you, just do your work."

"If only I could," Viigipuu said with another sigh, then grabbed his backpack from the passenger seat and got out.

Siiri Tihane and Minna followed him. Manfred Talvik welcomed them with a smile.

"Glad to see you! I thought I'd come and lend my younger colleagues a hand.

Only it seems you want to drag an old man into the deep, dark woods."

August Viigipuu adjusted his backpack straps and hung a camera around his neck.

"I don't want to drag you anywhere. That's just the job."

"Oh, ho! More positivity, please, Junior Detective Viigipuu! And who is this nice young woman?" he asked, turning towards Minna.

Minna introduced herself. She wasn't much in the mood for humor, wanting only to get back to the boys in the woods faster.

"Minna was the one who found the stolen jewellery and called the police," Siiri Tihane explained.

"Is that so! I suppose that means she solved the mystery of the jewellery theft! You know, you could take a lesson from her, Viigipuu," Commissioner Talvik teased. "True, though – this is only the beginning. The criminals unfortunately haven't been apprehended yet, as I understand."

"I've got no time to stand around and chat here like some people are used to doing back in the office," Junior Detective Viigipuu snapped. "Minna, get your dog and let's go. Every minute matters."

When Valter leapt out of the trunk, the smoke from Manfred Talvik's pipe threw him into a sneezing fit.

"Oh, you even brought a tracking dog!" Commissioner Talvik exclaimed with a smirk.

"You bet we did!" Siiri Tihane confirmed with a nod. "So you can go ahead and stop smoking, if you'd be so kind. The dog's sensitive nose can't stand it."