

FILTERED LIGHT

I lie on my back on the bottom of the creek. I can tell it's winter, because there's a cover of ice on the surface. It's almost evening, since there's just enough light to see. The water flowing past me has me pinned to the bottom, among the sunken flotsam and jetsam that accumulates down there. The water has to be cold but I don't feel cold at all; instead I feel all warm and cozy. I don't breathe – I have no need to do so.

A map case floats by me, and its belt drags down my face and my body, tickling me. In a moment, a balaclava drifts down with the current and travels down my face like an amoeba feeling its way. I shiver. I already know I will soon see a pair of boots still on the feet of the dead man, then his Batman belt buckle glimmers as his hips pass me, and then his faded and worn-out anorak appears.

And then, the face floats into view. The mouth is open and a few bubbles exit, the last to be contained in the lifeless lungs. The nose is raw and red from being blown so much. There's no soul in the eyes anymore, but they're open, and I see into a world I should not see when I look at him. Finally the hair, once a miserable comb-over and now the tentacles of his jellyfish head, trail after the guy as he floats down the stream. I stare at the ice above me again and sense the darkness falling.

Then I wake up, and even if I felt dry at the river bottom, I'm soaked with sweat. This dream comes to me a few times a year even now, but when I was a teenager I had it twice a month at least. The first year after the incident was the worst, but it's amazing how kids recover and manage to push things to the background.

I was fourteen when it all happened. My mom was working her ass off with two jobs, but unskilled labor rarely makes ends meet. She tried her utmost to give me a good home and I know she loved me very much, but with the bastard who was my father still harassing her over the phone and even paying us the occasional visit, we lived in fear much of the time. We moved around a lot, trying to find a place far enough from him but with work opportunities for her. I made friends quickly but had no means to hold on to them, and that made me moody and temperamental, which converted me into a loner.

I did okay in school as a small kid, but when I went into puberty, my grades took a nosedive. This was painful to mom, who wanted me to get out of the poverty loop and have a life that was worth something. I was harassed at school by the older boys, and girls thought I was too weird to approach. My solution to the pressures was to become a good fighter, and I managed to scare away my father too. The trick is, with a carpet knife you don't slash but stab. That way the hole was deep enough for him to get my point, but not wide enough for me to get into too much trouble over it.

The first friends I made after we moved to Jyväskylä were a bunch of bullies. They tried to pick on me, but I was too fast and experienced for them. After the first two push-arounds I took a blood sample from one guy's nose, then threw another one to the ground and sat on

him, my bony fist poised above his face to draw more blood if necessary. The one I hit spoke, bloody bubbles under his nose: “Wanna join us? We could use a fast fist like you.”

“Who’s us?”

“The Crocodiles”, he said. I laughed and had the shit kicked out of me, but I was still allowed to join. I learned the name of the leader was Lare, and he pointed out Ake, Juspe, Mara and Mikko.

I gained street wisdom fast. The Crocodiles taught me how to pilfer cigarettes and how to smoke them without coughing my lungs out, and where to find guys who’d buy beer for you from the store, and how to use the rush hour buses for picking pockets. I set high goals for myself and was soon among the best in each category.

The only thing that really got to me was the infinite sorrow in my mother’s eyes when she came to pick me up from the police station. Still a juvenile, I did not face charges, but counseling and whatnot, and the authorities would have a suspicious look into my life with my mother. I could not face her when she spoke.

“Pekka, you just can’t do this to me. You’re all I have, and if you stray away from the straight and narrow, you’ll kill my dream.”

“I’m not straying anywhere.”

“You are. If you go on like this, they’ll take you away from me, and I don’t get to watch you grow up to be a good man. That’d just finish me off.”

“Don’t worry Mom, I’ll be fine. Promise.”

That time, she bought it. But when the same thing happened a second time, and then once more, she was heartbroken. “Why are you doing this to me?” she said at the police station. “You know my life’s wasted already, but why do you want to waste yours, too?”

I had no answer. All I knew was, I didn't have much to look forward to anyway. I was more interested in hanging around with the Crocodiles and raising hell.

Come March, I completed my education. I was a respected member of the meanest team of bullies in town. We had our own hut in the forest by the stream, custom built with nicked lumber and materiel, and no one sane ventured there.

That’s why we were surprised to hear someone mucking about our place one day around dusk. At first we didn’t see who it was, but then Juspe recognized the intruder. “It’s Lieutenant Steele! What’s he doing here?” We all scrambled out of the shack and went into the bush to watch the guy get closer.

Lieutenant Steele was a local wacko. He was in his twenties, but retarded, so that he was more like a ten-year-old than an adult, despite his burly size. His real name wasn’t Steele, of course – he was Hannu Routala, but he liked to make believe he was a World War II hero, slashing his way through steamy rain forests, a Special Operations Executive agent. He picked

up a map case and a compass somewhere, and a threadbare balaclava completed his outfit. Machetes are hard to come by in Finland so he employed a huge Lappish knife for slashing.

He was probably unaware he was trespassing on the Crocodiles' territory. Mumbling to himself, he approached us, bouncing from stone to tree to bush. "Watch it!... damn the vines, snagging me... must reach HQ by eight or the battalion will be *wiped out*! Snakes! I hate snakes!..."

We watched him, not knowing what to do. He wasn't in our league, a grown man, and yet, he was trespassing on our turf. Any other gang we would have just beaten up and carried the remains to the roadside. "See, guys, the moon's rising. My dad heard someone say Steele only goes out on full moon nights," Juspe said.

Lare stood up and made himself visible. "You! Hey, you! Lieuuu-tenant *Steele!*" he shouted.

The fearless reconnaissance officer hero stopped cold on his tracks. "Who's there?" he hissed.

"We're the Crocodiles, and you're on our property."

He looked around. "Don't see any fences. This is common land as far as I know. Besides, I'm on a mission, gotta go." And he prepared to head on his way.

"Where you going?" Lare asked when his back was already turned.

"Across the Amazon, of course."

We chuckled. This guy was seriously retarded. The Amazon, our little Fox Creek, all of six-seven meters wide! The only common thing was that water ran in both, though the creek still had a cover of ice and snow on it. In places where the current was stronger, the water ate through the ice and formed black swirling eddies with foam on the edges. Lieutenant Steele took a bearing with his compass and started towards the south where the closest bridge was.

Lare said, "Let's work the sucker a bit. I bet we can get him wet. *Hey! Lieutenant!* You're not going to use the bridge, are you? If you were a real Special Ops guy, you'd cross it with style!"

Lieutenant Steele came to a slow motion halt. "Like, what? If Lieutenant has to cross the river, he uses the quickest route. The bridge."

"No, he wouldn't. The real Lieutenant Steele would use his wits, and figure out something real flashy, but you don't have any," Lare shouted and we all laughed like hyenas.

We saw Lieutenant Steele weighed the issue and could almost hear the gears whirring in his low-brow cranium. "The mission comes first. Fast and dependable, that's Lieutenant S for you."

Juspe said, "We cross the river by climbing into the aspens and bending them over the creek – Amazon I mean. But you're so lame you can't even do that." This was true. We crossed the river the previous Spring by bending young trees, but all of us got drenched in the process.

I looked at the guy and thought, the man on a mission is considering the variables. Lieutenant Steele could not lose face in front of snot-nosed kids, but on the other hand, the creek looked menacing with its white cover and bottomless black eyes. Finally he seemed to decide Lieutenant Steele's honor was worth a try, and he turned back to walk straight to the creek's edge.

He took a long while to select the tree and finally settled on a very tall but still slender aspen. With surprising agility he started up the tree; I was reminded of an ancient documentary I'd seen on TV, where Samoan natives went up a palm tree, thirty meters in as many seconds. We could hear him panting when he reached the middle of the tree, where he took a rest.

Then he climbed a couple more meters and tried to make the tree swing. "Wow, he's not so stupid after all," Lare said. Lieutenant Steele got the tree to sway, a little at first, but more with every movement of his stocky body. Soon he was able to extend his arms and hang down, and kick his legs sideways for more momentum.

When Lieutenant Steele did the last kick, the one he hoped to propel him across the creek, the aspen cracked, a rifle shot in the dimming light. The thing no one thought of was, we did it in May, and this was March. Sap ran free and copious in the trees then. Now they were barren and frozen stiff. In our full view, Lieutenant Steele fell towards the thin ice collecting speed, and plunged halfway through it. The map case, still hanging from his neck, slapped down on the ice.

The water got hold of him and started to pull him in. We watched, unable to act, as he hung on to the snapped tree, hoping to pull himself up and escape. The freezing black current filled his boots and his pants and weighed a ton, and his strength waned fast. He made one last effort to get to the surface, then he gave up. I saw his torso go into the water, and then his head went in with a look of boundless surprise on his face. For a second longer he held his grip, but then the fingers let go of the tree and he slid under the ice in a split second.

His map case was snatched from the surface by an invisible hand and followed him into the creek. All of us stood there without believing what we had just seen, but when one of us dared to move a muscle, we fled and ran the three kilometers home as fast as we could. Mother was not home, she was still at work. I took a shower to lose the clammy cold sweat and went to bed, staring at the model airplanes hanging from the ceiling, feeling just as dead inside as I knew Lieutenant Steele was as a whole. I didn't go to sleep until after she returned home around two in the morning.

Lieutenant Steele was never found. The cops had some inkling of his last moves, but could never fully understand what happened, and as none of us spoke, the file was moved to the bottom shelf to collect dust.

The only good thing to come out of this was the Crocodiles dissolved. I shunned all of them and to the eternal surprise of my mother, started going to school again. I caught my class, surpassed them in some areas, and graduated with high marks. Getting into law school was a piece of snake, as Lare would have put it. Still, I am a lunatic: no full moon passes without a nightmare, always identical, always silent.

At first I used to dream of the incident, and relive the hollow horror of watching a man die, but later, when it became obvious Lieutenant Steele would remain lost, the dream changed. I was then on the riverbed watching the corpse pass me in the subdued, filtered light of the failing day.

I tried to work it out through indifference. What good was his life anyway? He was a retard, a mail sorter, an automaton that liked sausages and beer. He had no prospects beyond becoming the fastest mail processor in the history of the Finnish Post. No one would ever have loved him, or missed him, and the only thing that gave him pleasure was playing soldier in the bushes. So, while lying in bed waiting to fall asleep, I pictured myself watching indifferently as the Lieutenant floated past me; but when the time came for that in the dream, I found I could not turn my face away and I had to look him in the face.

Another route I took was through hate. I prepared myself on the eve of the full moon nights, loaded my consciousness with scathing anger to project at the floating corpse, to puncture it and cause it to settle with the sediment. And yet, when I was all poised to scream my guts out, and let him really have it, fear would grip my windpipe and keep me silent, and his ability to float past me again and again, forever, remained unharmed.

Watching news on TV one evening reminded me of the comprehensive health care we have. I went into the therapy queue, and within four months, I got a series of appointments with Dr Stenroos, a psychiatrist. She was nice, good-looking too – I spent much time watching the way her chest moved when she breathed, and what kind of heels she wore to each of our sessions. When I told her my problem, she listened carefully, oozing empathy from her very pores. When my story ended, she said, “But Pekka, you must have pity on yourself. Surely you understand that given your social environment at the time, and the crushing peer pressure, you had absolutely no chance to do anything to terminate this terrible chain of events?”

I said, “So, to you it’s just fine I watched a guy die, and didn’t so much as move a muscle to stop it?”

She took off her glasses and sucked on the temple arm. “Do you think you should have?”

“Hell yes.”

“*This* is your problem. You can’t forgive yourself, even though you were under the influence of these other people, and were a minor. My advice is, forgive yourself, and the dreams will vanish.”

“Are you saying I am the victim here?”

“You’re on your way to recovery.”

As much as I wanted to ask her out to dinner, I just smiled my thanks and left. I tried her method once. I sat in the sauna and tried to relax my every muscle. Then I visualized the situation once again and hoped to convince myself of how absolutely incapable I was of affecting the outcome. Nothing is as easy to conjure up as self-pity, but just as it seemed to be working, I remembered how hard I’d laughed at Lieutenant Steele, and how much I’d admired

Lare for taking him on, and how all of us wanted to watch him get all wet and cold when he fell in the creek.

That he would die was an option we didn't consider, and that made it not at all easy to forgive myself for what I'd done. I was once again tense all over. Gritting my teeth, I poured the bucket of water on the stove, sat in the steam until the skin burned off my ears, and then lived my life with the nocturnal acquaintance of Lieutenant Steele.

Years later my mother, stout of heart and strong in faith, was overjoyed to hear I was made a District Attorney. When I went to see her, she told me of her cancer. That night we sat up until 4am and talked through all the things we should have discussed when they happened, but at the time she was too tired, and I was too intent on being a rebel. I told her what happened to the Lieutenant.

"It's all my fault," she said, "if I had time for you then, none of this Crocodile crap would have taken place." If anything, this pushed the wedge of guilt deeper into my calloused heart.

"Mom, I had no choice, you had even less, if we were to survive."

"Put the blame on me, and I'll take it away when I go."

I hugged her and gave her a kiss, and she ruffled my thinning hair, and that was that. Three months later, she didn't manage to negotiate with Lieutenant Steele. She never saw me get married either, but then, who'd shack up with someone who becomes rigid like a floorboard, sweating and screaming in the night once a month?

Last weekend, it was All Hallows' Eve. If there's something I hate, it's the Finnish way of celebrating by closing down the country on a Saturday. Instead of sitting it out watching Eurosport, I surprised myself by hopping in my car and calling a hotel in Jyväskylä for a one-night stay. All through the four hour drive up north, I asked myself, why am I doing this?

And yet, when I stood at my mother's grave, I knew why I'd come and what I wanted to ask her. I lit the three-day candle I bought at the flower shop by the graveyard, and set it down on the ground so its little yellow flame made shadows dance on the headstone. I asked her, "Mommy? Have I lived my life well enough for you?" There was no answer, and indeed, had there been one, I'd have returned to the shrinks. But still, in my heart I felt a soothing wave, and ascribed it to her.

On the way out I bought another candle. I drove out of the city, to my boyhood forest, and got out of the car. I walked a familiar path north, until I came to the little creek. I lit the candle and laid it among the grass, and took a few steps back. The flickering flame on the wick of the candle seemed the only thing really alive in the world, and its warm light seeped through the opaque plastic cup. Then I looked at the creek for the first time after thirty years.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Steele," I said in a quiet voice.

I walked back to my car, cancelled the hotel with my cell phone, and drove home through the night. In a week's time I will know if it worked.