

# FRANS THE JANITOR

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There's a quaint tradition in the towns of Finland. Many of them publish magazines around Christmastime, filled with reminiscences of goat-herding in 1920, or the arrival of electricity to the remotest village, and somewhat awful iambic hexameter poems by retired schoolteachers. The more rural the town, the more certain it is the magazine will be published.

As I sit here now, an envelope in my hand, I've decided to submit my own little contribution to one of the magazines. I never thought I'd write one, but when my wife recently passed away, I realized no one knew the story anymore, and that I needed to tell someone exactly what happened in the summer of 1968. The version of the story which was extant at the time is patently wrong, and I feel I should now set the record straight.

I was a first-year medical student then, and I'd done well in my studies. So well, actually, that I was supposed to get a summer job as an orderly at the Tampere University Hospital where I was studying. But then the son of the dean of the Medical Faculty decided he wanted to be one too, and with his connections he dislodged me with ease from my dream job. The ward nurse looked infinitely sad when she broke me the news. "Do you have anything else you could consider?" she asked me.

"No, not really. I'll probably have to go back to my old boss at the Post Office, and grovel for my mail sorter position." I looked out of the window where new, light-green leaves were already blocking the view to Lake Näsijärvi. I felt cheated and angry, and I promised myself I'd never succumb to nepotism if I held such a position.

"My sister works at the Keuruu Municipal Home for the Elderly. She called me last week and asked me if I knew anyone who'd want a summer job there. It's not a University clinic for sure, but at least it'd be within the field, and it beats sorting mail?"

I considered her offer for exactly three seconds. "Who do I call?"

She gave me a number. I called, I was confirmed straight away, and I was told to start in a week. Keuruu... I was a City boy from Helsinki, and studying at Tampere was north enough for me; Keuruu was a hundred miles yet further out. When I told my friends about it, they just told me it's a pretty place but a one-horse town if there ever was one. "Bring lots of books," one of them told me.

Arriving at the Municipal Home was something of a surprise, because it was not at all what I expected. Instead of the small, perhaps slightly run-down house I'd envisioned, I was dropped out of the taxi at an expansive, whitewashed, three-story building with no less than three wings. "An awful lot of people must live at Keuruu," I said to myself when I entered the sliding doors and went to the main lobby for my meeting with Head Nurse Koskinen.

She came to me, smiling, her hand extended. “You must be Jussi Korhonen. Welcome! I am very happy you’re here, because we’ve been having trouble getting orderlies for the summer. You can drop your bag behind the desk and I’ll give you a tour of the place.”

I did as instructed, and then followed as she charged down a corridor which seemed to go on interminably. Our steps echoed as if we were walking in cavernous space, and I had to speed up to keep beside her. She must have seen my wondering look, because she explained the size of the building. “This is not for Keuruu only. We are the first Municipal Home to be built for the elderly from five separate towns: Keuruu, Multia, Petäjävesi, Mänttä, and Pihlajavesi. You’re right if you thought there’d never be enough senior people in our little town!”

All the time she pointed out important rooms for me. “That’s the main recreation hall...that corridor over there leads to the sauna and swimming pool...this is our dining hall...that’s the door to the ward for the bedridden...” and so on. There was so much to see I could not remember any of the locations, but I thought I could learn it all on the job later.

We blazed through the floors and finally took the elevator down to the lobby. “So, that’s what we have. Nurse Jaana will be here in a moment to show you to your quarters, and then take you to the depot so you can get your working clothes and other stuff. Welcome once more!” and she was off, steaming up another corridor, a dreadnought in starched whites.

Nurse Jaana turned out to be not much older than myself, and very attractive too. Funny how at that age one is able to conjure romance out of thin air and let such thoughts occupy almost all one’s cognitive capabilities. We left the main building and took the gravel road towards the depot, which was in a separate building to the north of the main house. I noticed Jaana wore a ring; my castles in the clouds imploded without a sound.

I turned and walked backwards for a while to take in the huge building. In front of the main lobby was a sandy square, maybe thirty or forty yards wide. Above the main entrance was a balcony. “What’s with the balcony? The Head Nurse speaks to the staff from there on New Year?”

Jaana laughed. “No, I’ve never seen it in use. Some said it was built because they found they had some funds left during the building phase and the balcony was the easiest way to spend it. They say the view is great from up there, but I’ve never been. Here we are – let’s go and get your things,” she said and entered the depot.

Two hours later I was settled in the dormitory, which was built to scale with the Home. The upper floor was for women, and the men had their rooms on the ground floor. I was lucky – I had my room all to myself. I’d been told to report for the night shift at eight, so I just arranged my little library on the window sill and rested for a while on the bed.

At five to eight I made my way to the main lobby and asked how to get to the staff room. Another kind and pretty nurse told me where to go; I smiled, and found my way without a hitch. There were already five people in the room, someone shoved a mug of coffee into my hand, and another person pointed me to a seat. I smiled all around.

“Hello, night shifters,” the Head Nurse began her hand-over message. “As you see, we have finally received our missing trainee orderly, and our roster is now balanced for the summer. Please welcome Jussi Korhonen! He’s just completed his first year at Tampere Medical.” Approving smiles made me feel welcome.

“Arto, I’d like to make Jussi your charge. Would you take care of him and show him the ropes for tonight? Or actually, you have three nights together lined up. Sorry to start you off with night shifts, Jussi, but this is how it goes sometimes.” Head Nurse Koskinen pointed at Arto, who nodded at me.

Half an hour later we were already sitting at the night duty desk. “Mostly we sit around here and wait to see if Five Eyes goes off. Then we go and take care of the trouble.”

“Five Eyes?” My baffled look brought a smile to Arto’s bearded mouth.

Arto pointed down the corridor. “That’s the latest in paging technology.” I looked to see. High on the wall, right below the ceiling, was an enamelled white metal cylinder. It was about the size of a large tin, and was attached to the wall with a chrome arm. On the cylinder were five red lamps, arranged like the pips of a five on a die. I had little idea what it was.

He explained. “It’s officially called the Corridor Paging System, but we call it Five Eyes. It flashes and buzzes, and you just look at it and it tells you where something is happening. Every nurse station and ward room and other site in this building has a control panel. Here’s the code book,” he said, picking up a thick stack of yellowed, xeroxed papers. “You need to learn it by heart. Won’t take you long – you’ll know it all two days before you leave.” He laughed until his big belly began to jiggle and he had to dry his eyes.

To me it wasn’t funny. “Give me an example,” I said. “I can’t just try to memorize these if I don’t know what happens.”

Arto reached into the corner of the night desk and punched a couple of buttons on a control panel, about the size of a large box of matches. Immediately the thing on the wall burst into life, buzzing in two tones, and flashing its five red, bulbous eyes in a three-part sequence. “See that? Top two flash twice, then three across left once, then flash all five once. Repeat. Got that?”

I said I did, and he hit another button. The device flashed all five lights three times and went silent. “That’s the all clear. Now find out what was it that I paged.”

Taking the stack I leaned back and figured things out. “Umm... lemme see... okay. The first was... aha! Location! ‘Wing C, Head Nurse’s office’. The three across was ‘Head Nurse or doctor needed’, and the last five was “Urgent!”

Arto clapped his hands. “Close but no cigar. The first signal was two eyes, but twice. That’s our desk right here. The three across was top left to bottom right, not right to left. That’s us, any orderly must pick up that call. You got the urgent bit okay. Don’t worry, you’ll soon learn where you’re needed, because most of the calls are for orderlies. So, learn the locations and the tasks soon.”

“Can I keep the stack?”

“No. You read it here, and you learn it well. Sometimes you will be called with the Five Eyes, and you just got to know where to go, like a dog kicked on the arse. Oh, one more thing: if you copy that message and reset Five Eyes, you alone have that call. You *must* carry it out. Now we go and have coffee. It’ll be a long night.”

And so it was. Most of the nights were long, with not much happening except the walks around the silent wards, peeking in to see that all the gramps were tucked in and sleeping, and the occasional call to assist the nurse on duty. Little did I mind, I liked it so much. The nights of the Finnish summer are light; around Midsummer you can read outside in the ambient light, even in central Finland where Keuruu is. Scooting about in a dimly-lit hospital-like building appealed to my sense of adventure.

Within two weeks I was an old hand. I was let in on the inside jokes, such as calling the Head Nurse ‘Mother Superior’, and using Five Eyes for non-medical purposes. It was around that time I learned of Frans the Janitor.

One evening Nurse Jaana picked me up with a supper tray. “I couldn’t find Arto, so will you come with me and take Frans his supper?” she asked.

“Sure.” I joined her as she went to the elevator. “Which ward are we going to? And why do you need an escort?”

“Frans is not in a ward. He’s living in the former janitor’s apartment. We can’t have him in the ward anymore, as he’s scaring the other patients.” Jaana went into the elevator and pushed the ground floor button. She led me into the west wing, all the way to the end of the deep corridor, where there was a door with a latch. Jaana took the tray and motioned for me to open the door. I knocked on the door, and then unlatched and opened it.

It was a two-room apartment with a bathroom *en suite*. In the living room, by the closed venetian blinds, stood a wiry old man, with a classic Einstein haircut. He heard us coming. “Is that you, Jaana? Who’s that with you?”

Jaana put the tray on the table and led the old man to it. “It’s Jussi, our new summer orderly. You’ll soon learn to know him.” The old man sat down and faced me. It was then I noticed the cataracts in both his eyes, and the milky lenses made me feel uncomfortable in his gaze.

“I won’t stay here much longer, you know it, Jaana. I will be picked up soon.”

Jaana gave me a wink. “Come now, Frans, you’ll be with us for a long time still. Here’s your fork and knife, it’s pork chops today, and I’ve chunked it up for you already.” She patted his shoulder and Frans smiled.

“I have to go back. Please stay until he’s eaten, and bring the tray back to the kitchen.” Jaana took her leave, and I could hear the big lock click shut after her. I looked at the old man as he ate with the meticulous movements of an engineer. He even counted the times he chewed each bite.

I had to ask him. "Where will you be going?"

"I'll go where we all go at some time."

"Which is where?"

"You'll see when it's your time to be picked up." When the old man turned his unseeing eyes to me, I felt he had a gaze of a different sort, one which penetrated and made me shiver. I let him finish, then collected the tray and left him alone in his room. I took the tray away and went back to my desk, where I found Arto.

"Who is that guy?" I asked him.

"Long story. To make it short, he was here as a construction foreman when they built this place, and he asked to remain behind as the janitor. Then when he got too old for that, he was in the ward for a while, but when he lost his eyesight, he turned cranky. He began to 'see' friends of his walking the courtyard, and talked to them, and it freaked out the other old folks."

Arto sipped his steaming coffee. "So, after a while they put him with the demented ones, but he's not really one of them, and then Mother Superior remembered his old apartment was free since the new janitor didn't move here from his farm. So, we installed the bolt on the door and put him there."

"Is he a risk to someone?"

"To himself, at least. He's been trying to get out of his place of late, so watch that door. Once the nurses left the bolt latch open, and they caught him when he was trying to get to the balcony."

I happened to take the meals to Frans a few times, and gradually got to talking with him. He didn't seem a threat to anyone, including himself. Once I remained after he'd eaten, and as he leaned back, I asked him point blank: "Who will pick you up, Frans?"

"Forsman, Koskela, Wetterstrand, Aaltonen, Oksanen, Lehesmäki and Ojala."

"Would you like to tell the whole story?"

"Depends... whether you have time and can take it."

"I think so."

The old man stood up and clasped his hands behind his back. As he went to the window whose blinds were closed as always, he peered out as if he saw something. "Yes, that's Koskela out there..."

I began to think he was mad after all.

"It's fifty years next week since Lehesmäki died. I caused him to die, just as I caused the deaths of all of them."

“You killed seven people? Surely you’d be in jail instead of an old folks’ home?”

“Think back. What happened in the Spring of 1918?”

“The Civil War?”

“Ah. You didn’t sleep in history class, well done. I didn’t want to have anything to do with the war. All I wanted was to run my business as usual, but my workers got the Red Flu and started to work for the revolution.”

I leaned back in my chair. “And then?”

“I would have been just fine even if they’d joined the Communists as long as they turned in at the workshop every morning. Koskela was such a fine mechanic. He did the best detailed work. And Lehesmäki could have wrought the Sun from copper. Ojala then, you could give him a bar of steel and he could turn out anything you ever wanted, anything... almost without tools. All in all, we supplied Tampella’s train engine works with many of the crucial parts. They paid well, and I paid my boys well.”

“So what happened?”

“The front reached Tampere. The Reds dug in and the Whites encircled them. My boys steered clear of trouble until that goddamn agitator showed up and converted them. He made them join the Red cause. And not just that. He made them break into my office and break open the safe, and run away with the money. That must have been the reason for his visit in the first place, to get the money and buy more arms.” He waved as if there was someone in the window.

After he’d settled in the armchair, I couldn’t wait for more. “And then?”

“I got mad. I was so furious I swore I’d get them, and my money. I took my grievance to the White commander, and he said, ‘We’ll get all of them soon, you just wait.’ But I couldn’t wait. I went out and went from home to home, and heard they had indeed joined the Reds in the besieged city with their newly-bought rifles. And then I went out myself.”

He rubbed his unseeing eyes with tired hands, then looked at me. “I’m tired. Can we do this some other time?”

“Of course. Sorry to have exhausted you,” I said, and left the old man alone.

“Hey! Arto! Have you ever spoken with Frans about the Civil War?” I asked Arto when I met him in the canteen.

“No. I’ve never spoken much with him. Come to think of it, no one has. He must be fond of you.” Arto paid for his coffee and pastry. “Just don’t take everything at face value. He’s a little, well... you know.”

I didn’t agree with him. To me, Frans had come across as just a tired old man with something on his heart, and I was dead keen on finding out what.

The next evening, Nurse Sari was only too happy when I took the tray she was taking to Frans. "I'll take it to him, no need for you to go down," I said, and got a most enticing smile as thanks. By this time, I'd already found just how much I liked Sari's smile, and was going to ask her out as soon as I mustered up my courage. But now I had the reason to go and open the locks to Frans's apartment once again.

He was already seated at the table, and I let him eat in peace. When he dabbed his dry lips with the napkin, I asked him, "So... what happened next?"

He leaned back and looked at me, and I felt that same shiver at the milky eyes. "Then it turned bad. It was March 28<sup>th</sup>, and the Whites were attacking Kalevankangas, where the Reds were dug in by the church. Losses were terrible on both sides... blood flowed from the churchyard on down across roads. I was there myself, and was horrified by the ferocity of the battle. Still, what happened during the night was, my workers got second thoughts and tried to escape in the dark."

I poured him coffee from a little jug and put the sugar close to his hand. He picked up three lumps and then moved his spoon in a circular motion. "You know, it's fifty years ago, and even now, every day, I wish to God I hadn't acted the way I had."

My hands were sweaty with anticipation, and I rubbed them on my thighs. "So what did you do?"

"I happened to be at the command post when they brought my boys in. They were in a bad way, a couple were wounded and none had eaten for a couple of days. Nonetheless, when I saw them, my hatred flowed over, and when Nordström, the White commandant, asked me what I wanted to do with them, I just said, 'Kill them all.'"

I shivered.

"I could have saved them. I knew Nordström well, and I could have claimed their skills were essential for the war effort. But I didn't.

"And in the first light they laid them against the wall of a barn and shot them. I watched and felt I'd been avenged when the last shot rang out and Wetterstrand fell in a heap on the snow. But that wasn't the worst." Frans finished his coffee and motioned for more.

"What was that then?" I filled up his cup.

"They let them lie there for the day, and only in dusk went to take them to the temporary morgue. I went to help, and we picked up the stiffened corpses of my workers and threw them on the sled. When we lifted Wetterstrand, he wasn't dead. His lungs had been punctured, but he was alive. Looking into his eyes I realized what I'd done, and when he talked to me, I was filled with remorse."

"He spoke? What did he say to you?"

"He said, 'One day, we will pick you up, just like you pick us up now.'"

"Did he die then?"

“No, we took him to the field hospital. I discarded his red sleeve badge and stuck a fir bough in his hat to pass him off as a White so they’d treat him. He didn’t say anything. He never spoke anymore, not even before he died after a few months.”

He dabbed his lips again. “It’s fifty years from that now. Small wonder then I saw him today on the courtyard.”

I collected his plate and cup and took the tray. “See you tomorrow,” I said, and rushed out. When I heard the lock click shut in the door, I felt somewhat better, but I wished I hadn’t asked him to tell his story. I slid the lock bolt on and tapped it against the door, then left. Seeing Arto reading a magazine at his desk was such a relief.

He looked at me. “You must have seen a ghost. Get some coffee so the colour will return to that ashen face,” he said and poured me a cup from a thermos.

“Just spent some time with Frans. His story is starting to get to me.”

“I did try to tell you he’s finally flipping and we’ll soon have the apartment free for someone.”

At that moment, Five Eyes went off. Top two, bottom two, all five, cycle twice. Third floor, dementia ward, orderlies and doctor needed. I was quicker than Arto to roger the call, and I ran to the main lobby and up the stairs, and then down the corridor. Doctor Mennander appeared at the top of the other stairs at the end of the corridor, and we met at the desk by the ward door.

“Well? What’s the problem?” Mennander asked me.

“I responded to Five Eyes – but there’s no one here?” I said. The nurse of the ward came out and asked us to be quiet, and when we asked what the trouble was, she said there was no trouble. She hadn’t pushed the buttons, and there was nothing for us to clear up. “Damn these electronic systems,” Mennander said. “I was just about to leave for the day.” He walked away, grumbling as he went.

I shrugged and left too, and the nurse went to her tasks. When I met Arto downstairs, I said, “The system crashes apparently. No one rang the alarm.”

Arto said, “That’d be a first. It’s been on for three and a half years and not a single false alarm so far.”

The evening went fine, and the next couple of nights too, and then I had my first night on my own. I felt ready for it. I was happy to see Sari was on her shift too, at the bed ward, not far from me. I might just pop out at some point for some chitchat and watch the Five Eyes from her place.

I did the rounds, and watched the rain set in outside. I closed all doors that led out of the building. It was a long walk to go and check all eleven doors, but I didn’t have to go out. Just as I was at the far end corner of the third wing, checking on a maintenance door, Five Eyes went on. I checked the flashes. Bed ward, all orderlies, emergency.

I took the stairs to the second floor and was at the bed ward door in record time. I yanked the door open and was face to face with a very surprised Sari. "Oh! You scared me. Why are you here?"

Sari absolutely refused to admit having hit the Five Eyes alarm button. "You must have been mistaken. The alarm didn't blink or sound here at all. See? It's right there, I could see it all the time."

But I had seen all three of the devices blink along the corridor, and had heard the sound of the buzzer echoing in the hallway. I didn't want to press the issue and make Sari worried, so I made some small talk and soon had her promising to go out rowing with me, come Sunday. We couldn't stay together for long – we did have work to do, so we parted.

At my desk again, I decided to go double-check the doors. This time I started from the entrance by the janitor apartment. I yanked the handle and found everything okay. Just as I was about to leave, I saw the bolt on Frans' door was slid open. I closed it again and at the same time heard Frans trying to open the lock from his side. He pushed the door against the bolt a couple of times, then let the lock click shut and shuffled away from the door.

I stood there breathing fast and shallow. Why was the bolt open? Surely he couldn't have opened it from his side. I double-checked the bolt was locked and went to my desk, but pouring coffee wasn't that easy with shaking hands. When nothing else happened during the night, I could sign the duty sheet with relative confidence and go for a fitful day of sleeping.

The next evening I took Frans his meal. Once again I let him finish his meal in silence, then asked him, "What happened after the last one died?"

He put his fingers into his fluffy white mop of hair and tried to create order out of chaos, then gave up. "Realism set in. In my hatred and fury, I forgot these men were the best metalworkers anywhere north of Germany. So, having wilfully discarded my only source of revenue, I went bankrupt in short order. I had to think of something else to do, and I sold my works and left Tampere for good. I didn't want to stay in any case; the memory of what happened was too strong for me to stay. So I became an itinerant construction manager, building whatever I could find. This is the last job I had."

Before I could ask another question, he went on. "And now, it's about time for me to finish this job too. I've seen all seven of them here."

The hair on my neck stood up. "Like, where?"

He went to the window. "If you could see what I see, you'd take a look at the courtyard." I sneaked up to him and opened the ever-closed Venetian blind, but could see nothing but the well-raked sandy courtyard bathed in the gentle evening light.

"No one there," I said.

He worked his face slowly into a smile. "See the picture on the wall?"

I looked to the nearest wall on which was a framed photograph. "Are these your workers?"

"That's them. I'm on the right with the bowler hat. It's 1916 and all is well. Now when I look out of the window, I see them in the same order, left to right. They're wearing the same clothes. And I still have my bowler hat on the hat rack," he said and went back to sit in his armchair. "It's waiting for the time they pick me up."

I collected his tray and left without a word. Triple-checking the lock made me feel marginally better, but I was so happy I was not on night shift, not just now.

My turn came three nights later. It was one of those nights with just me and the night nurses. Sari was on too, two floors above me. I had not slept too well of late, so I was tired right off the bat. Coffee, dark as Venezuelan nights, had some effect, but I must have dozed off. I dreamed vague dreams of times I couldn't identify, and people I didn't know, but I was awakened by a volley of shots.

I fell off my chair I had balanced against the wall, then understood it wasn't shots. It was 02.15, and Five Eyes was buzzing in two tones and flashing its mean red eyes. I was to get to the third floor, acute medical ward. This time, the elevator was faster. Once I got there, I saw no one, but out of the corner of my eye, I sensed something moving by the balcony doors. It was like a shadow, but with substance.

I rushed to the door and ripped it open, and entered the balcony. It was empty, but as it was my first time there, I noticed what a view it offered out to the well-raked sandy courtyard below. I held on to the railing, trying to see if someone could have been inside the glazed door and then gone somewhere from the balcony, but could not find a route.

And then Five Eyes went just about mad. Returning to the corridor, I stared at the lights and listened to the buzzes and could not make any codes out of it. What was the oddest thing – only the device closest to me was on. I could see the others down the hallway were dead. As I watched, it did a sort of countdown from five to one, then went black too. I was sweating by this time, wondering what the hell was going on.

I remembered I had not done the rounds but once, and to calm myself down, I went on the route, trying to whistle to myself. I thought *River Kwai* felt appropriate, but the nasty echo made me cut it. The first locks and doors were fine, but then I got to the bolted door of Frans.

The bolt was missing. Someone had bent the restricting piece of three millimeter steel so as to remove the steel bolt altogether. There were no signs of the use of force; the lock frame had been bent back as if it'd always been flat. And, worse, the door was open. I rushed in and checked the small rooms of the apartment, but Frans was nowhere to be found.

As if it weren't bad enough, Five Eyes came alive once more. Bottom two, bottom three, all five. One tone. Trouble at the main entrance. I ran up the stairs and entered the lobby, but since I could not see anyone there, I went out to the courtyard.

I felt a wind pass by me, a gust I thought, but this had more volume than a regular gust. And the leaves of the ashes didn't move – they always flutter with the faintest of breezes, but not now. Then I felt it again, and twice more, almost being bumped by wind. I must be ready for the basket-weaving ward, I thought, but then I chanced to look up.

Frans was at the balcony. He was wearing a trench coat and boots, and his bowler hat was firmly planted on his head. He stood by the railing and held it with both hands.

“Frans! Don't jump!” I tried to scream, but my voice only came out as a theatrical whisper.

“Of course I won't jump,” he answered in stoic fashion. “That'd be stupid. But the time has come, and my workmen have arrived to pick me up, so I must bid you farewell.” He was still grabbing the railing with his knobby fists. I saw his trench coat move, again as if by wind, but when it flew open to either side of his wiry body, I understood it was no wind.

Fourteen invisible hands began to tear at his trench coat. Then I saw his trousers move, as if someone pinched the pant legs and pulled his legs back and off the balcony. He was soon in a horizontal posture, hands on the railing still, but when I saw his fingers twisted free of the black metal railing one by one, I moved back, watching and not believing what I saw.

Frans was indeed picked up, and when he had to let go of the railing, he grabbed his bowler hat with both hands. He moved out into the air in front of the balcony, carried by the hands visible only by the creases they made in the fabric of his coat. Majestically and silently, bar the incessant sound of wind that was no wind, he floated out to the courtyard, a full thirty meters from the building.

And then, he was dropped. The hands holding him ceased to exist, and he began to fall. It took him less than three seconds to hit the ground, and he met the earth with just a thump. He moved once, as if to straighten himself from the heap in which he landed, but then moved no more. I rushed to him and turned his head to see his face, but he said nothing. A smile, no, the ghost of a smile appeared on his lips, and then he died.

I looked around to see if there was anyone to help. I saw Sari on the balcony, and I put my hand to my ear mimicking a telephone. She understood and went to call the police. I kneeled beside Frans to wait. It took only fifteen minutes for them to arrive.

The cops had the good sense to keep the sirens of the Volvo Amazon silent, but they did brake hard, sending gravel flying all over the yard. The first to emerge could have been the granddad of the Keystone Kops, but the driver looked as if this was his first assignment ever. “Wilska, Lieutenant, and Officer Jormakka. What's this? Suicide?” the old man asked.

I explained that Frans had been thrown off the balcony and he'd landed here. Lieutenant Wilska looked in the direction I pointed. “That balcony? You're joking. That's a good thirty meters. He couldn't have been thrown here. Besides, who threw him off it?”

I took a deep breath and explained what had happened, and made sure I included every twist of the tale. Officer Jormakka took notes, but by the time I explained how the invisible

hands had lifted Frans's feet off the balcony, he took his pen off the pad and looked at me as one looks at a lunatic. Wilska took his pipe out of his pocket, and knocked the ashes off against his shoe.

"Guess what, son? This is my last week in the Force. Forty-four years of petty crime, drunks beating each other up, traffic offences and the occasional murder, but I've never, ever heard such an idiotic story. But that's not the point. The point is, I retire next Monday. I'll be damned if I start to investigate this as anything else but suicide, even if the body is found here, thirty meters from where he should have landed." He refilled the pipe with aggravated movements, then lit it. It took four matches.

"And I'll be *fucked* if I go to the Captain to explain to him that ghosts carried this man from the balcony and dropped him to his death. Jormakka, take the legs, and you, boy, you take the arms. Carry him over to where he would land if he jumped off the balcony."

I tried to protest, but to no avail. Jormakka picked up Frans' legs and motioned for me to grab the hands. Lieutenant Wilska measured a spot five meters from the main door. "Drop him here, in a heap, just as you had him there. Then, Jormakka, you go and get the camera, and document the *suicide scene*. I need a statement from you, kid. Anybody else saw this happen?"

I glanced at the balcony where Sari was peeking over the railing. I moved my head to signal her to go. She faded away. "No."

"That's good. So, you were the only person who saw this elderly and demented gentleman climb the railing and leap to his death? Write it down, Jormakka."

"No. I told you what I saw."

"This is what we will write. Having then met the ground at a high speed, the said gentleman died at... 02.45? That's half an hour from now?"

"The time is right but nothing else is."

"See if I care. Jormakka will type it up when we get back to the station. I'll send the mortuary for the body. You will now go and grab that rake, and make everything hunky-dory both here and there where you sat. Understood?"

I was about to protest, but then I realized my position; it'd be the summer orderly's word against the Police Lieutenant of forty-plus years. Fat chance. I went to pick up the rake and cleaned up the impact site, thus hiding all the signs of the demise of Frans the Janitor. For forty more years, the sound of the rake on the ground stayed with me and kept me awake at night.

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I married Sari in about a year's time, partly because I liked the way she understood me that night. I told her what happened, and she believed me, but we let people believe Frans had leaped to his death, depressed after losing his sight. We bought a summerhouse on an island on Lake Keurusselkä and stayed there for thirty-two summers. Reading the local paper every

summer, we saw Lieutenant Wilska died in 1986. I have no information of Officer Jormakka, but he's kept his silence, I am quite sure.

And now I am alone, after Sari died a year ago. I think it is time to let the good folks of Keuruu hear what really happened at the Keuruu Municipal Home for the Elderly. Frans the Janitor deserves it, and so do his workers. So, I will now print this and seal it in an envelope, and hope for the best.

All that remains to be seen is, how open is the mind of the Editor-in-Chief of the *Keuruu Christmas* magazine.