



WE
SINNERS

A NOVEL

HANNA
PYLVÄINEN

POX

SHE SHOULD HAVE told him already about the church but she hadn't. The warnings were all there—he could name all of her siblings, and he looked at her too deliberately, and when he hugged her she was caught too long against his chest. Every morning she decided she would tell him, but every afternoon it was too tempting to go one more day, one more minute where he found a way to hold her fingers as she passed him a note. But now she knew he was going to ruin it all and ask her to the dance, she could feel it—she avoided him carefully but fussed with her hair, nearly sick with the twin terrors of him asking her or not asking her, not sure to which end she should assign her hope.

But he found her—he knew her schedule, and he found her lagging behind after class, talking to the teacher. In the hall he pushed at her shoulder with his shoulder and they seemed alone, despite the swarm of people.

“So,” he said, “are you going to the dance?” She kept walking because it was a thing to do. “With me, I mean.” She found this to be charming, and against her will she was flattered through

and through. She looked at him. Her ears hurt with heat. She saw it was stupid to have ever pretended, even to herself, that she could go. “Well,” she said, but the word caught.

“You’re coming,” he said.

Her smile was more mischievous than she felt.

“Please come,” he said. He nearly whispered it in her ear. She looked at him. She detected sweat where his hair began to curl. It moved her, that someone like Jude could feel nervous talking to her.

“Well,” she said. She thought of the many available lies—she had to babysit, the baby was sick. There was always something, there was nothing like six younger siblings for providing an excuse. But in her mind a minister warned that she should always confess her faith, and it occurred to her, Jude watching her, that confession was what it was. And she confessed. She said things about the church, her voice shaking out of time with her knee. She listed, idly, some things she couldn’t do—nail polish and movies and music with a beat.

“So you can’t go to a dance?” he said. “Someone’s going to what? Punish you?”

“No, I mean—if you are tempted to do something, you know, maybe it’s better to just not do it. So maybe there are good movies out there but I mean there are so many bad ones, so just don’t watch them.”

“Just don’t dance, because dancing is—”

She blushed.

“Man.” She saw on his face that she should not have told him.

“Sorry,” she said softly. She wanted him to hold her, she wanted to sit in his big arms, like stupid girls did. She would cry. Hey, he would say, it’s okay. Instead he walked away without waiting to see what she would do. She watched him go, watched him walk his easy lope.

Before her last class she thought she saw him down the hall, or maybe it was someone else, tall and heavy with dark hair. She pushed into the bathroom, where girls staggered themselves around the mirror. They put on mascara, only on their top lashes, two coats, one under, one over. “Hey,” someone said, “is it true you can’t even go to the movies?”

“Oh, that,” Brita said. “Why?”

“Someone said.”

“Oh,” Brita said, “well, it’s not that big of a deal.” But she crept into a stall—she saw his name on the wall—and she thought about praying but it felt too vain to pray for something so small, and she didn’t. She pretended to take a long time and she fished through her bag for nothing, but there was a line and she could hear the annoyance in the shuffle of feet.

She told Tiina what had happened. They were tuning their violins before orchestra. “Does everyone know?” Tiina said, a peg spinning free. “Do my friends know?” She nearly teared.

“Jeez,” Brita said, “it’s not that big of a deal,” but she knew she was talking to herself. Still, she steeled herself, and she made it through the day, without seeing Jude again, without seeing his friends, without seeing her friends. She was almost out of the building when she heard their last name. “It’s true,” someone was saying, someone she didn’t even know. “They’re brainwashed. The whole family. They don’t even have a TV.”

Brita sat on the bus and pinched her thigh. She said the word to herself again and again, so it would mean less and less, and then nothing. The Rovaniemis were brainwashed. She was brainwashed. She thought about the people she thought were brainwashed, people who believed the world was ending on a specific date, people who saw aliens, people who believed meditating could make you lift off the ground. The Amish, with their claptrap horses and carts and orange reflectors to keep

away motorized traffic. She felt better, thinking about people who were actually brainwashed, and she shook the word from herself, listening to the song piped through the bus, something she wasn't supposed to listen to, and she watched Tiina do her homework across the aisle, her pencil skidding across the worksheet, the answers easy and known. Tiina didn't look brainwashed—Tiina looked almost unremarkable, her hair softly brunette, to the shoulders, everything average except her eyes, hooded, heavy, hinting at Finns who had moved to America and married more Finns, and more Finns again. But otherwise she—they—looked normal, their jeans the same cut as everyone else's, only cheaper, their shirts bold and basic colors, rising to modest places, but normal. This isn't what brainwashed looks like, she told herself, and she took out her own reading.

When they got home, adding their backpacks to the pile at the door, her mother was abrasively cheerful, pinching everyone. "We found a house," her mom said. She did a jig. She said they were having pizza delivered. They never had pizza delivered.

"How many bedrooms?" Brita asked. She felt suspicious.

"Three, but, well, we can convert the basement into another. So four, maybe five."

Her mom took Tiina's hands and they jiggled together.

"Four," Brita repeated. She went upstairs. She looked around the room she shared with her sisters, her dresser drawer askew again, her underwear hanging over the edge. She sat on the bottom bunk. She thought about the dance. She imagined what it was like to accidentally step on Jude Palmer's polished shoe, to smell his father's cologne in a darkened gym. Probably stupid, she decided, probably it was better she wasn't going anyway. It was okay, she was different. They were different.

They were in the world, but not of the world. And now they were moving, to someplace where people didn't know yet that they were different. She thought of her new teachers, their faces when they would meet her parents at conferences. Seven kids? Laughs politely stopped when they realized it wasn't a joke.

The school year mercifully ended. She did not see Jude, and he did not try to see her. She took all his notes and walked them out to the recycling bin at the end of the driveway late at night, stuffing them carefully between pages of newspaper. She said good-bye to her friends, pretending sadness but feeling relief, sensing already the inevitability of growing apart. Her friends would switch from one practice boyfriend to the next and fight for midnight curfews, and she would spend her Saturday nights at some church family's house, singing the same church hymns, eating cheese and crackers, always unable to get her volleyball serve over the net. She was seeing already that everyone was right, that believing friends were better, if only because you suffered together.

When true summer came, she threw herself into helping them move—of course her family hadn't hired a real estate agent, or movers, and they collected cardboard boxes from the dumpsters behind grocery stores. And of course in the midst of this, Julia—only five, but somber in her suffering—kept getting ear infections and needed tubes put in her ears, and their van broke down again, and again her dad would come home silent, bitter about needing to buy a new van at the same time they were trying to buy a house, snapping when no one brought their dishes to the sink. "You want me to put them away, huh, me?" he said through his teeth. Worse, their new home wouldn't

be ready before they moved, and they needed somewhere to live for the intervening month. Instead of going to a motel, like normal people, her mom had decided they would move into her cousin's apartment since she was gone for the summer, trying to get engaged in Finland.

When they had finally packed a storage unit with cribs and bikes and bunk beds, everything in multiples, they drove out to their cousin's apartment complex, her parents quiet, a church CD on, the windows down. They piled out of the van, hauling sleeping bags and garbage bags stuffed with clothes. A woman in heavy makeup and dyed red hair was wagging her finger, trying to count them as they marched up the back stairs. "Seven," her mom said to the woman, sharply. "No divorces. No twins." Brita slung the baby on her hip, lightly.

In the apartment she stood in the living room, which was also the dining room, and looked around herself at the miniature stove, at the couch, which did not pull out into a bed. The confines of the room packed and amplified the heat. On the kitchen table there was a note from her cousin. Eat the food, it said. Avoid the landlord, white hair, big dog—he didn't know they were there. She missed them. Love and God's Peace—these final words in Finnish.

At night the heat did not rest. Brita put her pillowcase in the freezer, but the relief was so temporary it was hardly worth the wait. One month, Brita thought, but when she woke she discovered she itched. She touched her face, the back of her neck. She looked at her arms. She looked around herself, at the waking kids and her mother, in the kitchen making puuroa, as if anyone wanted to eat something hot in this weather. She looked at Tiina, who was trying to ignore the baby climbing on her back and pulling at her hair. She saw the spots on the baby

first, then on Tiina. She checked the little kids. “Mom,” she said, “Mom, come look,” and when her mom began to laugh, Brita could not.

“It’s the chicken pox saga,” her mom said as they ate a lunch of bologna-and-cheese sandwiches on the living room floor, because now the folding table was covered in calamine lotion and the diapers, and newspapers with ads for new vans circled in crayon.

“Maybe we should get a hotel,” her dad said. Her mom laughed and laughed. The little kids laughed because she was laughing. Her mouth was open and Brita could see her fillings.

A week of oatmeal baths passed. The little kids rotated in and out of the tub, and by the time it was Brita’s turn the water was not even lukewarm, the residual oatmeal still on her feet when she stepped out, the towel damp from the other kids, the knob turning and jostling as someone tried to come in. All day she itched, but she would not scratch. She had a vision of appearing at her new school with scars, and every day she counted the number of pockmarks on her face. There was one particular mark that, in its close proximity to the somehow sexual organ of her mouth, she desperately needed to fade away. She borrowed winter gloves from her cousin’s closet, so she couldn’t scratch, but at night she would wake to find the gloves strewn and her scabs bleeding.

When it grew dark her parents let her and Tiina go outside. They sat on the back stairs and sniffed at the cigarette butts. “How do I look,” Tiina said, posing with a stub hanging between her lips.

“Stupid,” Brita said, but she thought Tiina looked cool.

“Do you miss him?”

Brita rolled her eyes.

Otherwise they never left the apartment. “I’m being held hostage,” Tiina would scream from time to time, without prompting. She taped strips of paper to the windows to look like bars.

Her parents took them out a few times, to places with air-conditioning—outdoor-equipment stores, the mall—but people stared. They looked like the walking plague.

“Look, Mom,” a little kid said, “it’s the chicken pox family.”

At last her parents left them home alone. “Kids in charge,” her mother said. They said they needed to run out for more calamine, but really they probably needed a break. Brita and Tiina went into the bedroom and began to go through her cousin’s dresser. They examined a collection of sporty thongs. They searched for love letters, makeup, and finally found a single stick of concealer.

The boys banged on the door. Julia had run out of the apartment, they yelled. Brita left Tiina with the little kids and made her way outside, along the balcony. She was nervous because she had seen the landlord just that morning, out in the courtyard with a graying dog. She hurried down the back stairs to the lower balcony, hissing in Finnish, rounding the corner to find Julia talking shyly to a youngish guy with a thick scar, wide as a finger, that cut across his brow. The scar ruined his good looks, making him approachable. “Dad ran over the cat,” Julia was saying. “The other week, before we moved. He was so mad he broke the garage door.” Julia wasn’t contagious anymore—none of them were—but she looked contagious, with her picked skin and her tired eyes, and her starkly blond hair caught by sweat to her neck.

“How many of you are there, anyway? I keep hearing all these feet.” He was holding plastic grocery bags full of frozen lasagnas and frozen pizzas and frozen french fries.

“Seven,” Julia said, before Brita could stop her.

“Your parents must be pretty busy,” he said. He laughed to himself. He shifted the bags from one hand to the other.

“What’s your name?” Julia asked.

“Steve,” he said, smiling patiently.

“Hi,” Brita interrupted apologetically. She took Julia’s sweaty hand, talking in Finnish, reciting the Lord’s Prayer because it was the only Finnish she could speak in full sentences. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and did not look back.

Brita looked for Steve, but she never saw him. People went outside only to walk to their cars, or to let their dogs out, and so she watched the dogs play with each other in the courtyard like children, happy to be among their own. When the landlord appeared with his army buzz cut and giant hound, the others called their dogs in, leaving the landlord’s dog to nose the door-sills alone.

Things were looking up, Brita thought. She hardly ever thought about Jude. The air was cooling. By the time evening fell, half the people in the complex were out on their balconies in folding chairs, sipping iced drinks. Her mom let them take turns sitting out on the balcony. The rest sat on the couch, reading books they had already read. In the kitchen her dad made roast beef sandwiches. The baby crawled into the kitchen and her dad pointed a finger at her and crouched down and said in a pretend growl, “Who’s you, who’s the chunkiest chunkerton I’ve ever seen? It’s you, champer-damper, it’s you,” and scooped her up. It was the same voice he had used with the cat

before the cat had died. He was good, people said, with animals and children, and when Brita saw him like this she wished he would still do that with her, but she was too old now to be teased, and too young to be talked to seriously. Sometimes he said things to her about work, or even money, but not in a confiding way. “What do you think I make?” he asked once, at a store, when she said she needed socks and then appeared at the register with new packs for everyone.

Above her father’s singsong came the cry of a woman outside. There was a general launch to the door, except from her parents, who looked up tiredly from the lists of vehicle sales. “What is it?” her mom said. Out the window Brita saw the landlord making his way across the grass stiffly but steadily. She saw the red-haired woman with her hand over her mouth.

“Something with a dog,” Tiina said from out on the balcony. Brita looked out the door—Steve was running along the balcony toward them.

“The landlord’s dog bit your little girl,” he said. Her mother rose sharply.

Brita stared at the sight of him at their door. She looked at their apartment, the sleeping bags everywhere. She bet the apartment smelled of them, of too many people. She saw him notice where cereal had been sprinkled and ground into the carpet.

Julia appeared with one hand over her back, the landlord behind her like an abashed parent. “She scared him pretty bad,” he said. “She just came up behind him, and he’s blind in one eye, he doesn’t like that. Max never bit anyone before,” he said. Julia turned around and Brita saw that Julia’s T-shirt was stained with small pools of blood, like spilled juice, and her mom lifted the shirt to reveal a series of puncture wounds. More people appeared at the door, the red-haired lady with her little dog, the old Chinese man who smoked on the back stairs

as if he were hiding it from his wife. They all stood at the entrance to the apartment and Brita tried to think of a way to get them outside and gone and not staring, but there was nothing to be done. The ambulance had to be called and a towel had to be pressed to Julia's back and everyone had to fawn over Julia and stare around the apartment.

"She didn't even tear up," the red-haired lady said, "not one drop. Steve saw the bite."

"Brutal," Steve confirmed. He eyed Julia's bite marks warily and made noises of sympathy. Brita couldn't stop herself from toying with her hair, but soon the ambulance came and took Julia and her mom away, and the apartment emptied—she thought Steve made eye contact with her before he left—and the landlord apologized halfheartedly, stiffly, clearly at a loss as to what to do about his dog, or this gigantic family camping out in one of his own apartments.

The landlord came by the next weekend to apologize again. "Anything I can do, let me know," he said. He spoke slowly, each syllable costing something. "Maybe this fan," he said, pointing to the noisy tumbling above them. Her mom said the drain was slowed from the oatmeal baths, and he knelt in their bathroom with no shirt on, jamming a plunger with surprising force. His body shook and he made noises that were awkward to hear, and he swore sometimes, and her mother pushed them away from the bathroom door.

Their neighbors sympathized with them. They told stories about Max nipping other kids, even his own granddaughter. Someone brought over cookies. Someone left a box of used markers and crayons at their door.

Brita wondered what Steve thought of them now, if he felt

bad for them. She shaved her legs with her cousin's razor and used her cousin's concealer stick on her pockmarks, and she borrowed the red-haired lady's folding chair and sat on the balcony with her feet up on the railing. She made ice water and wore sunglasses and imagined the sun was tanning instead of searing her.

She had chilled her legs twice with the melting ice cubes when Steve came out, walking through the courtyard, not toward his car but toward the landlord's door, at the corner of the complex. She watched him walk, hands in his pockets. He had a more hangdog air than Jude—more guarded, she decided. He knocked, stepped back, knocked again.

"Yes?" she heard the landlord say, not quite friendly. Brita sat up in her chair and leaned against the railing to watch. Steve had a broad back, a swimmer's shoulders.

"I was just coming," Steve said, "because—I'm on the lower floor." He said something else, and then she heard, "—the baby's always crying."

Brita burned. Everything burned, her face, her ears. She tried to get up slowly, but her sweaty skin stuck to the chair and the chair clanged against the cement. She moved to the edge of the wall and tried to pull the chair quietly shut.

"Are you okay?" she heard Steve say. Brita turned back and saw Steve leaning over the fallen form of the landlord. Max was keening, licking his face with perverse exuberance. "Hey," Steve said, looking up, noticing her, "you guys have a phone, right? Can you call and get help?"

She ran inside and got her mom to call and rushed back downstairs, the little kids following. She'd gotten as close to Steve as she dared, when she saw that the landlord had, all over his face and hands, the familiar scabs of their chicken pox, only heavier, not like a childhood sickness but like a disease. Along

one cheek the pox was so thick she couldn't see the space of skin in between. Other neighbors showed up. The red-haired lady leaned over the landlord and put her hand to his forehead uselessly.

"What's going on? Is he okay?" her mom said, appearing on the lawn. She chatted anxiously with Steve. Brita saw that her feet were bare, like they always were in summer, and she wished her mom would wear shoes. She saw her mother suddenly as Steve must see her, her face pleasant and round like Finnish faces could be, but devoid of makeup, giving her a harried look, especially with her hair hanging limply in the heat, curling some from an old perm. She looked, Brita realized, tired. She looked her age—she looked like someone with too many kids, someone too busy to wear anything but a black cotton dress.

"We can take him," her mom said, pointing at Max.

"Are you sure?" Steve said. "Really, it's okay."

"Julia just scared him before—it'll be fine," she said. "And it's only fair," she added, with an ironic smile. Steve shrugged and handed her the leash. "Kids, come," she said, "up," and they went, Max slow going up the flight of stairs. From inside the apartment they stood and watched the ambulance arrive, with its lonely whine and beating lights. They watched the paramedics wheel the landlord away, and then Steve make his way back to his apartment.

Julia cried and said she thought Max was going to bite her again.

"You have to get back on the horse," her mom said firmly. "When I was little, I was maybe Brita's age, I fell off Big Red and he bit my arm, and even while my arm was bleeding my dad put me back on the horse." Tiina and Brita looked at each other and rolled their eyes. She always told this story.

Max roamed unhappily around the apartment. They put

out a bowl of water for him, but he wouldn't touch it. "No one try to pet him," her mom said. She kept the baby strapped into the car seat on the counter. The baby cried and Brita tried to amuse her by hanging things in front of her face, keys, measuring spoons, her hair, but she was too old for that now. Finally Brita lifted her and walked her around the apartment, trying not to think of Steve and what he had said about them, trying to keep the baby from crying.

Her dad came back from looking at vans. "No seat belts in the back bench," he said, sighing. He saw the dog. "Why do we have this?" he asked.

"The landlord has the chicken pox," Brita told him, "from us."

"From who?" he said, as if he hadn't heard.

Her mom made them clean. Brita was sure this was because she was worried someone would come to pick up the dog, and she wanted the place to seem neat. Brita wiped the counter and rolled up the sleeping bags. Tiina found the vacuum cleaner and went at the carpet. The little kids threw all the toys in a cardboard box and tried to stack the books but they kept falling, and they gave up.

But no one came. Finally they unrolled the sleeping bags and turned out the lights. Her dad put Max in the bathroom with a towel on the floor and a bowl of cut-up hot dogs from the fridge. For a few minutes Max whimpered, and then he was quiet.

All the next day no one came. No one called. All day Brita stayed inside. She did not want to see Steve. She did not want to think of Steve. She hated that she had gone so quickly from trying to not think about Jude to trying to not think about

Steve. The little kids held races around the balcony and she yelled at them to run more quietly.

“Nels is cheating,” Simon whined. “He keeps pulling my shirt.”

“Cheat more quietly,” Brita said.

Her mom sent Brita down to try the landlord’s door and Brita moved hurriedly, in case of Steve, but she didn’t see him, or his car in the parking lot. She knocked hard, trying to peek through the plastic slats of curtains, but the apartment was dark and silent.

Her mom called the hospital, but they wouldn’t put her through. “Can you put his family on?” she said, tense, annoyed. His family wasn’t there, the nurse said.

The little kids crabbed and her mom snapped and yelled at them and then broke down, crying. Her dad came home and saw her crying and yelled, and the little kids ran into the bathroom to hide from him.

“Let’s just leave,” her mom said, her face and voice taut with tears.

“You think I want to be here?” her dad said. “You think I think this is fun?” he yelled, and then he turned around and left, and they all went quiet but he wasn’t there to hear it. They all made their own sandwiches and poured their own milk and sat and read quietly, and the boys didn’t even fight about wanting to read the same comic, and they spread it out on the floor and dripped jelly onto its pages together. They were in this tableau, the mood mild, almost serene, when her dad came in, carrying milk shakes and fries, cheerful as a form of penitence. “Serve it up,” her mom sang, “nice and hot, maybe things aren’t as bad as you thought.” Fries fell to the floor and Max sniffed them but didn’t eat them.

One more week, Brita thought, one more week.

* * *

The heat eased. By the end of the week it was only the midday hours that were unbearable, and in the shade of the balcony it was even enjoyable to be outside, but Brita kept inside. She napped and she sulked, and when someone asked her a question she gave the shortest possible answer. Often she simply sat and petted Max, but he hardly stirred. He didn't want his belly rubbed. She liked how he embodied her own depression. She thought she understood him, how he wanted to quit. If only, she thought, she could be like him and understand how little everything mattered. Everything bothered her. The little kids pinched each other and her dad eyed them moodily but said nothing. Tiina talked too loudly, all the time. Simon whined, about everything. Her T-shirts were all sweaty, so she took one of Tiina's and Tiina slapped her arm.

"Don't touch me," Brita said.

"Wash your own clothes," Tiina said.

"You're a little shit," she hissed at Tiina.

"Where did you hear that?" her mom said, dismayed.

"Dad," Brita said. The baby set off on a cry. She wailed, the rattle of a one-year-old, defiant, inconsolable. Brita picked her up and pressed her to her chest. "It's okay," she sang, "it's okay," but her tone was too angry.

Her dad sat at the table with his hand to his forehead. Nels picked up the recorder and began to play.

Her mom began to cry.

"Not you, too," her dad said.

"What?" her mom asked. "You think this is fun for me?"

"It's my fault," her dad said, yelling now, "that's right, it's all my fault. Blame it on me."

“Well,” her mom said, “if you would let us stay at a hotel—”

“You think I don’t want to be at a hotel? You think this is about being cheap?”

“No, I know,” her mom said, suddenly contrite. “I know.”

“Yeah, me, I’m a cheapskate.”

“Dad,” Tiina said, “Dad, stop.”

“Warren,” her mom said.

Suddenly he fell quiet. Brita turned and saw Steve at the door. He had a baseball cap on, highlighting his wholesome nature. His scar seemed laminated in the light from the living room.

“Hey,” he said, “some people are trying to live here.”

“Oh no,” her mom said, “we’re sorry, we’re so sorry. The heat,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “It’s okay, I get it.”

“We’re almost out of here,” she said. “Two more days.”

“Uh—did you need me to take the dog then, or what are you doing with him?”

“Well, we didn’t want to bring him to a kennel while we were waiting, but we don’t know what to do, he’s not even eating.” She was talking too fast.

“You didn’t hear?” Steve said.

“Hear what?”

“Oh,” he said. “Maybe I shouldn’t say it, in front of the kids.”

“What?” her mom said. “Is everything okay?” Brita felt something crawl around in her throat.

“Maybe there was already something wrong with him before,” he said.

“Are you saying—”

There was a terrible pause. Steve lifted his cap and reset it on his head.

“Sorry,” he said. “Yeah.”

“How awful, how completely awful, I don’t believe it.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Is there—will there be a service for him?” She asked this somehow utterly calmly and politely. Brita looked around the room. The little girls seemed confused, but Simon was searching about himself, no doubt for the doll he was too old to be carrying around.

“I don’t know anything about it,” Steve said. “Sorry.” When he walked away Brita stood at the door and watched him go. It felt like the end of the movies she wasn’t supposed to have seen, the way he was walking off along the balcony, his body backlit by the balcony lights, and for a second she thought of Jude.

“Steve,” Brita said. He stopped. “Sorry about”—she paused—“the noise.”

“Yeah.”

“Um, I’ll keep the little kids quiet.”

“Yeah, could you?”

“Yeah. And, you know, I know we seem crazy and everything but really—you know. We’re not.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Really,” she said, “we’re not.”

“Sure,” he said, but she could tell he just wanted her to leave him alone.

She went inside and closed the door behind herself. She leaned against the door and fell to the floor. She knew she was being dramatic, but it seemed like the only possible way to be.

“What is it?” her mom said.

She smiled her mother’s bitter smile.

“What?” her mom asked.

Her dad picked up a garbage bag and began filling it. “Let’s go,” he said, shaking his head.

“Lähetään,” her mom agreed quietly. It took twelve garbage bags to fit everything, but they packed rapidly. They shoved sleeping bags under the van’s seats, they threw toys and books and half-empty shampoo bottles anywhere they would go. They didn’t clean the dishes, and they left the newspapers unfolded on the floor.

“What about the dog?” her mom asked as they did a final check of the apartment.

Her parents looked at each other for a long minute, then her mom took the leash and they walked Max out to the van. At the van door he brayed, and her dad picked him up and set him inside the van. He curled up in between the seats and did not stir.

When they finally pulled away, her dad rolled the van windows down. Brita stuck her fingers out in the air. Her mom put a tape on, and the bright, easy concerto suggested an easier world than the apartment they had left. Tiina and Paula had fallen asleep leaning against each other, their foreheads slick with sweat. Simon’s head lay heavily against her shoulder, but Brita didn’t move him.

“Where are we going?” she called out quietly.

“I wish I knew, Brita-boo,” her dad said. She could not think of the last time he had called her that. He pulled them onto the highway. They drove for ten minutes, fifteen, and he stopped at a motel, parking beneath the overhang, but in a few minutes he came back outside, shaking his head. They stopped again, and again. Her parents dug through the glove box, through her mother’s purse. They clawed for coins at the bottom of the cup holder.

“Forty-four,” her mom whispered in Finnish.

They got back on the highway. They drove steadily, down roads Brita recognized but could not place. Her mom began to laugh.

“What?” her dad said. “It isn’t funny.” She fell silent, and when they finally pulled into the parking lot of the church her mom said, “Well, at least for once we’ll be on time.”

Her dad turned the van off, but the little kids kept sleeping. Brita watched her parents walk to the front of the church and unlock the door. She watched them haul in the sleeping bags. One by one they undid the seat belt of each kid, slipping the strap slowly from their limbs. One by one they carried each in. Max lifted his head each time but did not move.

When she was the last one left, she lay quite still. Usually her dad shook her, so she would wake and walk herself in, but this time he leaned in to lift her. As he carried her she felt him breathing hard and she knew she was too heavy. “It’s okay,” she said, as he struggled. She hobbled down to the ground.

She followed him into the church, up the linoleum steps to the sanctuary. Inside, the little kids were laid atop sleeping bags set out on pews. Brita found the last sleeping bag and lay down. She tried to adjust the end of it to build a pillow. She looked around the room. One of the windows was cracked and she saw the top of a tree, its branches burdened with leaves. At the front of the church, the cross was dark against the white concrete bricks—too small, she realized for the first time, for any man to hang upon its arms.

There was a stirring from the front of the church—her dad was pulling the front door, locking it. She heard the sound of Max’s nails against the foyer floor, and then her dad lifting Max up the stairs. Max came into the sanctuary and found a spot between two pews and turned, three times.

Her dad crawled into his sleeping bag on the floor, all of his clothes still on. Her mother was already lying on her side on top of her own, the baby asleep against her. Brita realized her

stomach looked bigger than she remembered, and she wondered if her mother was pregnant again. Probably, she decided.

“Pirjo,” she heard her dad say as softly as he was able.

“Mm,” her mom said. There was the distant tritone of a train. “Mm,” her mother said again.

“Can I have my sins forgiven,” he said at last. He spoke so quietly that Brita only heard the words because she knew what they were.

“Believe all of your sins and doubts forgiven in Jesus’s name and precious blood,” her mom said, tiredly but earnestly. “Can I too,” she said, and her dad said the words back. There was the sound then of each of them turning. A rustle.