

## A Woodcutter's Son



Now, Nikolas was a happy boy.

Well, actually, no.

He would have told you he was happy, if you asked him, and he certainly *tried* to be happy, but sometimes being happy is quite tricky. I suppose, what I am saying is that Nikolas was a boy who believed in happiness, the way he believed in elves and trolls and pixies, but he had never actually seen an elf or a troll or a pixie, and he hadn't really seen proper happiness either. At least, not for a very long time. He didn't have it that easy. Take Christmas.

This is the list of every present Nikolas had received for Christmas. In his entire life.

1. A wooden sleigh.
2. A doll carved out of a turnip.

That's it.

The truth is that Nikolas's life was hard. But he made the best of it.

He had no brothers or sisters to play with, and the nearest town – Kristiinankaupunki (Kris-tee-nan-cow-punky) – was a long way away. It took even longer to get to than it did to pronounce. And anyway there wasn't much to do in Kristiinankaupunki except go to church or look in the window of the toyshop.

'Papa! Look! A wooden reindeer!' Nikolas would gasp as he pressed his nose against the glass of that toyshop.

Or,

'Look! An elf doll!'

Or,

'Look! A cuddly doll of the king!'

And once he even asked,

'Can I have one?'

He looked up at his father's face. A long and thin face with thick bushy eyebrows and skin rougher than old shoes in the rain.

'Do you know how much it is?' said Joel, his father.

'No,' said Nikolas.

And then his father held up his left hand, fingers stretched. He only had four and a half fingers on his left hand because of an accident with an axe. A horrible accident. Lots of

blood. And we probably shouldn't dwell on it too much, as this is a Christmas story.

'Four and a half rubles?'

His father looked cross. 'No. *No*. Five. Five rubles. And five rubles for an elf doll is too much money. You could buy a cottage for that.'

'I thought cottages cost one hundred rubles, Papa?'

'Don't try and be clever, Nikolas.'

'I thought you said I should try and be clever.'

'Not right now,' said his father. 'And anyway, why would you need an elf doll when you have that turnip-doll your mother made? Couldn't you pretend the turnip is an elf?'

'Yes, Papa, of course,' Nikolas said, because he didn't want to make his father upset.

'Don't worry, son. I'll work so hard that one day I'll be rich and you can have all the toys you want and we can have a *real* horse, with our own coach, and ride into town like a king and a prince!'

'Don't work too hard, Papa,' said Nikolas. 'You need to play sometimes too. And I *am* happy with my turnip-doll.'

But his father had to work hard. Chopping

wood all day and every day. He worked as soon as it was light to when it was dark.

‘The trouble is we live in Finland,’ his father explained, on the day our story starts.

‘Doesn’t everyone live in Finland?’ asked Nikolas.

It was morning. They were heading out into the forest, passing the old stone well that they could never look at. The ground was dusted with a thin layer of snow. Joel had an axe on his back. The blade dazzled in the cold morning sun.



‘No,’ said Joel. ‘Some people live in Sweden. And there are about seven people who live in Norway. Maybe even eight. The world is a big place.’

‘So what is the problem with living in Finland, Papa?’

‘Trees.’

‘Trees? I thought you liked trees. That’s why you chop them down.’

‘But there are trees everywhere. So no one pays much for . . .’ Joel stopped. Turned around.

‘What is it, Papa?’

‘I thought I heard something.’ They saw nothing but birch and pine trees and shrubs of herbs and heather. A tiny red-breasted bird sat on a branch.

‘Must have been nothing,’ Joel said, unsure.

Joel stared up at a giant pine, pressed his hand on the rough bark. ‘This is the one.’ He began chopping, and Nikolas began his search for mushrooms and berries.

Nikolas only had a single mushroom in his basket when he caught a glimpse of an animal in the distance. Nikolas loved animals, but mainly saw only birds, mice and rabbits. Sometimes he would see a moose.

But this was something bigger and stronger.

A bear. A giant brown bear, about three times the size of Nikolas, standing on its hind legs, its huge paws scooping berries into its mouth. Nikolas's heart started a drum roll with excitement. He decided to get a closer look.

He walked quietly forward. He was quite close now.

*I know that bear!*

The terrifying moment when he realised he recognised the bear was also the one where he stepped on a twig and it cracked. The bear turned, stared straight at him.

Nikolas felt something grab his arm, hard. He turned to see his father looking crossly down at him.

'What are you doing?' he hissed. 'You'll get yourself killed.'

His dad's grip was so tight it hurt. But then he let go.

'Be the forest,' whispered Joel. This was something he always said, whenever danger was around. Nikolas never knew what it meant. He just stayed still. But it was too late.

Nikolas remembered when he was six years old with his mother – his jolly, singing, rosy-cheeked mother. They had been going to get

some water from the well when they'd seen the exact same bear. His mother had told Nikolas to run back to the cottage, and Nikolas had run. She hadn't.

Nikolas watched his father hold his axe with a stronger grip, but he saw his father's hands tremble. He pulled Nikolas back, behind him, in case the bear charged.

'Run,' his father said.

'No. I'm staying with you.'

It was unclear if the bear was going to chase them. It probably wasn't. It was probably too old and tired. But it did roar at them.

Then, right at that moment, there was a whistling sound. Nikolas felt something brush against his ear, like a fast feather. A moment later, a grey-feathered arrow pierced the tree beside the bear's head. The bear went down on all fours, and sloped away.

Nikolas and Joel looked behind them, trying to see who had fired the arrow, but there was nothing but pine trees.

'It must be the hunter,' said Joel.

A week before, they had found an injured moose with the same grey-feathered arrow sticking out of it. Nikolas had made his father help the poor creature. He'd watched him

gather snow and press it around the wound before pulling the arrow out.

They kept staring through the trees. A twig cracked, but they didn't see anything.

'All right, Christmas, let's go,' Joel said.

Nikolas hadn't been called that for a long time.

Back in the old days his father used to joke about and have fun. He used to call everyone nicknames. Nikolas's mother was 'Sweetbread' even though her real name was Lilja, and Nikolas himself was nicknamed 'Christmas' because he had been born on Christmas Day. His father had even engraved his wooden sleigh with the nickname.

'Look at him, Sweetbread, our little boy Christmas.'

He was hardly ever called that now.

'But don't ever go spying on bears, okay? You'll get yourself killed. Stay near me. You're still clearly a boy.'

A little later, after Joel had been chopping for an hour, he sat down on a tree stump.

'I could help you,' offered Nikolas.

His father held up his left hand. 'This is what happens when eleven-year-olds use axes.'

So Nikolas just kept his eyes to the ground,



looking for mushrooms, and wondered if being eleven years old was ever going to be any fun.



## *The Cottage and the Mouse*



The cottage where Nikolas and Joel lived was the second smallest cottage in the whole of Finland.

It only had one room. So the bedroom was also the kitchen and the living room and the bathroom. Actually, there was no bath. There wasn't even a toilet. The toilet was just a massive deep hole in the ground outside. The house had two beds, with mattresses stuffed with straw and feathers. The sledge was always kept outside, but Nikolas kept his turnip-doll beside the bed to remind him of his mother.

But Nikolas didn't mind. It didn't really matter how small a house was if you had a big imagination. And Nikolas spent his time daydreaming and thinking of magical things like pixies and elves.

The best part of Nikolas's day was bedtime, because this was when his father would tell him a story. A little brown mouse, who Nikolas



named Miika, would sneak into the warmth of the cottage and listen too.

Well, Nikolas liked to think that Miika was listening but really he was just fantasising about cheese. Which took quite a lot of fantasising, as Miika was a forest mouse, and there weren't any cows or goats in this forest, and he had never seen or smelt cheese, let alone tasted it.

But Miika, like all mice, believed in the existence of cheese, and knew it would taste very, very good if he got such an opportunity.

Anyway, Nikolas would lie there, in the happy cosiness of his bedclothes, and listen

intently to his father's stories. Joel always looked tired. He had rings under his eyes. He seemed to get a new one every year. Like a tree.

'Now,' said his father, that night. 'What story would you like tonight?'

'I'd like you to tell me about the elves.'

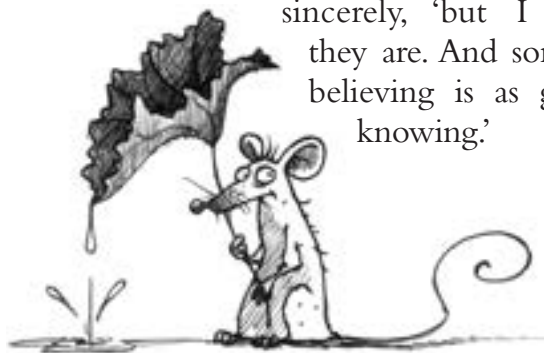
'Again? You've been told about the elves every night since you were three.'

'Please, Papa. I like to hear about them.'

So Joel told a story about the elves of the Far North, who lived beyond the only mountain in Finland, a secret mountain, that some people doubt is there. The elves lived in a magical land, a snow-covered village called Elfhelm surrounded by wooded hills.

'Are they real, Papa?' Nikolas asked.

'Yes. I've never seen them,' his father said, sincerely, 'but I believe they are. And sometimes believing is as good as knowing.'



And Nikolas agreed, but Miika the mouse disagreed, or he would have done if he had understood. If he had understood he would have said ‘I’d rather taste real cheese than just believe in it.’

But for Nikolas, it was enough. ‘Yes, Papa, I know believing is as good as knowing. I believe the elves are friendly. Do you?’

‘Yes,’ said Joel. ‘And they wear brightly coloured clothes.’

‘You wear colourful clothes, Papa!’

This was true, but Joel’s clothes were made from leftover rags he got for free from the tailor’s in town. He had made himself multi-coloured patchwork trousers and a green shirt and – best of all – a big floppy red hat with a white furry rim and a fluffy white cotton bobble.

‘Oh yes, I do, but my clothes are getting old and tatty. The elves’ clothes always look brand new and . . .’

He stopped right there.

There was a noise outside.

And a moment later came three hard knocks on the door.

## *The Hunter*



That's strange,' said Joel.

'Maybe it's Aunt Carlotta,' said Nikolas, really hoping more than anything in the world that it wasn't Aunt Carlotta.

Joel walked over to the door. It wasn't a long walk. It only took him one step. He opened the door to reveal a man.

A tall, strong, broad-shouldered, square-jawed man with hair like golden straw. He had bright blue eyes and smelt of hay and looked as powerful as twenty horses. Or half a bear. He looked strong enough to lift the cottage off the ground, if that had been what he wanted. But he wasn't in the mood for lifting cottages off the ground today.

They recognised the arrows the man was carrying on his back, and their grey feathers.

'It's you,' said Joel. 'The hunter.'

Nikolas could see his father was impressed.

'It is,' said the man. Even his voice sounded

like it had muscles. ‘My name is Anders. That was a pretty close thing with the bear earlier.’

‘Yes, thank you. Come in, come in. I’m Joel. And this is my good son Nikolas.’



The big man noticed the mouse sitting in the corner of the room, eating a mushroom.

‘I don’t like you,’ said Miika, looking at the man’s large shoes. ‘Your feet are, frankly, terrifying.’

‘Would you like a drink?’ Joel asked, meekly. ‘I have some cloudberry wine.’

‘Yes,’ said Anders, and then he saw Nikolas and smiled in a friendly way at him. ‘Wine would be nice. I see that you wear your red hat even indoors, Joel.’

‘Well, it keeps me warm.’

*Cloudberry wine*, thought Nikolas, as Joel pulled down a bottle that was hiding on the top of the kitchen cupboard. He didn’t know his father had any cloudberry wine.

Fathers were mysteries.

‘I’ve come to ask if you can help with something,’ said Anders.

‘Ask away,’ Joel said, pouring out two cups of wine.

Anders took a sip. Then a gulp. Then he drank the entire cup. He wiped his mouth with his big right hand. ‘I want you to do something. Something for the king.’

Joel was startled. ‘King Frederick?’ Then he laughed. This was clearly dark hunter humour. ‘Ha! For a minute there I actually believed



you! What on this Earth would a king require from a humble woodcutter like myself?’

Joel waited for Anders to laugh too, but there was a long silence.

‘I’ve been watching you all day. You’re good with an axe . . .’ Anders trailed off, seeing that Nikolas was sitting up in bed with wide open eyes listening to the most exciting conversation he’d ever heard. ‘Maybe we should talk in private.’

Joel nodded so hard the white bobble on his hat fell forward. ‘Nikolas, could you go in the other room?’

‘But, Papa, we don’t *have* another room.’

His father sighed. ‘Oh yes. You’re right . . . Well,’ he said to his giant guest, ‘maybe we should go outside. It’s quite a mild summer night. You can borrow my hat if you want.’

Anders laughed loud and long. ‘I think I’ll survive without it!’

And so the men went outside and Nikolas went to bed, straining to hear what they said. He listened to the voices murmuring and he could just pick out the odd word.

‘. . . men . . . king . . . rubles . . . Turku . . . long . . . mountain . . . weapons . . . distance . . . money . . . money . . .’ Money was mentioned

a few times. But then he heard a word that made him sit up in bed. A magical word. Maybe the most magical word of all. ‘*Elves.*’

Nikolas saw Miika scuttling along the edge of the floor. He stood up on his back legs, stared at Nikolas, and looked ready to have a conversation. Well, he looked as ready as a mouse ever looks to have a conversation. Which wasn’t much.

‘Cheese,’ said the mouse, in mouse language.

‘I’ve got a very bad feeling about all this, Miika.’

Miika looked up at the window, and Nikolas thought his tiny dark eyes seemed filled with worry, and that his nose was twitching nervously.

‘And if I can’t have cheese I’ll eat this stinky old vegetable creature instead.’

Miika turned to the turnip-doll lying by Nikolas’s bed, and took a bite.

‘Hey, that was a Christmas present!’ said Nikolas.

‘I’m a mouse. Christmas means nothing to me.’

‘Hey!’ said Nikolas again, but it was hard to be cross with a mouse, so he let Miika carry on, nibbling the turnip-doll’s ear off.

The men stayed outside the window for

a long time, talking distant words and drinking cloudberry wine, as Nikolas lay there, worried, in the dark, with a bad feeling in his stomach.

Miika also had a bad feeling in his stomach. But that was what you get from eating raw turnip.

‘Good night, Miika.’

‘I wish it had been cheese,’ said Miika.

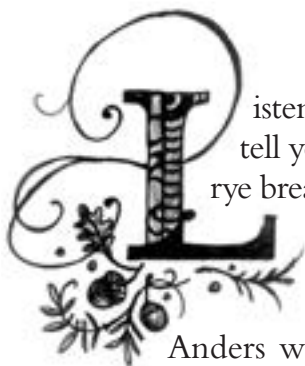
And Nikolas lay there, with a horrible thought. The thought was this: *Something Bad Is Going To Happen.*

And he was right.

It was.



## *The Sleigh (and Other Bad News)*



Listen, son, I have something I must tell you,' said his father, as they ate stale rye bread for breakfast. This was Nikolas's second favourite breakfast (right after *un-stale* rye bread).

'What is it, Papa? What did Anders want to ask you?'

Joel took a deep breath, as if the next sentence was something he had to swim through. 'I've been offered a job,' he said. 'It's a lot of money. It could be the answer to everything. But . . .'

Nikolas waited, holding his breath. And then it came.

'But I'll have to go away.'

'What?'

'Don't worry. It won't be a long time. Only two months.'

'Two *months*?'

Joel had a bit of a think. 'Three, at the most.'

That sounded like for ever. 'What kind of job takes three months?'

‘It’s an expedition. A group of men are heading to the Far North. They want to find Elfhelm.’

Nikolas could hardly believe what he was hearing. His mind was spinning with excitement. He had always believed in elves, but never really imagined that people could actually go and see them. *Elves*. Living, breathing *elves*. ‘The elf village?’

His father nodded. ‘The king has said there’s a reward for anyone who finds proof of the elf village. Twelve thousand rubles. Between seven men that’s over three thousand each.’

‘I don’t think it is,’ said Nikolas.

‘We’d never ever have to worry about money again!’

‘Wow! Can I come? I can spot a mushroom from a mile away even in the snow! I’ll

be really, really useful.’

His father’s long leathery face looked sad. The skin under his eyes had gained another ring. His eyebrows were sliding apart like caterpillars falling out of love. Even his dirty old red hat seemed floppier and sadder than usual.



‘It’s too dangerous,’ Joel said, his breath smelling of sour cloudberry. ‘And I’m not just talking about bears . . . There will be many nights sleeping out in the cold. Finland is a large country. A hundred miles north of here, there is a village called Seipäjärvi. Beyond that, nothing but iced plains and lakes and snow-covered fields. Even the forests are frozen. And by the time you reach Lapland food – even mushrooms – will be hard to find. And then the journey gets even more difficult. Which is why no one has ever made it to the Far North.’

Tears filled Nikolas’s eyes, but he was determined not to cry. He stared at his father’s hand, and the missing half finger. ‘So how do *you* know you’ll make it?’

‘There are six other men. Good strong men, I am told. We have as good a chance as anyone.’ He gave his familiar crinkly-eyed smile. ‘It will be worth it. I promise you. We’ll make a lot of money on this expedition, which means we will never have to have watery mushroom soup and stale bread again.’

Nikolas knew his father was sad, and didn’t want to make him feel any worse. He knew he must be brave.

‘I’ll miss you, Papa . . . But I understand that you must go.’

‘You’re a child of the forest,’ Joel said, his voice trembling. ‘You’ve a tough spirit. But remember, you mustn’t go near danger. You must stop your curiosity. You have too much courage . . . I’ll be back by September, when the weather gets worse. And we’ll eat like the king himself!’ He held up a piece of dry rye bread in disgust. ‘Sausages and fresh buttered bread and mountains of bilberry pie!’

‘And cheese?’ wondered Miika, but no one heard.

*Bilberry pie!* Nikolas nearly fainted at the thought. He was so hungry that the idea of the sweet purple berries encrusted in mouth-watering pastry seemed like heaven itself. He’d once tasted a bilberry, and it had been lovely, but everyone knew that the way to make something even lovelier was to put it in a pie. But then he became sad again, and a thought occurred to him. Surely Joel – who was scared to let Nikolas out of his sight sometimes – wouldn’t be leaving him on his own.

‘Who’ll look after me?’

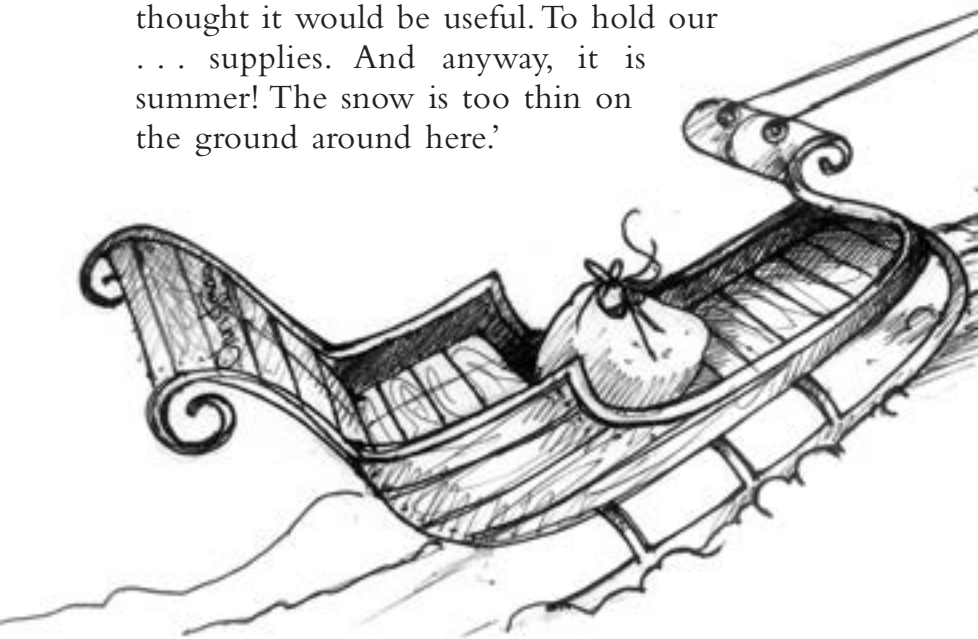
‘Don’t worry!’ said Joel. ‘I’ll write to my sister. She’ll keep you safe.’

*Sister!* Oh no. This was even worse. It was bad enough spending the whole of Christmas afternoon with Aunt Carlotta, let alone spending three whole months with her.

‘It’s all right. I can be on my own. I’m a child of the forest. I can . . .’

Now his father interrupted him. ‘No. It’s a dangerous world. And you’re still a child. We saw that yesterday. Aunt Carlotta is a lonely woman. She’s a lot older than me. She’s really an old lady now. She’s forty-two. Hardly anyone lives to be forty-two. It’ll be nice for her to have somebody to look after.’

He looked at his son for a long while before breaking the final piece of bad news. ‘Oh, and I’ll need to take your sleigh. Anders thought it would be useful. To hold our . . . supplies. And anyway, it is summer! The snow is too thin on the ground around here.’





Nikolas nodded. He could not think of an answer.

‘You still have your turnip-doll.’ Joel pointed to the sad-looking turnip with a face carved in it that was sitting by Nikolas’s bed.

‘Yes,’ said Nikolas. He supposed that as turnip-dolls go it was a very nice one.



Maybe it was the best doll made out of a rotten, stinking turnip in the whole of Finland. 'That's true. I still have that.'

And so, ten days later, on a cold but sunny morning, Nikolas watched his father leave.

Joel was wearing his red hat, carrying his axe on his back and dragging the wooden sleigh behind him. He headed off under a pink sky, through the tall pine trees, to meet the other men in Kristiinankaupunki.

And then, after that, the *really* bad things started to happen.