

Like an oak

It sure ruined my day when life emptied my workshop all over the floor. I was looking in my tool cupboard for a medium-sized chisel so that I could finish off what I was making, but instead I pulled out a cardboard box. Loose photographs and a fragile album toppled to the floor. I piled up the loose pictures, put them back into the box and lifted it on to the work-bench.

I had decided that it's pointless to look at old pictures; I remember what I remember of this life. I put the important pictures on my wall, the ones of people I admire – there are two of them; an Olympic gold medal-winning javelin throwers and a news anchor. That's enough for me. Anything else is superfluous and can stay in the cardboard boxes or bureau drawers.

But I had to take a little peek in the album.

On the inside pages I found my father's name, written in fountain pen, and the date 1913, and all of a sudden

I remembered looking through the album's six pictures as a little boy with my mother in one of the brief moments when there was no work to do between tanning leather and cleaning fish. Between someone being born and someone dying. I also remembered my father wondering what kind of a job being a photographer really involved. At the bottom of each photograph was the legend *Photographer K.R. Åkström* and what I knew about him was that he spoke a strange kind of Finnish and, in addition to photographic equipment, sold little bottles of spirits during the years when alcohol was nowhere to be found.

In the first photograph in the album, my father and my mother stand side by side, newly engaged, although they looked as if they had been photographed for the state police archive. Behind the smiles they looked scared. It really wasn't easy in those days to get married or to pose for the camera.

Then came a picture with me in it, in my mother's lap. Twenty-five-year-olds in those days looked different from today. My mother wore a scarf on her head and clothes almost as heavy and drab as life itself. In addition to me, there was an older child – how could I have forgotten him? Urpo, the neighbours' orphaned child was living with us until he was old enough to work. In the picture, Urpo looked like a miniature adult, although he would have been six years old at most. Next to us is a sapling a little shorter than orphan Urpo, planted by my father the day I was born. The oak still grows today in my garden, so big that my son Hessa, Dr Kivinkinen, and the social

worker all think it should be felled at once. They are scared it may fall on to the house. But it won't fall until I cut it down and even if it did, a good house couldn't have a better ending.

The last full picture in my parents' album was of a completely unfamiliar person sitting in the back of someone's horse-drawn cart. I really couldn't say whether it was a week day, a festival or a funeral.

The very last picture was a half-picture.

It was a picture of a man and a woman, holding each other's hands. The photograph had been torn so that the faces were missing, and in the bottom right-hand corner was a stain.

There was another flash in my memory.

My father had brought the picture back from the war and the stain was blood. I certainly don't know what a photograph like that was doing in our family album. It really is better that nowadays you can get friends from other countries by exchanging letters, not bullets.

Beside the loose photographs I found an envelope marked 'Important'. Inside was an entry ticket for the Salpausselkä games, a Middle Finland-Kajaani timetable, but best of all, the newspaper cutting with my father's mother's death notice and my father's fiftieth birthday announcement next to it. There was only a week between the two events and my father had taken the notices to the newspaper office at the same day, thinking he might get a discount for placing the two orders at the same time. In fact, all that happened was that the two texts changed places.

Granny's death notice read: I WILL NOT BE CELEBRATING.

Father's birthday announcement read: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matt. 5:8).

I closed the envelope, put the album into the dresser drawer and began to go through the loose photographs. Pictures from different dates were randomly mixed together, black-and-white and colour, large and small, school photos and passport photos. I looked at my wife as a young girl, before we met. She was smiling in her summer clothes, just as I always remember her. Light and feminine, even when she was tormented by the mosquitoes in the cloudberry bogs or by the varicose veins in her legs.

Now, as I looked at the old photographs, I felt as if I had stepped into them. I certainly was amazed how I suddenly remembered the itchiness of woollen socks against bare skin, and the feel of my wife's hip when my hand touched her while a family photograph was being taken.

The fog disappeared before my eyes. The present day disappeared. I wasn't looking at the photographs from today, but from when they were taken.

At this age, long years and slow events are like flashes of lightning. You can't take anything with you, and nothing much of yourself remains here. That's why you should be able to go exactly as you wish, and who else knows what I want?

The telephone startled me back to reality. It was half-past seven, the time when my son rings. Every morning at the same time he checks that I am OK, what I have done, what

I'm going to do. I pressed the green button on my phone and announced that I had been going through the lives of my parents and of myself. I knew what I had to do today, and I would do it quickly. I had to go to the care home, the fabric shop, the hardware store and to buy some ink.

Bring the horses in!

I showed my wife our wedding photograph and remembered how I'd wanted to go straight home from the church. I'd wanted to tear the tight collar from my neck, put on my boots and grab my spade. What's the use of just standing there shaking hands with people and eating cake? My wife smiled a bit and I felt that this was the kind of day when she might understand what I said.

I remembered out loud how my wife threatened that our marriage would be a short one unless I agreed to the wedding waltz. I had to be fetched from sulking in the attic. That's the one and only time I've danced and hopefully there are no photographs from that occasion.

I waited for the food to cool. I lifted up the photographs for my wife to see them – sometimes she smiled, sometimes she turned her eyes to meet mine.

I asked whether life really had been as it appeared in the photographs or whether it was just the moment or the way people were posed. In a realistic picture my mother would be in the kitchen, my father in the logging forest and I would be taking hay to the horses, but how can you take a picture in three places at the same time? I suppose the sun shone then, too – the world can't have been black and white? Perhaps fresh pike-perch was being grilled and someone had an accordion.

My wife moved her head a bit and I thought it looked like a nod. I tried the food with my little finger and gave her the first spoonful. I told my wife that you never have pictures of the moments you want, for example when I dared for the first time to jump head-first off the cliffs at Lake Porsajärvi. Another example would be a series of pictures of my wife, and they would go like this: she would lean out of the window as I came home from work. I would wave to her and she'd wave back and call out to tell me that dinner was on the table, which of course I knew from the smell of the potatoes.

I also had in my pocket three letters my wife had written to me, which I found in the box of photographs. I kept them with me even though I did not want to read them.

'I'm not eating, I'm not hungry, and the horses still need tending,' came a voice from the next bed.

I put the photographs in the plastic folder and concentrated on feeding my wife.

'If you won't eat, Anneli dear, I will have to feed you,' said the carer.

She dipped some rye bread in milk and tried to coax Anneli to open her mouth. More food ended up on the floor than inside her. There must be a reason why my wife likes her food and Anneli doesn't. Maybe it's our own potatoes and the smoked pork that I mix with the hospital food.

'Why's she getting better stuff?' Anneli asked. 'Why aren't I getting any of that neck of pork?'

I told the nurse that the strange smell of smoked meat must be coming from the air-conditioning vents. I wasn't going to get caught with my own potatoes, because I well know how hospitals scrutinise minerals, salts and sugars. Nutritional values are more important than good taste and the happiness that tasty food brings.

When you're in life's final furlong, you shouldn't have to eat the same as at the beginning, in nurseries and primary schools. It's sensible to be careful with what children eat, because in working life they will end up glued to their ergonomically designed chairs in warm offices, and in jobs like that you need completely different chow from my generation. Human beings are strange creatures because our bodies have not kept up with our minds.

My aches and pains came from the fact that I have used the same bones and muscles to do outside work from the age of four. Today's youth go outside for the first time when they are ten, because the weather's always either too cold, too hot, too windy or too settled.

So my wife certainly has every right to her smoked pork and her knob of butter, and Anneli should have the same right, too.

My wife tasted the second spoonful between her lips as little children sample unfamiliar foods. Trying to work out whether it was treat or poison. She swallowed and opened her mouth again like a baby bird. I offered her the next spoonful and told her how the photographs had cheered me up. There are still a few things I haven't done in my life.

'Are you making a Wendy house for your grandchildren?' the nurse asked.

I told her I had made one of those years ago, in the Fifties. Now it was time to make something just for myself.

Gradually, my wife began to enjoy her food. That's what happens if you are patient, if you remember to live at my wife's pace and not your own, that you're hurrying because it's nearly time for the news. If you hurry, her mouth clamps shut or the porridge you've just spooned in comes right back out. At the same time Anneli in the next bed closed her mouth with an imaginary zip.

'Oh my goodness,' the nurse said. 'I have to finish my round. I'll come back at the end and hope that Anneli will be more willing to co-operate.'

When the nurse had gone, Anneli whispered to me that she had to get out of here. She intended to take with her the pieces of bread she had left uneaten, and she had stockpiled a fistful of sugar lumps inside a pillowcase, plus the same amount of salt. Anneli said she knew where the main door was; if she picked the right moment she would be able to use it to escape. I understood her desire very well. No one's comfortable behind locked doors, at least if

they realise they are behind locked doors. Often old men and old women waited beside the ward door in case it was left ajar, and if someone left it open, a search for the old men and old women was mounted, with official bulletins and volunteer helpers. I tried to convince Anneli that we were safe. She looked me in the eyes for a moment as if she'd understood something important.

‘Bring the horses in!’ Anneli cried.

I said I didn’t think there were any horses here.

Anneli tried to get up, but it was a long time before she remembered which foot she should put on the floor first. My wife didn’t like loud noises, and she began to moan a little.

‘What’s the matter here?’ asked the nurse, who had returned to the room with a mother’s anxiety. She looked at me, too, as if I were Anneli’s companion in crime. I said that we were bringing the horses in and going to Viipuri.

‘Anneli, sit down!’ the nurse said. ‘Calm down. Eat.’

Giving orders really doesn’t help calm a person down. First one person shouts, then the other shouts back not to shout. And then a third person arrives and demands why the hell are you shouting, do you need a whack in the gob. If a child is shouting you should put a nail in one hand and a hammer in the other. Or a hot potato. Perhaps a book, if they’re a reader. Something to do is what they need.

My wife’s eating ended there and then.

I cooled the coffee for a moment by stirring it. My wife slurped three times from the beaker and began to get ready for sleep. I brushed her hair back from her

forehead, gave her an extra quilt and lowered the bed into its sleeping position. I turned out the light. Outside, it was mid afternoon. The street lights were coming on; the sky was turning from twilight to darkness. I twisted the venetian blinds shut. My wife was already asleep.

Anneli looked at the nurse, a taut wrinkle between her eyes, and the nurse didn't really know what to do.

'Felt boots, good felt boots! The old man took the cap! Bring the horses in!'

I said that the horses were absolutely fine, I said I had got them to follow me here by bringing my own packed lunch. I took the packet of smoked pork from my pocket and let Anneli use her own fingers to swipe a slice, two, three. She smacked her lips and said she often eats things like this when she goes to town with the old ladies. Anneli asked if there was any mackerel. She suspected that you could only get food this good on the black market, and I didn't deny it. Anneli asked if there had been any bombing during the night, and whether the horses had stayed calm.

I looked for an old baby picture among the photographs. I gave it to Anneli and said that it should be well cared for; it was only a couple of months old. Anneli nursed the picture and looked at the child. She chatted to it in a low voice; I nodded and said that's good, and the crying stopped at once. I said the cap and the felt boots were drying on top of the stove. I promised to take some hay to the horses when I left. Then I put the dishes on the tray, turned out the lights and took the tray to the kitchen.

I sat down for a moment in the TV room. Leafing through today's paper, in which things were even more

awry than they'd been two days earlier. Insanities had been happening in finance, because money was no longer notes but merely numbers in the computer networks of the Central Bank. From there it is lent, invested, stolen, twisted and turned beyond recognition – money that has never even existed. Then the computer network revealed debts and receipts for which subsidies and stimulus packages had to be created. Really, potatoes would have been easier to trade in. If someone could work out a way to package potatoes and sense in the same sack and how to pack those sacks into a container, export trade would definitely increase.

Into the TV room tiptoed Risto Lipponen, who had once been the most important tax-payer in the village. He traded in cars and electronics and built two blocks of flats whose reinforced concrete I was involved in making. Prosperity was visible in Risto's expensive brick-built house, his German cars, which got bigger every year, and his similarly swollen belly.

He retired and I retired, and I did not see Risto Lipponen for fifteen years until he sat himself down in the rocking chair at this moment, a piss stain on his trousers. Not for Risto the retirement days on the golf courses of Spain that he announced in his birthday interview. He also claimed that he had always been an entirely sober and honest man.

That's life. You can't do anything about it.

I am sure a medicine for memory diseases will be invented. There are cures for polio and tuberculosis and AIDS. But it only means that a moment later nature comes back with an even more mischievous form of flu. Risto

Lipponen stared at me for a long time while I tried to maintain a slightly distant and briskly amicable expression.

‘Guess how long I’ve been here?’ Risto Lipponen asked.

I guessed as long as the C section of the newspaper.

‘Try again.’

A one-column news story?

‘Wrong again. You’ve not got a lot of sense, have you?

Shall I answer, since you can’t?’

I nodded. Risto Lipponen counted his fingers for a long time, as children do.

‘An eternity is how long I’ve been here.’

I asked if Risto’s eternity would be helped by some smoked pork and mashed potato.

‘I’d prefer some of my favourite drink,’ Risto whispered.

I really wouldn’t want Risto’s fate for myself, or Anneli’s. A person has to have a plan in the event of brain diseases and other threats. If I lose my reason and end up wandering around like an idiot, then the direction is clear. The cloudberry bog. Or the shore of the Arctic Sea. I will forget where I am, and disappear into a quarry. Then the newspapers are welcome to report that an old man was found in the swamp, stiff with cold, as long as they remember to say that his buckets were full of cloudberry and his boots well polished.

I look after my wife. Who will look after me? Will my son come and feed me? I have my doubts. Will I want him to come? Certainly not. Will it be the nurse who turns me over in bed, sees my backside and my front, who gives me a shower, thinking her own thoughts, like what she needs

to buy from the shop, does the cat have food, reflecting, goodness this gentleman smells of a lived life?

Why live your last years at the mercy of others, when you've always been so independent – when as early as five you knew how to make porridge, milk a cow, untangle a net and dig a ditch? And what if I suddenly find myself in a completely different time? The time when I have only seen seventeen summers, buying motor parts? I drive through villages and claim I own places. I eat Saturday sausage on the churchyard bench and forget to wear my long-johns.

I won't agree to nappies. Neither will tubes or infusion bags have any contact with my body or skiers' bodies for that matter [a reference to doping]. I must express my wishes while I still can. It is equitable, economically sustainable and environmentally friendly.

My wife thought about these things differently, because wives think differently. For them, caring and being cared for are easier. They want to be held by the shoulders, massaged and comforted. They know how to return the favour. It is not difficult for them to ask for help or to accept a hug. Even in her bed, she looks as if she would rather be in this world than not. Every day I look into her eyes. Every day they fade a little, but they have not gone out.

If there is no one who remembers me as I was, do I exist? Who knows who Anneli used to be? Are there photographs left, any writing? Do we know anything about the years when she, along with Risto Lipponen, was full of life and strength?

Do they?

One.way.or.another.

I was in a fabric shop for the first time in my life and I knew what I wanted. But blow me if there wasn't a shop assistant at my back asking how could she help me, as if she really had any interest in anything but the notes in my wallet. I am more than suspicious of shops with warm, carefully considered lighting in which assistants give warm, carefully considered advice about whether this will go with your floor, window or wedding dress.

It certainly is better not to reveal anything about your plans to strangers, but you have to say something so that they don't think you're a shoplifter. The easiest thing is to talk about the weather, although it was velvet I wanted, and that's what my wife would have wanted, too.

I told the shop assistant that this morning had been the warmest for thirteen years and the ground was still green.

Normally at this time of year you would be able to go skiing; now there was no snow anywhere. The assistant nodded and pulled out a bolt of too-bright red cloth. I told her how flies had been buzzing between the window panes; they must have thought it was spring although it's actually December. Those innocent creatures don't understand what's good for them and for that reason I haven't bothered to swat them; let them buzz away on the pastries if it makes them happy.

'This is the fashionable colour of the moment, or, erm, maybe that one over there . . . Might you consider . . .'

I put the fabric suggested by the assistant back in its place and took out a calm green, which in another light looked black. And a suitable amount of lace edging. The assistant cut the fabrics to length and I checked the measuring rod to see that she wasn't cheating me. When we moved over to the till, I asked for a handful of white- and red-headed drawing pins. For free.

'Errm, I'm really not allowed to give preferential treatment, sir. We have offers across the whole chain for everyone's benefit, if you know what I mean.'

It's not preferential treatment, but cultivating customer relations. Things like this get more expensive for me, and cheaper for the shop, year by year. That, of course, is something young people don't understand – nor does the American shareholder whose desires, needs and fancies dictate what you can do in Finland's fabric or tyre shops. All I'm asking for is justice and fairness, which at this moment would be a handful of white and red drawing pins.

The assistant narrowed her gaze; she had clearly never been confronted by such complex decisions in all her nineteen years.

‘Oh well, OK,’ the assistant said. ‘But you won’t . . . you won’t tell anyone. You know. Like.’

Who would I tell? I asked, as I put the drawing pins in a bag and the bag in my coat pocket. In the old days I could have told Yrjänä, but how do you make contact with the dead? Yrjänä would have known how to talk about such things and remember friends we had in common and fabric shops from days gone by. He was a talker where I preferred to remain silent. My wife knew how to buy fabrics, cups and birthday cards. I know how to buy a hoe and a car, an Escort.

I crossed the road to the hardware store. Or of course it’s no longer a hardware store, but an interiors and building supplies merchant. They always have to play with words and make things difficult. When you’ve got a good, clear word like cleaner, then it’s always changed to something like hygiene and cleanliness worker. Soon people won’t be people, but organisms capable of communication, according to their skills and desires, whose prime asset is the opposable thumb.

In the hardware store I was able to find my way around and stand my ground. I knew where the paint was, and what paint I needed. But here, too, there was an enthusiastic sales assistant to be avoided. When he made towards me I ducked from the paint section to the tool section and from the tool section to the tile section. Sales assistant school clearly misses out the

course about pushiness driving away lots of good customers.

I took a tin of white gloss paint, a tin of stain lacquer and some acetone, and three rolls of masking tape. I went to the till, where the owner himself was on duty. He was a shopkeeper of the third generation and had the worst voice in the church choir, but he was clever. Today, too, he immediately threw in a paintbrush and remarked that the weather was reasonable.

Shopkeepers are complicated, if you think about it. They pay the highest rates in tax, providing plenty of rulers for the primary schools and blood-test needles to the health centre. They're also able to skate around excessive taxes. Shift subcontracting businesses and subsidiaries to Estonia. Vote for the Progressive Party and invite each other to big parties on Independence Day.

The clever shopkeeper does not flaunt his money. The hardware store owner lives in the same house as he did in the Sixties and does not boast by renovating the façade. Inside, his house may be made of diamonds and swimming pools, but of course I don't see that. He understands the virtue of driving an ordinary car and has not upgraded to an Audi even though he must be tempted to spend the income that's announced in the local paper once a year.

For a shopkeeper, everyone's a customer, and he's a shopkeeper for everyone. A good shopkeeper is not arrogant; he values a little boy's pile of coins just as much as the credit card of someone who's building a house. The boy who buys sweets will one day be a house-builder.

I wished the shopkeeper a happy day. The shopkeeper said something about skiing conditions and you could see that he knew his customer. Then he nodded and looked me in the eye as if he really was my friend. As I approached the door, I turned back to look and saw the shopkeeper already becoming best mates with the next customer.

I walked from the hardware store to the grocer's shop.

I bought buttermilk, and some overpriced lactose-free milk for my son. You have to know how to promote your own products, but the best selling point is that the things you're selling really are quality goods. Then they can be expensive, too. After this morning's conversation he would probably rush round to see how I was. It was his habit nowadays; he came without announcement, tidying places that were already clean, asking the sort of thing you ask old people and insisting on making food for the freezer. He always used the electric hob because he'd never learned to use the oven. He thought it was slow, although it was he who was slow. In the hundred-metres race in Year Five he took more than fifteen seconds.

I let him come because it's important to him. And it's better to have my son to look at than my own reflection in the kitchen window. He could bring the children more often, but they have horse-riding, chemistry tests, friends' birthday parties, a violin concert or just need to catch up on sleep. Anyway, my son is probably in touch with the council health and old people's services and together they will be working on a care plan for me. My life is being organised by people whose parents I helped carry to the

grave and whose goings-on I have been following from the snotty-nose phase to the eye make-up phase, the moped-riding phase and the cool youth phase. I get really grumpy when one of them shouts how are we today, can you still manage on your own, do you still drink coffee, can you still hold a cup, have you had stair-rails installed?

I took a bus home, sitting two rows behind the driver, next to the window. We fetched the school-run children, of whom there is now only one since the family from the blue house moved to a bigger village. The boy asked me what I had in my bags. I showed him the fabrics and the paints; the boy wondered if I was going to build a completely new room in the old house, just like they do on the television programmes his mother watched. I told him I was making a coffin.

Khomeini or Kekkonen?

You shouldn't make a coffin. According to my son, I should just sit on a sofa goggling at German cops 'n' robbers series on the TV. If I'm allowed to build something, then it should be a bird-box or wall-clock. I told him I already had a clock in every room, two in my bedroom. A birdbrain is a person who tells you to build more bird-boxes.

‘You seemed a bit cryptic on the phone.’

With my son, I often find myself having to speak a completely different kind of Finnish to the one I know.

‘I was worried you might have some kind of blood pressure problem. Do you think so? Do you find yourself losing your balance or going sort of dizzy?’

I felled the trees for the coffin many Olympics ago, dried them first in the cowshed porch, then let them rest in the attic for a moment, for thirteen years. Half pine, half

birch. It's important what season you fell them in, so that the timber will curve in the way you want it to. My own coffin I will not paint or plane or lacquer. On top of the velvet will go my day quilt, the brown and yellow one, on which my wife embroidered my initials. It's terribly ugly, but so soft and warm. For my wife I plane and lacquer and decorate. I make wooden lace with a chisel. White, it needs to be. My wife will get what she would want. For other people you need to make what's good for them, even if they don't understand it.

'Wooden lace? What are you talking about, Dad? What is it you don't think we understand?'

A coffin isn't really anything more than a vessel for transporting a person. It's silly for the heirs to use their money on anything like that. If you're careful to save money when you're buying a car, a bicycle or a cart, then why waste it when it comes to a coffin? It is on show for just one day; you never have to service it or buy it hubcaps.

The coffin shop man is after the last penny from the mourners, and you can avoid that if you are prepared. People are lowered to their final rest in fine suits, even if they were more comfortable in sweatpants or overalls while they were alive. In the church hall a lot of nonsense is talked about a fine citizen and benefactor whom the minister didn't really know at all. Of course, a few people really will be grieving, but the rest want to get to the oxtail soup as soon as they can and are worrying about whether they look sufficiently mournful, whether they are drooling, whether they can summon a sympathetic smile to their lips from time to time. Or then they're in a hurry

to feed the cows. Or to watch the first trials for the fifteen hundred metres.

Then there is the group of haters, who are fed up to the back teeth with all the fine words when they remember well how mean and selfish the dead person really was. For example, the man who didn't bother to return the circular saw he borrowed – now doesn't seem quite the right moment to ask the heirs for it back. But why not? It was a good circular saw, with the original blade. Like the one I lent to Kolehmainen. Why did I do that? He's still alive, of course, but I haven't got round to raising the subject. I could raise it with his wife, she is a Thai berry-picker, a fine person, but we lack a common language. It's certain that the circular saw will not return to my descendants; instead, Kolehmainen will sell it through the small ads columns and claim it's in good condition for its age, throwing in some useless object like a fan that he's bought on his travels in the Far East.

'Dad, seriously,' my son said. 'Funeral expenses just aren't a problem, or the saw, and especially not Kolehmainen. The problem is the fact that no one has died. There's no need to be making a coffin for anybody.'

What has death got to do with making a coffin, anyway? As many people leave here as arrive. Coffins are needed just as much as potatoes or dentists. The funeral trade has always been a more secure way of earning your bread-and-butter than the research into developing countries which my son studied for seventeen-odd years.

'I, errm, changed my main subject,' he'd admitted. 'I began to feel somehow closer to women's studies.'

You know, it's currently a really essential aspect of the problematic of modern society . . .'

The funeral trade is a growth area for the future. My generation was content with simplicity, but it will be different in the year 2050. Even in the coffin, there will have to be constant loud music, central heating, air conditioning, cushions and a fridge. And fifty per cent more timber will be needed for one person's coffin because people are constantly getting fatter and exercising less. Cardboard factories, too, are doing well because the beard-and-sandals brigade want to go to their graves in a modest and eco-friendly way.

My son insisted that my wife was still lying in the health centre ward and that Kivinkinen had prophesied 107 years of life for me; 109 if I would just agree to swap full-fat milk for fat-free.

I withdrew a bit, because I understood what was at stake here.

My son was afraid.

He was afraid of where it inevitably ends, this human journey. In the fact that we have to take responsibility for our demise.

'Why don't I go and make some coffee. Isn't it coffee time, for you, I mean – I don't drink it, as you know. So, tea instead . . . Do you have any tea, Dad?'

Yes, I do have the packet I bought for him in 'Ninety-eight.

I asked him to pass me the plane before he left. He gave me the file. What's the matter with him, why can't he tell the difference, at his age? Looks as if a file is an

unnecessary object for his generation, apart from my daughter-in-law's nail file.

I took a step back and considered what I had achieved. It looked good and straight, with enough room for the shoulders.

A day came into my mind – the day when my old man and I listened to Stalin's funeral on the radio. On the table was a layer cake, and we didn't often have one of those. I certainly didn't feel like eating it. Even though Mr Moustache was a terrible ruler who moved his people around and changed the directions of rivers when he was drunk and was a terrible brawler. I can't eat cake when someone dies. Dad took four extra pieces and went back to the larder in the evening too.

That was certainly enough for one day.

I don't have energy to do much any more. An hour is enough unless something's urgent. It's best to finish when you have the appetite and strength for the following day. I switched off the light and pulled the door shut.

Inside, I sat down at my kitchen table and put my palms flat on the table. I asked my son to pull the splinters from under my nails, since it's beginning to be hard for me to peer so close. I can see and remember far away best: you can imagine distant things accurately, just as you'd actually see them.

'Can you wait a minute, I'll just watch this to the end?' my son replied in the same way he'd spoken ever since he was a child. It's what young people do, they think the television is like Uncle Veijo, whose talk never ends

and never becomes interesting but you have to watch programmes to the end.

I asked again, and slowly my son began to get up from the sofa. He used his balance and his centre of gravity quite wrongly; if you get up that way you're bound to have back problems and an early retirement.

I showed him the longest splinter, which my son grasped timidly. He looked me in the eye, asking if he dared pull it, and I chivvied him to do something. Blood was oozing from under the nail, and funerals other than Stalin's began to come to mind. At the end of the Eighties, in Persia, the bearded man and demagogue Khomeini was carried to his grave. In Persia men have dresses and many metres of fabric wound around their heads. A dress would be pleasantly cool, since you don't have to wear anything under it and the wind goes from one sleeve to the other. Why don't men wear clothes like that here? If I were to put on a dress, there would soon be a white van and flashing lights outside the house, or a current affairs journalist who would ask me what it was like to be a modern man. Khomeini really wouldn't have placed a high value on home-made trousers.

Khomeini's life may be harder than an ordinary person's life, because he is responsible for a whole nation and also has to wage war against a superpower. There's a lot of noise made about religion, as if life were nothing more than a revivalist meeting. It's not, it's ordinary. Someone like Khomeini would never be able just to go down to the lake to lift his fish traps.

There were so many people at the memorial service that it was bedlam.

‘Does it hurt a lot?’

Khomeini was already dead, why on earth had that happened. It was probably a relief.

‘Taking out your splinters. Does it hurt?’

No more than taking off your shoes.

I wonder what they offer funeral guests in Persian church halls. Is it the Persian Karelian stew, this kebab, which you can buy even here in our village from the shop where the insulation store used to be? Or was it the bus station? Anyway, now Anadolu Kebab is there and I have tasted them on at least two occasions. Not bad, even though they use funny flavourings, such as allspice. Then there’s a kind of liquid on top of it all, which is good enough to eat more of, except that it makes you go to the loo. I’m sure Persia has its own Karelian stew; everywhere does.

‘Well, I haven’t studied the festival or food traditions of the Near East in any depth,’ said my son.

I guessed that in addition to the kebab there would be some kind of cabbage salad, a thin, warm flatbread without butter and, to drink, a goats’ yoghurt drink. Of course the young people and youths of the Near East would like to replace these with sweet carbonated drinks and electric guitar music, and nothing that had any meaning for their own parents and grandparents has any meaning any more.

I made a coffee and sat in the rocking chair. I ask whether my son remembered the funeral of our own

country's Khomeini, Kekkonen. Both of them blokes you can't get rid of even after they die. In life they had too much power and after death half the people yearn for a strong leader. The other half climb out of the bunkers to say how awful it was down there, and they go on about it for a generation. The bad times are blamed on Khomeini, Kekkonen or a councillor.

'Did you watch it on TV?' my son asked. 'With Mum? Did you drink coffee and watch them on TV? I kinda remember that I might have watched too.'

We certainly didn't watch it on TV, or drink coffee. We had better things to do; we had to empty the manure silo. I still maintain that a home-made coffin and generally less fuss would have been fine for either Khomeini or Kekkonen, maybe even one of those cardboard coffins. There was no need to parade them around town or walk behind black limousines.

Since nothing else came to mind, I made an attempt to lighten the atmosphere a little. I wondered what cremation would be like. I've seen a documentary about how the dead are cared for at other latitudes and in other cultures. At high temperatures it is just sensible to destroy flesh and bones at once, but what I don't know is whether the Indians know how to use embers properly. Do they use the fire for a robber's roast to eat afterwards? Do they use the residual heat for industrial purposes? Do they tell campfire tales? Burning bodies on a bonfire would make sense in Finland, too.

'Why not?' my son smiled briefly, but then took it back. 'We shouldn't laugh at things like that. Not, like,

at my age, anyway. At your age it's different. I mean, an experience like that . . . or maybe it's the point of view.'

I wasn't laughing at anything, just thinking about how things could be organised more effectively. It's hard to get bone to burn so it would be worth collecting the bones and giving them to children as toys. They could fence with thigh bones or use skulls in dramatic productions. That's what people do today, after all. They always have to be on show.

'I really don't think the hygiene officials would agree . . .'

Of course there are things where permission should be asked, like suttee and wars of aggression, but why shouldn't you be allowed to choose your own final resting place? While you're alive, after all, you're allowed to torture your body with alcohol, tobacco, earrings, general idling and messing around. Why is it that something that has during life been a general rubbish dump should become sacred after death? My son set the plates on the table and asked me to sit down. The vegetables for the soup had been cut completely wrong, into weird strips. I said nothing and ate.

Between the first and second bowlfuls I remembered one more funeral.

Tauno Pokkinen met the end of his road in the spring of 'Sixty-six. He fell through the ice while he was fishing. He didn't die there and then, but on the journey home, on a bend, when he insisted on proving that even a numb man can turn the wheel. But he couldn't turn it, and Tauno crashed into a tree. Anyway, Tauno was a young man then, because I was still quite young. We weren't friends, but from time to time, when doing volunteer

work, we would drink juice from the same bottle and eat sausages.

I sat in the back row of the church and looked at old Pokkinen and old Mrs Pokkinen. It was as if they were carved from stone. It was no use the women hugging and the men trying to look them in the eye and at the ceiling at the same time. Parents really shouldn't have to go to their children's funerals. It turns the world upside down.

‘Couldn't we change the subject?’

Of course we could change the subject. It was time to talk about my will.