

Bad Luck

A Short Story by Ursula Hegi

and here it is quiet.

Winterquiet. The walls of my room are white and bare; the mattress on my bed is firm. Every other day a tall doctor with glasses comes to talk with me. He doesn't ask me anymore why I did it. He doesn't need to: he knows all about the bad luck and that one has to set an end to it.

Last summer several accidents happened in our town: an infant was for-

gotten on the roof of her parents' car when they packed their beach gear into the trunk, and as the car backed up, she rolled off and was crushed under the wheels; a two-year old boy rid-

ing with his father on a tractor fell off and was mangled; a newborn's arm was chewed off by the family dog, a brown mongrel, part golden retriever, part doberman. Three white coffins within weeks of each other.

Our town is small: 2368 people. We know each other, know each other's children. Accidents like this make us cautious. Something was changing — we all agreed on that and drew closer, watching our children more carefully, warning them about the dangers in crossing the street, climbing a tree, riding their bikes.

The beginning of August, a day after I'd replaced the light bulbs in our house, three-year old Austin Smith disappeared. My husband and I took turns helping the search parties, combing the woods, calling his name in the night, the sound of other voices like echoes from a distance. The police dredged the lake. Two days later Austin Smith was found on Route 7, several miles from town, wearing red shorts and a blue shirt his mother had never seen, talking about a pretty lady and a kitten he'd played with. For a while the evening paper printed articles about the search for the woman, but she was not found.

We all warned our children about talk-

ing to strangers and felt relieved when the first week of September came around: school was a safe place to be. My daughter, Andrea, was starting second grade. We live half a mile from school; the bus only picks up those children who live more than a mile away. Although Andrea used to walk there in first grade, I thought it better to drive her for at least a couple of weeks.

She held my daughter's hand, and as I reached out for Andrea, the woman's lips drew apart in a horrible smile, and I saw that her teeth were brown stumps.

The first day of school, after I'd straightened the pictures in the hall and living room, we left the house together. I was surprised to see how many other parents dropped their children off. But the next week there were less, and by the third week only the dentist's wife and I still drove our children to school and picked them up. The following Monday I was the only parent waiting until my daughter was safely inside the double door.

That's when I saw the woman.

Call it premonition, whatever — all I know is that it didn't surprise me to see her there. I didn't know her, but I had expected her for some time.

Standing next to the building, she stared vacantly at the passing cars. Her yellow dress was faded, hanging loosely, and her hair was very short, thin and fuzzy like feathers on a duckling. One small area on the side of her head was without hair; it looked like an old scar. Her arms hung down her sides, and she turned them slowly, slowly so the pale skin of her inner arms showed while her elbows rubbed against her waist. She was younger than I, not more than 25. It was as though she were looking through me, and for a long moment she seemed to stand for all the bad luck of the last months.

I thought of staying, of going inside to the school office to tell the principal about her. But what could I say? That a woman was standing outside? That she kept turning her arms? That I was afraid something terrible was going to happen?

Finally I drove home, but I found no comfort in dusting and rearranging my onyx elephant collection. Half an hour before classes ended, I was back. The

woman wasn't there. I waited for Andrea in the hallway next to her classroom. That evening I warned her again about not talking to strangers and told her

never to leave school with another woman, even if the woman told her I had sent her. What woman, Andrea wanted to know. Never mind, I said, just remember not to go with her.

I dreamed of her that night, of the light blue eyes, unnaturally pale and large, of the slowly twisting arms. She held my daughter's hand, and as I reached out for Andrea, the woman's lips drew apart in a horrible smile, and I saw that her teeth were brown stumps.

The next morning she was there again, wearing the small sleeveless dress, standing closer to the double door than the day before. I got out of the car and walked Andrea up the wide steps, holding her hand firmly in mine. As we passed the woman, I looked at her face, just to let her know I was forewarned. She looked through me. It was a cool morning, but that's not why I shivered. This time I waited in my car to see where she would go, but she stayed in the same spot like an apparition cast upon the dark bricks of the building, turning her thin arms.

Every morning she stood closer to the school door, and every night she moved closer to my daughter: dreams of Andrea reaching for the woman's hand as they walk toward the lake; dreams of her brush-

ing my daughter's hair and letting it hang loose instead of braiding it as I do; dreams of her bathing my child, soaping her back, her chest with those narrow hands...

It became difficult to fall asleep. My husband didn't share my concern. I tried to warn some of the other parents, talked to the principal. No one listened. The pictures in our house remained unstraightened; my onyx elephants turned dull with dust. October came, but I did not care to replace the light bulbs as always on the first of each month.

I began to bring a book or a magazine to school. Sitting in the car after Andrea went inside, I waited for the woman to leave so I could follow and see where she lived. But she always stayed motionless until that morning when she looked at my daughter as we walked past her, and her lips drew apart in the familiar smile of my dreams. Andrea raised her hand and smiled back. My legs felt heavy when I went back to the car. I picked up the book I'd brought but couldn't follow the words. I closed it and laid it on the passenger seat, tracing the letters on the dust jacket with one finger.

That's when she made her move.

Ever so slowly she walked away from the building, her pale eyes on me through the windows of the car, closer, until I felt my fingers twist the key in the ignition, closer, passing in front of my car, her face turned toward me through the windshield, until I had pressed my foot against the accelerator and felt the car lurch forward, heard the thud that took the power from her as she crumbled like a paper doll, face down, thin arms crossed.

The accidents in our town have stopped.

But nobody has come to thank me. Only my husband visits me on Sunday afternoons and talks about things that don't matter in a hushed voice one brings to sickbeds. He won't bring Andrea; he says it would upset her. It won't be long until I can leave. I don't mind the wait. Our town is safe again and here it is quiet. Winterquiet. The walls of my room are white and bare; the mattress on my bed is firm. Every other day a tall doctor with glasses comes to talk with me. He doesn't ask me anymore why I did it. He doesn't need to: he knows all about bad luck and that one has to set an end to it.

Last summer several accidents happened in our town: an infant was forgotten on the roof of...

Poetry

Translated by Seija Paddon

Excerpts from Sirkka Turkka's *Tule Takaisin, Pikku Sheba*

(Helsinki: Tammi, 1987)

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Life is a house swaying in the wind,
a vine circles its walls and porch,
laughter a quick cry.
The house must be sold soon, before it
falls,
the language you hear in the rooms is
already monstrous.
How I long for you sometimes when
lightning conceals
the sky, you are like Venice in
December, when

it rains.

Your neck is a barn door, a church wall,
it narrows upward when seen from
below
when you stand on a ladder, drive a nail
into a wall.

And the nail also reaches the sky
and the sky infinity, this will never
end,
a knife is thrust through the heart
now
like the nail through the sky.
These houses must be sold, the build-
ings
— I ponder, and the way hens always
cross

the road at Sannäs

and poplars stand in a row
like small, devout boys.

...

...

And I want you
to tremble at last
like a lake wet from rain
lifts summer onto its wings,
its swans
When they still linger a moment
above the trees in the park,
above all the beloved gold
When their colour is already
whiter than snow
whiter than the colour of parting.

Two Poems by Eila Kivikkaho

Summer Poem

I will not dress a child of mine
in silk.

Torn pants and a jacket of the wrong
colour
attire that won't hurt the eyes,
won't clash with the patchwork glim-
mer
of water, trees, paths, and land,
with what beauty is.

Stay away from silk, little-finger,
press your cheek against rough bark,
you its sister.

Dance

Anguish had bulk. Yes. It had.
But I cut it into small slivers,
danced with light, slim ankles
until it died.

In my tale
it shrunk
In my silence
again crept near

Thus I let words slide
like fine, fine sand,
the weight on the head fly
off the way dry leaves fly,
lose, whatever the cost
anguish, the only one ever dead.