

A WIND AT THE WINDOW

by Greg Stolze

When we found Maarit's corpse it was winter and she was stark naked. Indoors, true, but we lived in Espoo, in a cold apartment, and December was no time to run about without a stitch. But we opened the door and there she was, lying on the floor with her eyes open and unquestionably dead.

Pilvi screamed and I don't know why I didn't too. It was not hope that kept my tongue still. Maarit was not pretty in life, not as pretty as Pilvi anyhow, but she had been graceful. She fenced and played volleyball and when she put down a foot, the step was firm and controlled. When she reached for a cup or unscrewed a lid, it was elegant, unknowingly so. An athlete, Maarit's body did only as instructed. Or it had in life.

She sprawled, knees awkward, ankles drawn to an acute angle, with the toes pulled back. Her head was twisted, tilted to her shoulder. One thin elbow jutted aloft, the other was locked straight along the floor. She looked like a smashed spider and it was unthinkable any of us girls, let alone her, would have held that posture for long.

There was a terrible smell, though she could not have been dead long. We had seen her at breakfast just that morning. She'd been fine.

Pilvi, Maarit and I were room mates, sharing a small apartment

near the Aalto University School where Pilvi studied. I went to the University of Art and Design there, and had moved in after an unfortunate breakup.

Pilvi grabbed me and buried her face in my shoulder, where the wool of my coat had a fake fur collar. The chill tip of her nose touched my cheek, though the apartment was unseasonably hot.

I found myself unable to look away from Maarit, cataloguing the details, noting the colors, finding the composition of her collapse. Her skin was crimson, and her lips were puffy and cracked. Dispassionately I took in the white froth of vomit, caked on her mouth and splattered on her shoulder. Her eyes were wide open while her fingers curled tight, yet splayed out at the knuckles. She had defecated on the entry tiles.

My name is Hilikka Imatra and I am the daughter of a medical examiner.

الموت

When the police finally finished questioning us, when we had told them for the tenth time that she did no drugs, we were let go and we drifted to a small café down the street. We could have stayed and made tea at home, perhaps, but doing so—such a domestic act, so

homey and intimate—would have been unbearable with the police still prowling the entryway. We put a pot of coffee on for them and walked away in a daze.

“What could it be?” Pilvi asked, her voice high and frightened. “She was young! Healthy...”

Then there was an airy sound, like an enormous breath, as the door opened. Heated air from the restaurant swept out, replaced by an icy breeze.

“What happened?” The voice, rough and masculine, came close on the heels of the noise. Too close for someone who had come in, looked around, seen us, and decided to ask. It was the urgent speed of someone who had entered with the question in mind.

“We don’t know,” Pilvi said. “Oh Deacon, it’s awful, so awful, Maarit is dead!”

Deacon was American, a husky pale man whose English always sounded too clipped in some places, too drawn out in others. He had the apartment under ours and we did not know why he was living in Finland. Today, as most days, he wore jeans, army boots, and the green coat with his last name (“Phelps”) over the heart.

His face paled and lengthened as he sagged down into a chair. Seeing his shock, Pilvi began crying again, as when the police had put Maarit in the body bag.

“How?” he asked. His voice rasped.

“We don’t know,” I said. “There was no blood. No injury. No sign that

she had been struck.” I looked down at my napkin and realized I’d been tearing into its edges.

Hesitantly, Deacon reached out to hold Pilvi, his eyes going distant. They did sometimes. As if he was looking across a thousand miles of Hell and was too weary to even fear it. His frown deepened and a tear spilled from his left eye.

“Goddammit,” he said. I turned my face back downward, wishing I was crying too. I tried to cry but couldn’t, quite.

I didn’t tell Deacon that she’d been found naked, her clothes flung aside, sweater buttons in the living room from where they’d been pulled off in haste. I didn’t tell her there were no marks on her thighs, none of the bruises my father talked about in rape cases. I didn’t see how it was his business.

Then his questions came, different from the police. I don’t really remember them. The detectives were specific, their requests crafted to be easily answered. They wanted many facts. To them, it was a puzzle, and if they only collected enough data, it would resolve itself. Deacon was nothing like that, he was wild and vague, looking not for a what or how, but for a why. He wanted reassurance or consolation, and we had none to give.

At some point, he ordered coffee. When it arrived, we all calmed. Perhaps the presence of the waiter made us realize what a spectacle we were making.

“Look.” Deacon took his first sip and hunched forward, lowering his voice. “I was... I was in Iraq, okay? And this is nothing like that, I know, I understand. But I’ve had people die. I’ve had... friends taken out from under me, y’know?” He took a deep and shuddering breath. “You have to take care of yourself,” he said. “I know that’s lame and it doesn’t help but there’s no help for it. I’m real sorry, but there’s no help but time. You just gotta... keep on. Put one foot in front of the other. Don’t do anything... um, permanent.”

Pilvi burst into tears anew and I excused myself. On my way to the bathroom I checked my purse for a tampon.

All three of us were on the Pill, in almost perfect lock-step. In a closet, on a shelf below the towels, we kept our sanitary supplies and I was relieved to be prepared. I didn’t want to go back to the apartment for one in front of policemen.

As I closed the stall door, I thought about the box of pads Maarit had just bought and then I started to cry. We would have to throw them away, I thought, or donate them to charity because I wouldn’t use them. I couldn’t just take them, it would be obscene. That was when her absence started becoming real in a dull and banal way, not the stark horror of her body. That was my first inkling of the long road it would be to a new normalcy, back to life without grief.

When I returned to the table, Pilvi was staring at Deacon in astonishment and uncertainty.

“What?” I asked as I sat.

“What?”

Deacon looked like a shamed dog. He glanced to Pilvi and sighed. “You want to tell...?”

“You do it!” she said, indignantly.

He looked away and mumbled, “Me and Maarit were fooling around.”

I felt my eyebrows rise.

“I mean, I figured the police would... um... know.” His pasty face started to redden. “There’s probably some... evidence.”

“When?” Pilvi asked, her voice firm.

Deacon’s blush deepened.

“Last night.”

“Why didn’t she tell us?” I asked, but it was nearly a rhetorical question. Maarit was a private person, and not one to tire herself pursuing romance. She’d had no interest in long walks and cuddling on the sofa, but neither was she virgin and saw no reason to have celibacy forced upon her. I could see the appeal of Deacon for her purposes: A sullen foreigner living alone could be counted on for discretion and to stay out from underfoot. But perhaps Deacon had not understood the arrangement.

For a moment I wondered if Deacon had killed her. By his own word he was no stranger to death. He was muscular. Perhaps he could have broken her neck. Or strangled her, except he hadn’t. Her throat had been unmarked.

But if he was her killer, he was an excellent actor. The sinking of his

face had seemed terribly genuine. I had reservations, but my feeling was that if he had carried off that lie, he could certainly deceive me about anything.

الموت

As I went home, I saw something odd, something I did not appreciate until later.

Pilvi had gone off to see Maarit's parents. I couldn't bring myself to go. Pilvi was better at emotions than me. With her they'd cry loudly, together. With me, we'd all sit in awkward silence.

A fresh snow was just beginning to fall as I saw a police car drive past, Deacon in the back. One of his hands idly rested on the glass and he stared out, but when he saw me he looked away.

The front door into our building faced away from the wind, so the snow there was old and undisturbed. Or at least, it was not yet coated with fresh flakes. It was, however, marked.

The lines in the snow were beautiful. There was a grace to their curves, the kind you often find in the evidence of natural processes. If you've seen the marks snakes leave on sand, these were something similar, or like canyon walls formed by centuries of wind. But along the rims there was a gleam. The snow glittered as if beaded by tiny crystals. No longer fine dry powder, the edges of the cuts had melted and re-frozen. The lines tapered towards the bottom,

where another rim of ice meandered through their turns.

I could not think what might have made such a mark. I was preoccupied, in any event. I didn't even notice how purposefully they seemed to converge on our front door. Not then.

الموت

A month passed.

I would say things returned to normal, but in the small ways they had never stopped being normal. Classes proceeded as scheduled. Our tea and coffee levels sank and rose. The sun rose and set. But in the light of Maarit's absence, nothing felt right. Every ordinary act was a reminder of the Maarit-shaped hole in routine. Once she'd been taken for granted. Now she was just taken.

According to the police, Maarit died of acute heatstroke. Not only was it ridiculous that a woman should die such a way inches from windows to a snowy city, there was nothing in our flat that could have generated the necessary heat except the oven, and she hadn't been in the oven. Yet my father examined the report and even looked at the body, the test results, all of it. He could not fault their conclusions.

"If she was able to take her clothes off, she should have been able to get somewhere cool," he said, voice helpless. "It makes no sense."

Deacon remained in his apartment, his expression more

haunted than ever the few times we saw him. But he avoided Pilvi and me.

The second time, Pilvi was going out and I was listlessly trying to persuade her to wear her hair up.

"It looks so pretty," I said.

"I can't be bothered." She had a dinner for a close friend and she couldn't avoid going. I was staying home to study and watch the clock, until it was a reasonable time to go to bed. That was how I spent my time outside of class, just waiting.

There was a loud crash from somewhere below us.

I went to the window and I saw them again, the curls in the snow, fresh again. I felt an unaccountable nausea, as if I was looking at something obscene or unnatural, and then heard another boom. It coincided with a flash from the window directly beneath ours, a light that reflected on the snow floating in the air.

"DIE, MOTHERFUCKER!" It was Deacon's voice.

"What's happening?" Pilvi cried, and I grabbed her wrist to pull her into the bathroom. I had some notion that the tub would protect us from a bullet, if Deacon was shooting a gun. It seemed likely he was.

We squatted there for some time, with our hands over our heads, until we gradually came to feel less frightened and more ridiculous. I started to stand, but Pilvi stopped me and drew her cell phone from her pocket.

"Deacon?" she asked it, soon after dialing. "What... what happened?"

She listened for quite some time, then stood up and stepped delicately onto the tile.

"He says it's okay now," she told me, helping me out.

"What happened?"

She shrugged. Minutes later, we were in Deacon's apartment.

It had a depressing, utilitarian feel. Mattress on the floor instead of a proper bed, crates for shelves. It was tidy, with pants and sweaters neatly stacked, DVDs in rows, books arranged upright. The first disorder visible was a foot locker, at the end of the bed, flung open with underpants spilling out of it.

There was a haze, as if someone was smoking heavily, but the smell was gunpowder, not tobacco. As we came in, Deacon was sitting on a folding chair at a card table, with a stained towel spread on it. He was taking apart a compact shotgun and cleaning it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry, I mean it."

"Deacon," I asked. "What happened?"

"I shot it. I shot... something."

Indeed, as I walked in I could see a mark by the door, chewed-up drywall and splintered wood.

"Who?" Pilvi asked, her voice quiet.

His lips went flat. "Not who. What. I think it killed Maarit," he said.

"Killed Maarit?" Pilvi echoed. "Killed Maarit? Nothing killed her!"

She died of heatstroke!" Her voice was indignant.

"Look," he said, pointing at the floor by our feet. "Touch it."

There was a spot where the varnish on the floor had cracked and bubbled up. I reached down and it was hot, very hot.

"I don't expect you to believe me," he said evenly, "But it came back. Some kind of *thing*. Couldn't see it... directly. But there were waves, heat waves. I felt it. Right through the door, or around it or... I shot it. I hope I shot it. Maybe it can die. Or maybe I just scared it off."

"We should go," I said, pulling at Pilvi's sleeve.

"You think I'm crazy," Deacon said. "Maybe I am. God, I hope so. I hope you're right. But girls... Pilvi, Hilikka, you know I would never hurt you. I didn't hurt Maarit, it was that *thing*."

"It's all right," I said, as we moved back through the door. "It's okay."

We ran out into the street without even going back up for our coats. We ran through the dim afternoon down to that same coffeehouse from the month before. We sat there for an hour and a half, drinking cup after cup of herbal tea, discussing whether to call the police. We decided nothing, which meant we didn't call. To our surprise, no one else did. We learned later that the three of us were the only tenants at home that afternoon.

The sky had been dark all day, but was darkening further when Deacon came to the restaurant.

"I saw you didn't have coats," he said, awkwardly offering us each a thick wool pullover. "Um. So I brought you these. I'm going to, like, go out for the evening."

"You really think something invisible killed our friend and ruined your floor?" I asked him.

He opened his mouth and then closed it.

"I'll see you later," he mumbled, then left.

It was just as well that he'd brought us the clothes. We'd have been in no danger, but it would have been uncomfortable. And that month, I didn't have my purse with a tampon in it.

Walking home, I saw the curves in the snow. As before, they were melted at the rim, with a valley of ice in the bottom. I couldn't be sure, but I thought there were more of them.

الموت

Deacon did not get arrested that time either. We went back and forth about it, but both of us were so distressed and disturbed that his actions seemed far more rational than they otherwise would. In the sun with one's friends, it's simple to scoff at ghosts. Alone in darkness, it's much easier to believe. Deacon had shot his wall during the deepest gloom of a Finnish winter. Maarit's death had already upended our world. My routine of sketching nudes and washing clothes and paying telephone bills seemed less real and

reasonable than the idea of an unseen attacker.

But even in the daze of grief and confusion, some questions troubled me. A few days after, when nothing else had happened, I went down to return the sweaters.

"Deacon?" I called, after he ignored my knock. "I know you're in here, I saw your car parked."

"Actually, I was walking," he said from behind me. I jumped.

He thanked me for not calling the police as he unlocked the door.

"What did you shoot at it?" I asked. I have always been a little too direct. He didn't even have his coat off.

"Rock salt," he said.

"Why do you even have a gun?"

"I've always had a gun," he said.

"Then why rock salt rounds?"

He turned to hang up his coat. "They sell them for bird hunting," he said. "It's what I had."

I looked at the small shelf of books under the window. *An Inquiry into Von Junzt* was one title. *Myths of the Araby Peninsula*. *Legends of Sumer and Akkadia*. *A Speculative Biography of Abdul Alhazred*. *Djinn Lore in the Rashidun Caliphate*. *Persian Folk Tales*. Several of the titles were in Arabic, too.

"Thanks," he said, as he took the sweaters from me. "Thanks for washing these. It was, um, very courteous."

"Do you speak Arabic?" I asked.

"Little bit. I read it better than I speak it."

"I didn't think you'd be interested in fairy stories."

He shrugged. "I didn't think I'd ever live one."

"Deacon, what do you believe happened?"

He sighed and sat down on the bed, gesturing apologetically to one of his folding chairs.

"I dunno. Look at what we can observe, I guess? It's invisible. It's *hot*. It wants something in this building. It ran off when I shot it with salt. Other than that, I don't have much."

"It was exactly one month between attacks," I added. He blinked.

"Yeah," he said, nonplussed. He got up and pulled a calendar off the wall.

"Twenty eight days. In the afternoon, too, both attacks. I hadn't thought of that."

I decided not to mention why I'd noticed. "Why her? Why you?"

"I've asked myself the same thing," he said, replacing the calendar carefully before turning back to me. "Maybe she was just the first one it found. I mean, if it came in and just started going upwards, attacking as soon as it ran into someone... that would account for me, right?"

"Was Maarit the first it would have met that way?"

"I think so. The police surely talked to everyone else in the building and I don't think there are any... any witnesses."

“So how did you know?” I asked. “How did you know what to watch for?”

He reddened a little. “Training,” he mumbled, turning away. “You want tea? Coffee? I’m going to have something.”

“Surely the army didn’t train you to watch for invisible heat monsters.”

His hands shook a little as he turned the knob on the stove.

“They trained me to be on guard,” he said. “Alertness. But you know what? That was nothing next to time in a shootin’ war. The head-docs call it ‘hypervigilance,’ always being tense and ready to react. You go in a war zone where any car could be a bomb, where anyone with a cell phone could be calling a sniper, and you get good and jumpy.” He gave a mirthless little chuckle. “Maybe PTSD just kicked in at a lucky time.”

الموت

Fifty-six days after Maarit died, Pilvi was in a bad way. She was drinking far too much and had gotten back together with a bad boyfriend. She hardly slept and when she did, all too often she would wake screaming or weeping. So when I told her Deacon’s theories and told her my plan, she agreed. Without my knowing, she fortified herself by starting a fresh bottle of Salmiakki before. I smelled it as I opened the door to our flat and I must have frowned because she stuck out her

chin and gave me an insolent, defiant glare.

“Come along then,” I said, and together we went down to the American’s apartment.

When he answered our knock, we saw that he had his shotgun positioned on the table, aiming right at the entryway. A second weapon, a revolver, was pointed at the window. Deacon wore a parka, unzipped over a chest bare of everything but hair and a pouch on a leather necklace. Unshaven, his blotchy skin and red eyes made him look the perfect madman.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded hurrying back to his table. “Get out of the building, get the fuck away before...”

“We’re here to help you,” I said, just as Pilvi asked, “What are those?”

All along the edge of the room were thick plastic storage bins, each filled with what looked like white cigarette smoke. From the way it drifted off the white crystals I knew it wasn’t.

“Dry ice,” I said. “With salt?” Deacon didn’t answer me.

“Why do you have your apartment lined with trays of dry ice?” Pilvi asked.

“Because I couldn’t get liquid nitrogen,” Deacon answered. “Now get outta here!”

“It killed our friend,” Pilvi said firmly. “We’re going to help you.”

“Can you even handle a gun?” he demanded

“Hilkka can. I can keep watch.”

"How d'you expect to see it coming?"

"Marks in the snow," she replied. "Hilkka described them from the last two times." She looked out to the street and twitched. "Oh shit."

"GET BACK!" Deacon screamed, but she remained frozen until he lunged across the room and grabbed her, his coat-ends flaring behind, pulling her roughly back and to the floor.

"Stay down!" he snarled, and staggered towards his table of guns.

Then he stopped because I was pointing the pistol at his chest.

"Hilkka, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Step back. I will count three. One, two..."

Hastily, he backpedaled to the window and even with me aiming at him he had to sneak out a glance. The snow was falling pure and thick, the layer before our building smooth as a sheet on a well-made bed.

"I didn't kill her, you know I didn't, you know that..."

"I do, but you know more than you're telling. We will help you against it, if you deal with us honestly."

"I don't..."

I pulled back the hammer on the handgun.

"It's just rock salt rounds," he said.

"There is no such thing, not commercially, not for handguns. Did you make them yourself? Why?"

"I don't know anything!"

"You lie. Why only Middle-East folklore? Why use salt? Why be on

guard? You will tell us. I am counting three. One..."

"Okay, okay." He looked out the window. "Yeah. It's all my fault."

الموت

Here is what he told us.

When he was in the army, he was stationed in Iraq and, for a while, was assigned to guard a museum. While there he made the acquaintance of one of the curators, a man named Gabir. After the oil wells were lit, Deacon's unit was reassigned, only returning to the museum weeks later. By that time it had been looted, but not completely. Gabir had taken some of the very oldest items, including a set of small temple seals, to his apartment. For safekeeping, he said.

Deacon and his fellow soldiers stole them.

"Everyone was getting rich," he said, eyes pleading, fingers creeping to the pouch at his neck. "I was sure if we left them in country they'd get blown up. It would be a waste! The building right next to Gabir's got burned, it was too much of a risk!"

I think he sensed that Pilvi and I had made up our minds, because he continued the story. The unit, carrying the seals, was moved up towards Tikrit and during a midnight convoy, one of their vehicles was blown off the road.

The very next day, it came for them.

"At sunset," he said. "You know that Helsinki time is an hour earlier than Baghdad? The thing's like

clockwork." He looked outside again. By this time I'd lowered the gun.

He didn't see it come. He just heard his friend start screaming, saw him turn red and start frantically flinging aside his clothes. Deacon tried to help him and felt the heat.

"It was *slithering*, like a goddamn snake! The books, they say the djinn are creatures of smokeless fire and, and it moved like a fire, only with purpose..."

He saw it leave, saw its sinuous tracks in the sand, but didn't connect it to the seals until two months later when another man from his squad was taken. The survivors contacted Gahir, only to learn he'd died in mysterious circumstances. Circumstances that were increasingly familiar.

"Eventually I was the last one," Deacon said. "So I ran. I got some leave in Germany and I went AWOL. I headed north. I'd ransacked Gahir's place, I had some of his books, but I really have no fucking clue what it is or how the seals stopped it."

"Why Maarit?" Pilvi asked, her voice brittle. She'd risen from the floor and was standing behind me now.

"I've been wondering the same thing," he said, staring out the window, his fear of me apparently forgotten in that weariness that always seemed to creep up on him. "One of the books talks about 'invisible intelligences' alien to us who, who 'sip our emotions like fine vintages.' There's a guy named Prinn, said they didn't necessarily understand our feelings but they like being exposed to certain ones. Like,

like you don't care about the sugar bowl, you just..."

He started to make jerking sounds in his throat as he suppressed his sobs.

"Me and Maarit, I'd told her how special she was to me and... and..." He stiffened. "It's coming."

I stepped to the window and looked down as the sinuous cuts appeared. They had no visible source, but outlined in the falling white was a shape, perhaps like an eel, triangular in cross-section, steaming where snow touched it, coming nearer...

"The seals," I said. "They're around your neck?"

He nodded. "Give me the gun," he said, just before I swung it into the back of his head as hard as I could.

"What are you...?" Pilvi cried as he crumpled, but I had no time for her. Feverishly I dropped the weapon and pulled the pouch away as there was a crack at the window.

When you press your hand on frosted glass, it leaves an impression, melting along the lines of contact. I saw the form of three bony fingers, or perhaps legs like a spider's, segmented and splayed out equilaterally, with a knot at the center that could have been a beak or a mouth. Then there was a second impact and the glass broke.

"Take him!" I cried, shoving him across the line of salt. "This is the one you want, he's yours!"

الموت

Pilvi has not spoken to me since. She will not take my calls and my letters go unanswered. Mutual friends say she is angrier than they've ever seen. Then they look sideways at me as if wary. I wonder what she said about me.

We moved out of the apartment. Building inspectors have made themselves quite busy there after the second mystery heat-death in one winter. Deacon's remains were shipped back to the US. I don't know if the Army had anything to do with that, if he was convicted of desertion in absentia or if they forgive all in death. I suppose it doesn't matter.

The cramps started this morning, right on time. Late tomorrow afternoon, it will be twenty-eight days to the minute since Deacon died. He said it was like clockwork. Like me, on the Pill.

I did a research project on ancient Iraqi art and got names for a few researchers. I've posted the temple seals to two of them, no return address. Perhaps I should have kept them, for protection. Or perhaps I should have thrown them in Bodom Lake.

I am alone now, well alone. My uncle owns a small cabin, far to the north, away from cities. He calls it his retreat. I have come out here to think and my mind keeps coming back to Maarit. Why Maarit?

If it pursued emotions, what feelings could Maarit have had for Deacon that he and his unit would also have shared? He would say a bond of friendship and caring, I think. Loyalty. Perhaps love, even.

But his unit betrayed their friend Gahir. Gahir betrayed the museum where he worked. Deacon betrayed his army.

Humans draw a line between rejection and betrayal, but are their flavors so dissimilar to an alien palette? Soon, perhaps, my life will depend on whether Maarit loved Deacon, for I surely did not. But betray him? I did.

I look out the windows and off to the tree line. All I see is a smooth, pillowy surface of snow. It is as white as a blank page. I have my own gun loaded with rock salt.

If it comes for me, this will be my best chance. Even at this latitude, the eaves are dripping and the icicles falling off. Twenty-nine days from now there will still be snow, but only in patches and mounds.

In twenty-nine days, I won't see it coming.