



“It’s Damn Good to Be a Bad Girl”

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Eleven-year-old Li’s mother and father are constantly out working in the barn and on the fields of the collective farm. Since Li is the oldest child, she is responsible for keeping an eye on her younger sister Lotta and her little brother Sass. Luckily, her neighbour Taavi – the girl’s best friend – is also around. Left to their own devices, the children are always searching for things to do at home as well as in the nearby forests and meadows. Naturally, not all their adventures unfold safely.

Kätlin Kaldmaa’s memoir-like children’s book is set in rural 1980s Soviet Estonia.

Awards:

2017 The White Ravens

2016 Good children’s book

2016 Nominee of the Annual Children’s Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

Terrorisport



Reading sample

CHAPTER FIVE

in which breath is caught

Some days just bore you to death. You wake up—it's boring. You take a little walk outside—boring. You watch TV—boring. You read a book—boring. Today, for one, is so incredibly boring that it makes me sick to my stomach. Everyone else is just as bored as I am. I guess mom can tell that we've got some kind of dangerous boredom-infection, because she tells us to throw on our jackets and take it outside. She says we can go ahead and be bored out there, as long as we don't get in anyone else's way.

We hunch down on the edge of the porch. We're so damn bored. There's nothing to say. No one has anything to say, and to no one. Lotta is poking at the dirt, Sass tries to run around making siren noises, but soon doesn't feel like it anymore, and I'm just staring at nothing. Taavi pops out from behind the hedges.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Nothin'. We're bored."

"Wanna play cards?"

"Nah."

"Let's go down by the big willow."

"Nah."

"I don't feel like sitting around here, either."

"Nah."

"Well, let's go hang out by the river."

"Y'think we feel like doing that?"

"Oh, fine then. There's nothin' better to do, anyway."

Groaning, we push ourselves to our feet and daw-

dle our way towards the river. Today, our legs take us somewhere completely different than usual. Normally, we putz around Cellar Hill and the bomb crater, but today's a different kind of day. We don't feel like doing anything.

So, we wander into a random thicket somewhere—a place where there's nothing interesting, not even the shadow of a crater—and stop. "Well, what now?" Taavi asks.

"I dunno."

Suddenly, a rustling sound comes from behind us. In her unbearable boredom, Lotta has climbed up a tree. She shinnies up as high as she can get and starts rocking back and forth. She swings in the treetop or swings with the treetop, however you want to put it. My face lights up.

"How is it?" I ask.

"It's totally... different! Give it a try," Lotta calls down.

She doesn't have to tell us twice. We all scramble and scabble to climb to the top of a tree. Before I go up mine, I give Sass a little push to help him climb one.

Let me tell you—it's the strangest feeling in the world to climb up as high as you can, then rock back and forth, harder and harder, until the treetop starts to sway. 'Cause you know, it's no ordinary swing that goes back and forth. Not at all! It's the kind of swing that doesn't yield to human laws. It does kind of go back and forth a little, but more around and around its own axis, and a tree's axis is its roots, of course. The more you rock outward, the more momentum you get. You end up moving along a pretty unpredictable trajectory.

We hover and bob up there like dream animals. Sometimes, we bump into each other; for a while, Taavi and I even manage to reach out and catch each other's hand. Swinging around like that, we each work up such a high speed that all of a sudden there's a loud crack and we crash to the ground. What happened? Nothing special—the treetops just couldn't handle our swinging, and snapped in half.

Not a problem. There are alders there galore. No one here cares about them. No one but us. We find new trees, lickety-split, and climb to the tops, scrambling and scrabbling.

Meanwhile, Lotta's tree has also snapped and she has fallen down. Sass, on the other hand—the smallest of us all—is squealing and whirling around at the top of his tree like no other. The little chimp!

“Hold on tight, Sass!” I call up to him while I climb up my next tree.

The tree doesn't really want to swing under me at all. The trunk is too thick. I climb back down and look for a scrawnier tree. Got it. I climb up, I swing. Oh, what a wonderful feeling! It shoots through my stomach in a funny way and my head feels as light as I-don't-know-what. The world's so amazing; so amazing! Lotta is swinging, Taavi is swinging, Sass is swinging, and I'm swinging. Each of us is at a different height. This time, Lotta has found a tree that's especially nice and tall, and is swinging an entire body-length above me.

There's a loud crack! somewhere again. It's Taavi. There's cursing, scuffling, and rustling noises. Taavi finds a new tree. All of a sudden, there's an unbelievably loud crack followed by a thud so hard it makes you flinch. I look around—Taavi's in his tree, Sass is in his tree, Lotta is under hers. From up here, I can see that Lotta isn't moving. I climb and I leap and I scurry down the tree.

Lotta isn't moving, she ISN'T EVEN BREATHING, and she's starting to turn blue in the face. Lotta ISN'T BREATHING

Lotta ISN'T BREATHING.

Lotta ISN'T BREATHING.

“Taavi!” I scream. “Taavi!”

Taavi realizes that something's wrong, scurries down his tree, helps Sass to get down his, and they run up to us. Lotta isn't breathing, and her face is getting bluer and bluer.

“What should we do?! What should we do?!”

All kinds of thoughts fly through my head, as fast as lightning bolts, until they finally settle on CPR, but that's just not right, somehow, my mind tells me, and then my arm raises high and I hit Lotta right in the center of her rib cage, and Lotta's lungs suddenly start working again, and Lotta takes in a breath deeper than anyone's ever taken before or will ever take again.

“Stay still, keep lying down, don't move,” I say, stroking Lotta's cheek.

Lotta stares straight up at the sky, and it takes a while before blue-Lotta turns into human-colored-Lotta again. Just a little paler. Then, we help her up and slowly make our way home. There, we all read books on our own until evening, and no one is bored for a single second.



CHAPTER SIX

where water is sought and fire is found

Along with summer comes a new boy moving into the empty house next to ours. Taavi lives in the next house down, more diagonally. And in the house next to that is now a boy, whose name is Aarne Water. Yep, that's his name. The Water family. Mother, daughter, son. We don't talk to the mother or daughter all that much, but we sure do get to know Aarne. He's the same age as Taavi and I, and is going to be joining our class once school starts.

We call Aarne Water-Aarne, and never refer to him by any other name.

Water-Aarne has had to get by on his own for a few days before we invite him to join us.

"You want me to show you how to look for water?" he asks after we'd lazed around on the edge of our porch for long enough, making small talk.

"You mean how you turn on a faucet?" Taavi asks.

"Yeah, you turn on the faucet and water starts running!" Sass squeals.

"No, not like that," Water-Aarne replies. "With a dowsing rod, of course."

"What's that?" Lotta pipes up. "There's no such thing."

"Oh, yes there is," Water-Aarne argues back. "Almost anything can be used as a dowsing rod if you just know how to search for water. You can grab leftover bits of wire or birch branches, and voila, you've got yourself a dowsing rod."

"And you're saying you know how to search for water?" Lotta asks.

"Of course I do!" Water-Aarne crows. "My last name's not 'Water' for nothing, you know."

Plan for the day—search for water. We'd never had a day like that before. Well, let's get to it!

Water-Aarne goes inside, and comes out again a couple of minutes later with two lengths of wire. He's bent them into 90-degree angles. Water-Aarne explains that he holds onto the shorter ends, and then the longer ones will swivel to touch when there's underground water beneath your feet. We decide to walk down to the field and the meadow behind the house, since there should be water aplenty. Especially considering the big spring puddles that form on the fields, which are little Sass' favorites.

The delegation heads out. Water-Aarne takes the lead, and we walk behind him in twos like a disciplined military regiment. When we reach the edge of the field, Water-Aarne holds his dowsing rods parallel to the ground, and starts pacing slowly and mysteriously between the potato mounds. We watch him from the edge of the field like three curious blackbirds, just without hopping around. Sass, I'll admit, does tend to jump and prance every once in a while, but I hold his hand and he manages to stand still patiently. For a little while.

All of a sudden, Water-Aarne's dowsing rods start to move when he reaches one spot. They sway back and forth at first, and when Water-Aarne takes a couple of steps forward, the tips of the wires meet. He shows us how when he shuffles over to one side, they spin away from each other again, and when he moves back to where the water is at, they touch. We all line up single-file behind Water-Aarne, and the five of us march downhill across the potato field. Across the water.

When we reach the meadow, Water-Aarne turns a little to the right, and it isn't long before we're almost at the river. There, in the thicket, Water-Aarne stops.

"The water comes out of the ground here," he says.

"Well, who doesn't know there's a spring here!" I want to say, but Taavi tugs my sleeve and I keep my mouth shut before I blurt out the whole sentence. It's our spring, and it's been ours ever since we moved here. It took barely a week before we found it. You can tell from a distance where the spring is. By the plants that grow around it, since plants

like that usually grow along an actual river. They're water-loving plants. They grow much higher than the other plants here, so there's never any trouble finding the spring. Our spring water is filled with iron. You can tell because the rocks and the dirt that the water flows over is coated red. The water itself is tasty. Pure.

"Do you want to try, too?" Water-Aarne asks.

"Nope," Taavi says.

"Me neither," I say.

"Uh-uh," Lotta says, shaking her head.

"I do!" Sass squawks, grabs the dowsing rods, and starts running around the meadow with it. He sprints this way and that until he falls down face-first.

Sass' nose is muddy when I help lift him to his feet, but he is beaming:

"Look, Li, I found water! There's water here!"

And sure enough, Sass is standing in a puddle. Luckily, he is barefoot.

"Yeah, Sass—you're the best dowsing rod of all. You always find water no matter what!"

Sass is a happy boy, and Water-Aarne gets his dowsing rod back.

We take another path back to the house, which crosses a bonfire pit where grown-ups were burning garbage the night before. We had to go to bed while they were still up, talking and laughing very loudly. It was totally unfair. Even from far away, you could see that the bonfire pit was still smoking, which meant that there were hot coals beneath the ashes. It looked like we could still get a fire going today.

The others get the same idea, so we all walk briskly towards the pit. Even before we get to the edge, I can see some mess of wires resting right on top of the coals. When the breeze blows across the wire, it glows like a lightbulb coil, just a little dimmer. I seize Sass' hand so that he won't come up with any foolish ideas.

"Ooh, what's that?!" someone says. And right after those words comes a piercing scream.

Without thinking twice, Water-Aarne had grabbed the wire with both hands, and since it was red-hot, there were now deep lines seared into both his palms. He was in awful pain.

Our little mob runs over to Water-Aarne's house. Luckily, his mother has come home on her lunch break, and Taavi's father is in the next house over, too. Water-Aarne, who is choking back tears, is given ice from the freezer to hold, gets in a car with his mother, and is rushed off to the emergency room in town.

Water-Aarne has to walk around with big white bandaged bear paws for the whole next month.



Vesi Aarne

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

in which plans go up in smoke

“And then the White Lady appeared on the wall...”
The room is as quiet as a graveyard, only one girl gasps audibly. Everyone is staring at the big, cold, bare, night-green wall. It almost seems like something is shining on it.

“Ah, what’re you trying to scare us for? There’s no such thing as ghosts,” one of the older girls says. “My uncle, on the other hand, told me that in big cities, there are SAUSAGE factories, where they make SAUSAGES out of human flesh. Since we don’t have enough animals to make enough SAUSAGES so that there’d be enough for everybody, they put human flesh in the SAUSAGES, too. And meat from children is the best of all. In Moscow, there’s even a kind of SAUSAGE shop where one of the front steps just opens like a trap door when a kid steps on it, and whoosh!—the kid goes straight to the SAUSAGE-making line. They catch hobos and make them into SAUSAGES, too. My uncle said he’s even seen a kid’s finger in a SAUSAGE with his very own eyes. That’s why they label it “Children’s SAUSAGE” in the grocery store.”

“I don’t wanna go to a SAUSAGE factory!” one little girl squeaks, and hides under her blanket.

“I don’t waa-aant to go-o-o,” the others now work up the courage to cry out.

“What do you want, then?” For a while, only the older girls’ murmuring can be heard, and then the storytelling begins again.

“In Tallinn, in the Old Town, there’s an old house that anyone’s free to walk through as they please. There are old sofas and lavish chandeliers inside. One time, my aunt’s friend went there. She went with her boyfriend, and they walked around and messed around, and for any of you who don’t know what “messaging around” means, then you’ve got to grow up a little before you find out. Well, so they were walking around that house and everything was so pretty, and all of a sudden, my aunt’s friend’s boyfriend found a door hidden behind a thick brocade curtain. He wanted to go through, but the girl didn’t,

so the guy went in to have a look around anyway, and the girl waited for him behind the door.

She waited and waited and waited and waited, and finally, she got fed up with waiting, so she cracked the door open a little and peeked inside. There was no one to be seen. The girl figured that there was probably another door inside that led into another room, so she decided to take a look. She went inside, but she couldn’t see another door. The light came from candles burning on a gorgeous candelabrum. The floor was BLACK and the walls were BLACK and the ceiling was DARK red. And there were DARK red curtains hanging on one wall. The girl walked up to those DARK red curtains and pulled them back. A BLACK glove popped out from behind the DARK red curtain and started choking the girl, but she fought her way free of the BLACK glove and ran out of the room and afterward, no one could find the door to that room ever again. Not even the curtain that’d been covering the door was there anymore. And no one ever saw my aunt’s friend’s boyfriend again.”

The next morning, our ward got an earful. Someone had told on us to the nurses for telling scary stories. Two of the older girls were moved into other wards. A quiet little mousy girl replaced one of them, and the other bed was left empty.

That’s the children’s hospital for you. At long last, three girls who told the world’s best scary stories had all ended up in the same room, but the nurses still found out and now, nothing interesting will ever happen here again. I’ve been here for several weeks already, and I’ll probably have to be here for several more. When kids are brought to the hospital, the doctors firstly do all kinds of tests on them for a few weeks, and then they’re treated for a few weeks, and when they’re finally allowed to go home, they have to rest up and get better at home for a few weeks more. And no one will tell you what’s wrong with you. Sick people go to hospital. Is that clear? Over and out.

So, at best, my mom and dad come to visit once a week and bring me books, and I ask them to bring me the thickest books they can find, because otherwise I’ll just die of boredom here. I can’t put up with reading the same book who knows how many times

over and over again. Well, twice, maybe. So, thick books are good. And so are tiny, tasty apples—hard ones that stay ripe for a long time.

Boys and girls are kept in separate rooms in the hospital so that the boys can get into mischief all on their own and not mix with the girls. If boys and girls were to make mischief together, then the hospital would be shut down before long. Most of the boys are the kinds of patients who have a body part bandaged up or something in a cast, while the girls tend to have invisible illnesses more often. One boy, for instance, got caught on a nail sticking out the roof of a construction-site trailer, and hung there until he fell to the ground. Now, he can only lay on his belly or stand. Then, of course, there are the ones who jumped off a swing going full speed, or leapt in somewhere headfirst, or got soaked in cold river water for half an hour and then end up coughing their lungs out here.

Today, a new boy came to the hospital. His name is Karel, which is a very noble name that means “king”, and he’s rumored to have a very noble sickness. You can tell right away that Karel is from a very noble family, because the nurses coddle him all the time and talk about him nonstop. He apparently took ballroom dancing lessons, which made all the nurses click their heels. Nurse Natalya said that Karel probably even has to have an operation, and that his mother is a product specialist at the big department store, which is a very noble job. Karel walks around the hallways as if he were a king’s son, a.k.a. a prince, and everyone always asks him whether he’s feeling alright and if maybe he’d like to have anything. Karel declared right away that he wouldn’t eat the nasty food that’s served here, that he refuses to eat porridge at all, and that his meals should be cooked specially for him.

“Yes, of course, right away, I’ll go talk to the cooks,” the senior nurse replied—she, who is the most awful witch in the whole world and never made any exceptions for anyone.

Then, there’s another boy here who has an invisible illness, just like the girls. The boy is tall and has red hair, and his last name is SQUIRREL. He has a first name, too, but no one uses it. In any case, there are two of them—those SQUIRRELS—because the hos-

pital SQUIRREL has a twin SQUIRREL brother, who sometimes comes to visit because they live nearby the hospital, and the senior nurse knows his family and always wrinkles up her nose at the SQUIRRELS. Apparently, SQUIRREL doesn’t come from a good family. SQUIRREL doesn’t walk down the hallway like royalty—SQUIRREL walks quietly and unnoticeably and is so good at creeping up behind people’s backs that you never hear or see him doing it. He’ll just stand there and when you turn around, well, damn it—you just want to scream. But I haven’t screamed once yet. Well, and then he just saunters away as if everything is A-OK and nothing even happened at all. And I suppose nothing really did happen, of course, except for getting such a shock that your kidneys and your liver switch places.

That Karel has been promenading around the hallways here for three days already. While the other kids have to stay in their wards, idling the time away, and aren’t even allowed to tell scary stories, the KING’S SON can do whatever he wants because his mother is a product expert. But he’s a product expert’s son and not a KING’S SON, I constantly remind people.

I was just coming back from another x-ray. No one knows what they’re x-raying anymore—first they tell you to lay down, and then stand up, and then jump, and then stand in one place and not to move and to stand there until you’re about to pass out, and then it’s all okay and that day’s x-raying can be declared a success. If my dad were a king, then I’d have him put an immediate stop to it. But he isn’t, so I’ve got no other choice than to stand there and wait until the world starts swimming before my eyes. It always does. You can bet your bottom dollar on it.

So, I was just coming back and had returned my coat to the coat-check woman and was walking down the hallway towards my ward. It was quiet time in the hospital, which meant that the children had just eaten lunch and now had to sit around silently in their wards, and weren’t allowed to speak even a single word to one another. The nurses can always hear. Well, so I was walking down the hall towards my ward, wearing my grey hospital pajamas, when who other than the KING’S SON himself appears. Right in the middle of quiet time, his glasses sparkling in the stale hospital light! Then, my body acts faster



than my mind can think and I fake a punch at him with my left fist. Do you think I'd really ever hit him? Well, think again. I did it from three feet away. And with my left arm, to boot! In any case, the KING'S SON is so terrified that he doubles over and charges right into my fist, glasses-first, and his glasses break and the glass slices through my finger and there's blood everywhere and the golden KING'S SON starts howling like a fog horn. I guess he thinks that it's his blood. So, the KING'S SON is screeching, I'm spurt-ing blood, all the doors fly open, kids rush into the hallway, and there's all kind of hospital staff on the scene lickety-split, all gasping and crying out like the world's smartest bunch of chickens. Honestly, I'm telling you! All of them are cooing and dabbing at the KING'S SON and no one cares that my finger is sliced open and that I'm bleeding. A shadow surfaces in the crowd behind me—it's the tailless Squirrel. He quickly sizes up the scene of mayhem, looks straight at me, makes an expression that might be a smile, and disappears. Who knows where those squirrels run off to, anyway.

Before long, the senior nurse has gotten the situation under control, and all the children are shoed back into their wards with a strict order not to leave—they're even only allowed to use the bathroom with special permission. And I'm not going to start listing how many kids here are being treated for bladder infection.

Luckily, Nurse Natalya is working today, so while all of the others are fussing over Karel (Oh, you poor little thing! We'll call your mother at once! Yes, of

course you can talk to her. We'll give you your own room straight away. Did that scare the daylight out of you? Does it hurt anywhere? Does your tummy hurt? Or your little head?), she bandages up my finger. It's not all that bad, of course—just a little one-centimeter wound, but it's pretty deep, so when Natalya finally gets the senior nurse's attention, she says I need to be sent to the central hospital for stitches. The senior nurse takes a look, too, and calls an ambulance. She leaves all the other nurses to take care of Karel and accompanies me. The adult hospital has some kinds of medical instruments for stitching up wounded girls. The senior nurse gives a firm order not to use any anesthetics. When the man holding the needle and thread looks at her questioningly, she declares: "Let that serve as punishment for attacking an innocent child. It's her turn to suffer now."

The man stares at me, but I don't blink an eye and take the two stitches courageously. It hurts a little, of course, but when it's time to be brave, then it's time to be brave.

Afterward, I'm made to sit next to the senior nurse while she calls home—and not my home, but the neighbors', who go out to find my mom—and listen to the whole tirade she unleashes on my mom about my infamously bad behavior. This time it's harder to be brave for some reason, but I manage without shedding a tear. I'm not allowed to talk to my mother as punishment, too. And I'm not allowed to go back in my ward, either, so I don't disturb the others while they're resting. I'm left to sit on the

cold hallway floor, wearing the world's prettiest grey pajamas, while all the nurses sit around their break room excitedly discussing the day's main event. The coffee mugs clink and the voices get more and more animated.

I'm staring at the water stains on the hallway ceiling, trying to figure out what figures I can trace with them, when someone touches my shoulder. It's Squirrel. He signals to me to stay quiet, and motions for me to follow him. I go. Squirrel takes me down to the cellar, where there's a little hiding place with a big boiler inside. Squirrel closes the door, turns on the light, and it's instantly clear that this is the best place in the world right now. It's warm, and Squirrel has a couple packages of cookies that he swiped from Karel and—as I soon discover—comic books. I'm not allowed to read comics at school or at home (because, I'm told, they're "not serious reading material"), but here in our secret chamber, the only things that exist are what is right in front of us. We eat cookies and read comics and laugh, but very softly so that no one will hear us.

"How'd you find this hiding place?" I finally work up the courage to ask.

"My grandpa used to be the boilerman here, so I know everything about the building," Squirrel says. "And I've got keys to all the rooms. They haven't changed a single lock here in thirty years."

We read comics for a little while longer, and then Squirrel asks: "Hey, do you want to go snooping around a little?"

I do. In one fell swoop, I've become a bad girl. And I've got to admit that

it's damn good to be a bad girl.

Title translation by the author

Chapter translations by Adam Cullen

Halb
tüdruk
on jumala
hea olla