



Vanemuise's Blade

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Keropää, 2020, 222 pp

ISBN 9789949986866

Storybook, fiction

Age: 9+

Rights sold: Finnish

Reilika likes visiting her father at work, especially after he gets a job at the Estonian National Museum. It gives her a chance to poke around and sketch some of the pieces. One day, she notices that the Vanemuine blade – one of the most fascinating items the “Echo of the Urals” exhibition – been switched out for a copy! When neither Reilika’s father nor his colleague can explain it, they decide to get the police involved. The museum director himself even wants to meet the young detectives. Now, it’s up to Reilika to convene the secret club to solve the eleventh mystery.

Award:
2020 Good Children’s Book



1. Jasper

The gravel crunched pleasantly under the bicycle tyres. The sun shone warmly and the autumn breeze stroked Reilika's face as she reached the familiar parking spot. She locked her bike and walked far enough along the winding path among the mown grass to fit the whole building into her photo.

A remarkable view was to be had over the great meadow. Emerging from the earth was a glass oblong that glittered in the sun like a spaceship. The part of the building on the ground brought to mind some kind of cyber-age insect net. A large board explained that visitors should please come closer, the spur of crystal was Entrance A and this fantastic creation was no secret laboratory but the Estonian National Museum, or ERM.

Reilika walked under the building's beak. Over the main door this towering garret alone could accommodate hundreds of people, as it had for summer's Puuluup Ensemble concert. The building's majesty took your breath away. Whenever Reilika walked through the main entrance on a sunny autumn day like today, she felt as if she were walking into a diamond.

The sun's rays reflected back and forth inside the building and danced in interesting rings of light and shade. Reilika thought that the museum was a little different every day, as if the building were alive.

The person at the ticket office was just serving a party of foreign tourists and Reilika was at the end of the queue. When everyone had a ticket, the man bowed to her respectfully and said in a low voice, "Good morning!"

Reilika replied politely, showed her family pass and asked to visit the "Echo of the Urals" exhibition. The man took her ticket and stood up straight, so that his name-badge could clearly be seen under his black beard. It read "Basilius Kärner". He nodded his head in the direction of the computer screen. Something was taking longer than usual for some reason.

Reilika watched Basilius Kärner closely. The burly man had a prodigiously bristly beard and long, dark hair fashioned into a plait and coiled into a topknot. He did his work with a serious expression. All his movements were slow, and when talking he pronounced each syllable clearly and with emphasis, like someone who wants to be certain that his words will be understood correctly.

"Mhmm," he said finally. "Your family pass will run out soon. Please can you tell your dad to renew it."

The printer issued an oblong ticket and Basilius handed both it and the family pass to Reilika. She thanked him and left. She stopped for a moment on the Bridge to send two texts. One to Mari, just the photo she'd taken outside of the building, and one to her dad, to tell him she'd arrived.

The Bridge was the museum's most open space where large events were sometimes held. The sides of the glass structure were transparent and looking through the windows visitors could see with their own eyes that they really were standing on a bridge because there were pools of water underneath the building. As far as Reilika knew the pools had no purpose at all apart from the fact that the architects had likened them to marine inlets. Suddenly Reilika noticed a man on a scooter rapidly approaching from the right-hand side of the Bridge. He looked both brawny and comical. He was wearing shiny black shoes, crumpled dark trousers, a creased checked shirt and a black sweatshirt emblazoned with the letters "CABBAGE" – the area of Souptown where he lived – across the chest. He had a backpack like one a schoolchild would carry. The scooter rider was Dad's colleague and bosom buddy from the Estonian University Students' Society. His name was Uku-Meelis Soosaar, known as Uku. Reilika stopped and greeted Uku. He replied with a wide smile, apologised that he was in a rush and wound his way on the scooter towards the ticket office.

At the same time a familiar alert pinged. A message from her friend. Mari had sent a photo back showing the football stadium and the FC Elva logo. There was also a text from Mari saying that she had a friendly against Elva instead of training and calling off their plan to study maths together that

evening.

Reilika messaged Mari back saying no probs, and saw a new message. Dad letting her know that he was going to be some time.

The entrance to "Echo of the Urals" was in the rear section of the Bridge where Agnes, a steward, was sitting. She would cast the beady eye of a hawk over each visitor as if examining a mouse from the sky. Nine times out of ten she'd be knitting socks, as she was now. Reilika nodded a hello to her and stood in front of the large wooden doors. They opened.

On the other side of the entrance stood a low metal gate. There were several like it, with metal arms, throughout the building, and Reilika had already become accustomed to them – and to the fact that they didn't always give the green light. That was why there was a flesh and blood person like Agnes at each gate, to let visitors in when there was a problem with a ticket.

Reilika fished the ticket Basilius had given her out of the pocket of her jeans and showed it to the barcode reader on the gate, which worked just like the ones in cinemas. The machine accepted the code and the green light gave her permission to go through.

She walked past the lift and scampered down the long, wide steps. The loudspeakers were playing bird song to tune visitors into a forest people's mind-set. Underfoot was a sheen of blue light

and below the glass white, fishlike shapes darted about. Although the fish weren't alive, walking along a screen set into the floor was spooky.

Reilika followed the entire length of the broad computer-generated river, which ended at a Karelian sauna. Two elderly women were examining the walls of the wooden sauna and jumped as they heard Reilika's footsteps forging ahead confidently. She always walked quickly when she knew her destination.

She stepped into the lofty tunnel that soon turned 180° to the right and sloped gently upwards. The bend confused people and here, at the beginning of the slope, Reilika often heard visitors debating whether they were lost. This was also the place where a concealed transducer signalled that it was now time to scare people, and the loudspeakers broadcast the terrible roar of rocks moving inside the earth. Every one hearing the sound of an earthquake for the first time felt an urgent instinct for self-preservation and wanted to escape. Reilika already knew to expect the noise so her heart didn't jump, but the rumbling was highly unpleasant. The next special effect was the call of a corn crake. Reilika didn't have a clue why the semi-darkness of the corridor was where it started its call. Did it perhaps represent the Echo of the Urals? A few bats was all that was needed to dub the exhibition "The Haunted House".

The lighting created just as much unease.

Light seeped from the ceiling or from tiny LEDs. The artists' favourite scare tactic was clearly to shine a torch under someone's mouth in a darkened room and grin broadly to make the guiltiest of childish expressions look like that of a vampire.

The corridor itself was a display space but the exhibits weren't plonked here and there all higgledy-piggledy: instead they were in glass enclosures built into the walls, lit by small lamps. The enclosures in this particular corridor concerned the earth and the air.

The slope wasn't steep, but it was long. At the higher end a platform, accessed by a gallery, awaited the visitor, offering views over the halls on the ground floor, but Reilika refused the opportunity to admire the wonders they contained. She had another destination in mind. She turned into another tunnel, this time one that curved downwards.

There appeared to be no-one in the Nordic people's hall. There was no hum of voices, at least. Quieter conversation wouldn't have been audible from the hall above, where the soundscape was a busy buzz. In one corner of the hall there was a snarling forest animal of some kind, in another was a Sami home with a crackling fire. Somewhere the tundra wind howled. Reilika glanced knowingly at the small screen which would begin to tell the folk tale as she moved closer. The Sami folk tale reader's voice was wonderfully lively. It was also exceedingly

odd to hear the voice of a young Sami girl ringing out in a room where there was no-one to listen to her.

The Nordic people's hall was the darkest, most enchanting, most mystical room in the exhibition. Here Reilika felt for the first time that once, long ago, Estonians too had been like Native Americans. She found the image so amusing that she hadn't even told her best friend, Mari, about it. Mari had promised to visit the museum with Reilika several times, but had always cried off because she had footie training or something else on.

Reilika stood in front of the headwear enclosure and set to work. She was halfway through a picture of the headcap that had red and white flowers at the front as decoration. The first few times the young artist had done some sketching in the hall



she'd been dogged by the feeling that someone was following her – an impression that was not entirely mistaken because although concealed, all the halls were full of security cameras.

Her pen danced silently across her sketchpad. Drawing the hat was becoming rather a time-consuming task because the embroidery was so delicate. Unfortunately she was unable to examine the hat more closely because of the glass wall in the way. The cap for a Sami child, which was more than a century old, was extremely rare and worthy of protection to make sure its colours stayed as vivid and beautiful for another hundred years.

When the picture was finished, Reilika looked at her phone to see if Dad had messaged her again. She strolled round the exhibition a bit more and went back into the tunnel that led to the Nordic Peoples' Hall. Now she had time to look in the enclosures. Suddenly she stopped by one of them because something had caught her eye. Reilika looked at the knife that Dad had dubbed "Vanemuine's Blade".

"Hang on, that can't be..." she thought.

Her phone rang and Reilika jumped. Dad was calling to tell her he'd finished work for the day. Reilika promised to come right out but lingered for a while, examining the content of the enclosure and the sign attached to it, which read:

Decorative knife from Karelia

Gold, carbonized steel, Karelian birch, jasper

(Lake Äänis, 1984)

Vanemuine's blade was splendid, but Reilika was dissatisfied with something. The handle was decorated with a gaping mythological serpent and its eye looked darker than before. The stone wasn't shining properly. The eye should have been a semi-precious stone called jasper, as stated on the sign alongside it, but it wasn't. Reilika was sure that the snake's eye was just painted on in reddish-brown. The same was true of the eye of the fox that was engraved on the steel – that too should have been jasper.

What was a copy of Vanemuine's blade doing in the enclosure?

2. A theft is discovered

The Estonian National Museum bike rack was in front of the building under a birch tree. Reilika was standing next to her and her Dad's bikes and talking about what she'd drawn and seen in the "Echo of the Urals" exhibition.

Dad had secured his folder with a bungee to the luggage carrier and had then glanced towards the museum, rubbing his chin, which sported two days of stubble. They had been ready to set off home when something Reilika had said struck him as odd.

"You mean the Karelian hunting knife?" he asked.

"Aye, that's the one," Reilika confirmed.

A faint smile formed on Dad's mouth. Interesting; when had his daughter started saying "aye" like the locals here down south more than the familiar "aye"? He said nothing about it however and replied in similar fashion. "Ee lass, that blade's a very precious item. And you think it's a copy?"

"Yes. Daa. Ja."

Dad pondered his daughter's words for a moment. His instinct was telling him that something was wrong. "Shall we go and have another look at 'Echo of the Urals' before we go home? Would that be OK with you?"

Reilika had no objection. Dad picked up his folder and they made their way back to the place where Dad had now been employed for several years, ever since the new museum in the Raadi area of the city had been opened at the end of one of the runways where the airfield used to be.

The plaintive call of a cuckoo welcomed them into "Echo of the Urals". Father and daughter made straight for the enclosure housing the blade, begging the pardons of the visitors ahead of them who were strolling in more leisurely fashion from hall to hall.

Reilika's Dad squashed his nose against the glass and made a weird whining, growling sound, like a dog begging for scraps from the dinner table. Finally he shifted back to human language. "You're dead right, Rellu." Dad said, calling his daughter by

the affectionate form of her name. “That object is a DIY job – it’s a good effort but it’s still dodgy.”

He put his folder on the floor and plunged his hand into a pocket for his mobile. “Let’s see what Uku says. Pleeese pick up... Hi, Uku! Listen, I’m in ‘Echo of the Urals’. Just wondering if you can cast any light on why this doo-dah’s here instead of Vanemuine’s blade? ... Yes – well, come and have a look... Yes, come and see... Yes, that’s right “

The darkened tunnel was a creepy place to wait. Reilika took a photo of the replica blade with her phone and set about drawing it in her sketch-pad. Dad walked on and peered into the other enclosures, mumbling that the other objects seemed all seemed to be present and correct, at least at first glance.

Before long they heard a voice, some way off, “Vabandust!. Excuse me!”

The familiar shape of a man emerged from the tunnel. It was Uku, hurtling along on his scooter towards the enclosures. He jumped off, landed on both feet and asked, “So, what’s up?”

Reilika’s Dad gestured towards the enclosure for the knives and said, “See for yourself!”

Uku’s mouth sagged open, drooping at the corners like a melting snowman. His fingers fidgeted nervously with his ring that bore a blue, black and white flag, and his hands shook slightly. The ring signified that Uku was a member of the Estonian University Students’ Society. Reilika’s Dad wore an

identical one and they would ask each other for help as bosom buddies. Reilika did not know exactly what that expression meant, but it was something to do with preserving loyalty to Estonia. Uku grew more and more nervous as he realised that something was very suspicious.

“Don’t you know anything about it?” Dad asked quietly.

“No...” Uku shook his head and eyed the enclosure anxiously, “...what the...?”

“You can say that again,” Reilika’s Dad replied.

“It was you who noticed the swap, was it?” Uku asked Reilika, who answered with a modest smile.

“Very smart!” Uku remarked admiringly and continued inquisitively. “How did you spot it?” Reilika thought for a moment and answered “The jaspers are gone. From the eyes...”

“You’re dead right!” remarked Uku, acknowledging what she said. “The original blade has jaspers for eyes. They’re found in Lapland and they’re not in short supply. They’ve used very good shades of brown to decorate the replica, but when all’s said and done it’s just paint. As to what the thing’s actually made of...well, that I really couldn’t say.”

“Let’s find out then,” said Reilika’s Dad. “We can do that when we open the enclosures. Uku, do you agree with me that we’ve been victims of a

theft?”

Uku smiled wryly like the English teacher when Reilika and her classmates pronounced words the American way. He sounded very worried when he said that as far as he was aware it had to be a theft. Nothing like this had happened in the museum for a long time. Uku had heard talk of pilfering from the ERM when it had been in the old building on Veski Road. But only a couple of piggins had been taken, and that was by a group of students who had returned them the following day. Vanemuine’s blade was in a different league altogether. It was one of “Echo of the Urals”’ flagship exhibits.

Finally Uku asked quietly, “Hardi, do you know if Auli is still here?”

“I think she’s left already. Do you want me to call her?”

Uku shrugged his shoulders and replied quietly, “Can do.”

Hardi – Reilika’s Dad – started searching for her number when Uku raised both his hands and said wearily, “I’ll do it. I’m the one in charge of this display after all...But what shall I tell her?”

“I don’t know,” Reilika’s Dad replied. “Just tell it like it is.”

“Maybe it’s someone’s rubbish idea of a practical joke?” Reilika interrupted.

“We’ll find out, but Rellu, I think you should go home.”

Reilika didn’t reply. Dad knew that silence

did not mean agreement.

“If what we’re dealing with here is a theft...”

Dad began.

Uku gave her a sympathetic look and added, “You’ve helped us hugely already.”

“Ok, I’ll go,” she said dutifully.

“See you later! Tell Mum I might be late home.”

Reilika still said nothing but left as asked.

Dad watched her and felt a pang of regret. He knew that the theft of the knife was just the kind of mystery that would she and her secret club would love to solve. Even so, as this was an actual theft, the investigation had to be left to the police.

Reilika whisked her school bag and sketchpad onto her back and headed towards the main entrance, although at the ticket office she veered into the library. She was so nervous that she couldn’t and wouldn’t ride her bike. “Oh my goodness, I’m too young for anxiety disorder,” she thought. There were only five people in the library. One of them was a slender young man who was drawing something. When he saw Reilika he lifted his pen and muttered hello.

Reilika knew the boy by sight and responded to his greeting. He had vivid ginger hair, a snow-white face and was often there. He was a serious manga fan as was clear from his backpack, which was covered in Japanese figures, and his dragon T-shirt. Even the way his hair stood up and his wisp of a mous-

tache somehow felt Japanese. His mop of hair was very uneven in length and partially covered one of his eyes in a strange way. The boy smelt like a sweet shop. Reilika couldn't make out whether his scent was cologne or Hubba Bubba.

She took a seat at an old-fashioned table by the window and carried on drawing Vanemuine's blade from the image on her phone. While she was working she forgot everything else. When some time later she heard a police siren outside, she glanced out of the window and sighed deeply. What a shame she'd been sent away from "Echo of the Urals".

The nee-naw sound made by a vehicle with flashing lights was becoming louder and louder. Reilika noticed that Manga Boy on the other side of the room had walked over to the window and was following the arrival of the police very closely. From the window you could see the police bus arriving from Rooski Street. There was a final nee-naw and then silence. The car had stopped in front of the building.

The boy looked at Reilika and asked, "Do you know what's going on?"

Reilika deliberated whether she should disclose her thoughts to the unknown boy. She decided she might as well because it would be all over the papers in the morning.

"Yes," she replied with a nod. "An exhibit's disappeared from 'Echo of the Urals'. Stolen, I think." "What gives you that idea?" the boy wondered. "Nothing's secret in this building," Reilika replied enigmatically. Although he was behaving normally, Reilika suddenly regretted speaking out. She didn't want to plunge into a lengthy chat with the stranger. The boy's glance settled for a moment on Reilika's drawing. Without saying a word he then went back to his own table as if something had remained unspoken, leaving only the scent of fruit-flavoured gum in his wake.

Reilika assembled all her stuff and looked outside impatiently. She stood up and set off towards the library door when the boy stopped her with a question, "Excuse me, but is everything all right?"



"Everything's fine," she replied and looked at the boy's drawing, which looked like some kind of mask.

"That's really good," Reilika said appreciatively.

"I'm a cosplayer," he informed her, a moment later adding, "this is a sketch for a mask."

"Cool," said Reilika admiringly.

The boy pointed to Reilika's sketchpad, "And you were drawing a beautiful knife."

"Thanks!" she said. "I enjoy scribbling things down now and again."

"It's a really beautiful picture of a knife. Hope you don't mind me asking, but does it have anything to do with the theft?"

Reilika looked in astonishment at the boy, who had folded his arms across his chest. His eyes were red, as if from lack of sleep. From drawing night after night, perhaps? The wispy moustache, the unkempt hair and the very pale skin accentuated his windswept, artistic look.

"Yes," Reilika began, openly astonished.

"Yes, that's what's been stolen. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess," Manga Boy replied in English, "What do you know about the theft?"

"Nothing," the word fell from Reilika's lips and she suddenly felt sad. Right now Dad, Uku and the police were standing next to the enclosure where the theft had occurred and she wasn't allowed

to be there, even though she was the person who had discovered the crime. The mystery was slipping through her fingers. What could be worse for a young detective? But she didn't want to tell all of that to this older boy whose name she didn't even know.

The boy struck up conversation again, "I think I know who you are. Hang on, I'll have a think. Hardi's your Dad."

Reilika nodded and all of a sudden the quiet boy laughed happily. He was so lucky to have guessed correctly, it was like he'd hit on the winning answer in some TV quiz show.

"My name's Tugan. My Grandma's the museum director," he added.

"Great," Reilika replied, unimpressed.

"And you often come here after school," he stated.

"Sometimes," Reilika corrected him and wondered what clever remark she could make that would leave the older boy with the impression that she was an intelligent person. Her eyes wandered over the shelves in the large library, which stretched from floor to ceiling. They still had space for books. – "How do I get out of this?" she wondered.

Suddenly the boy offered Reilika a pink oblong stick that he'd magicked up from a small box covered with Japanese hieroglyphs.

To refuse felt unwise, so Reilika accepted the stick but didn't start to chew on it, instead holding

it as if it were a sparkler. She realised it was some kind of Japanese sweet but as she'd never had one before she had no intention of trying it in the boy's presence. The pink oblong might taste vile and where would she put it if it did.

Manga Boy Tugan bowed forward slightly and whispered, "I know you're a detective."

"Who says?" Reilika asked.

"I have friends in the Soup Quarter," he replied with a knowing look.

This was the last straw for Reilika. She drew herself up and fibbed that she had to get a move on to the hairdresser's and the shops. Whatever else the boy might know she was definitely not going to say a word about anything to do with Ramps Secret Society.

Reilika left the building and walked to the bike rack. When she arrived she tried the pink stick. The glaze housed a biscuit and at first the taste wasn't very strong, but it left a curious, sticky sensation in her mouth. The Japanese stick was just as odd as its giver.