



“How My Dad Got a New Wife”

By Reeli Reinaus

Illustrated by Marja-Liisa Plats

Tänapäev 2020, 196 pp

ISBN 9789949850273

Storybook, fiction

Age: 10+

Rights sold: Polish, Latvian

Kaisa lives with her father. The girl's mother died when she was very young. One day, her father decides to find a new wife. Kaisa is glad, and wants to help him. Together, they draft a list of qualities a candidate should possess, put it up on the Internet, and try out other ways to meet new women. Although the candidates meet all the conditions they listed, the women still turn out to be unsuitable when they actually meet. It seems like each one has something either missing or extra. Kaisa's father is disappointed and wants to abandon the plan, but then, he meets someone.



Reading sample

[pp 52–57]

Love Magic and the Friend Zone

“How on earth has your mom found all those step-dads?” I asked Merit at school one day.

Merit shrugged. “She says she doesn’t find them. That is, she doesn’t look for them. They find her all on their own. She attracts men without trying. Mom says you won’t find anybody if you look for them. People can tell you’re desperate from a mile away, and then they avoid you instead.”

I started wondering if my dad was very desperate, and from how far away people could tell. Maybe it did stand out when he constantly looked around in public, as if he was a fugitive terrified that the police on his trail might leap out at any moment. Or when he clomped around the grocery store, rushing up to every remotely pretty woman to ask her something.

One time, it turned out that the lady he approached wasn’t shopping alone. Her husband had just gone off looking for something, and came back right at the moment when Dad was asking her advice on the best way to make French fries—vegetable or olive oil? Dad was startled when the man joined the discussion and reckoned that coconut oil was the best option, so he returned home with a jar of it.

“And when your dad does finally meet somebody, then he’ll have to pay attention to a ton of important things,” Merit continued.

“What kinds of things?” I asked.

I didn’t get how it could all be so difficult. They were grown-ups, after all!

“Well, for example, he’ll have to make sure he doesn’t automatically end up in the friend zone right away,” Merit said.

“The ‘friend zone’?” I’d never heard of it. “What does that mean?”

“Well, I’m not really sure, either,” Merit admitted. “But from what I can tell, it’s when somebody sees somebody else as like, a good friend, but nothing else. So, they can like, go to the movies together and talk about all kinds of things, but even so, they won’t hold hands and go watch the sunset.”

As always, I later told Dad what I’d heard that day: about the possible friend zone, which threatens someone who wants to get to know somebody else better.

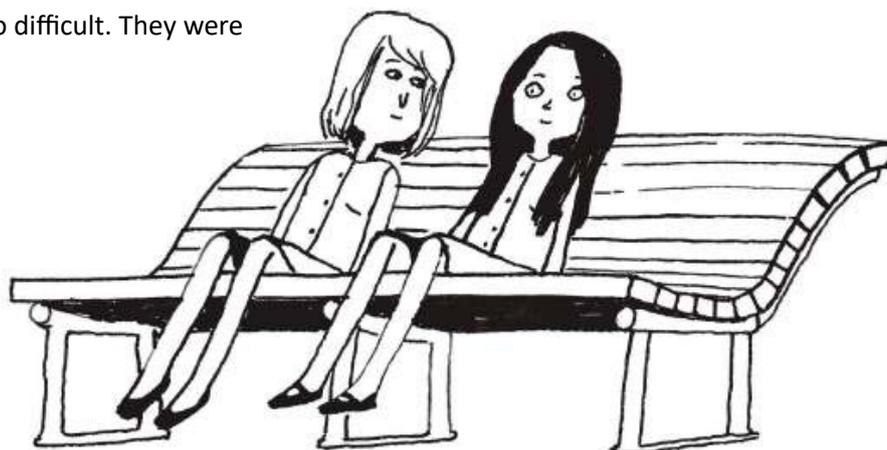
This time, Dad took my warning very seriously. It turned out he had never heard of the expression, either.

“And it’s a dangerous place, huh?” he asked after I laid out what little I knew about the friend zone.

I shook my head. “No, it’s the exact opposite, I think: it’s not dangerous, but really safe. Just that once you’re already in it, then you’re probably there for good.”

Dad nodded thoughtfully. “So, then, those women will take me as like, a friend, but not like someone who, well, you know...” He coughed.

“Exactamundo!”



Whatever the cough was supposed to mean, I was certain that Dad had caught on.

“But if nothing else works, then there’s always witchcraft, of course,” Merit said one day as we were snacking in the school cafeteria.

“What witchcraft?”

“Love magic,” Merit whispered, as if it was something secretive.

“What does that mean?” I knew, of course, what the words meant separately, but I had no idea how magic like that worked. “Is it like, some kind of hocus-pocus?”

Merit nodded. “More or less. But it works like a charm! At least that’s what one of my mom’s friends claimed a while ago.”

“So, what’d she do?”

“Well, she held a picture of the guy she liked and lit a candle and cast a spell. And an hour later, that guy called and asked her out.”

“Huh. My dad hasn’t even met anybody yet. Where’s he supposed to get the woman’s picture?”

“He can cut one out of a newspaper or a magazine if he likes some celebrity or something.”

“Dad says he’s just looking for an ordinary woman.”

“You can find ordinary women’s pictures in newspapers and magazines, too,” Merit argued.

I shrugged. “I’m not totally sure Dad’ll be into it.”

“Then I guess that spell won’t do.” Merit took another bite of her meat pastry, and a smile spread across her face. “A pastry!”

Before I could ask Merit what she meant, she began explaining with her mouth full.

“I just remembered another one of my mom’s friends said once that she took a couple strands of her hair and made pastries and baked them into

a few. She invited the guy she liked to come over, made a mark on the ones with the hair, and gave them to him. That magic worked, too.”

I stared at Merit’s pastry and suddenly felt sick to my stomach. I was totally sure I wouldn’t give my dad that recommendation. I didn’t know one word of any magic spell, either. On top of that, I wasn’t convinced that he’d even start casting spells. I felt he preferred honest solutions to the problem.

“It doesn’t have to be hair, either, you know,” Merit said when she saw my look of doubt. “I just remembered that fingernails work just fine, too.”

“No!” I exclaimed clearly. “Dad won’t agree to witchcraft.”

Merit nodded. “Then I guess he’ll just have to get by on his own.”

/—/
[pp 86–98]

Maria and Raw Food

“Do you want me to give you a little frozen meat to take home?” Merit suddenly asked, pulling open the freezer door.

“There’s nowhere for me to keep it,” I said sadly. “She’ll throw it away as soon as she sees it.” It was a good idea, of course, and I felt my mouth slowly start to water.

“Tell her it’s for Fred,” Merit suggested.

I shook my head doubtfully. “We’re not allowed to give Fred raw meat anymore, just dry dog food. They say raw meat will give him worms.”

Merit sighed sympathetically.

I sighed in desperation.

/—/

The first time Maria came over, Dad made salad for dinner and didn’t add a single sliver of meat, because Maria was a vegetarian.



Despite its meatlessness, Maria pushed the salad around her plate and only ate a couple bites.

“I’m not used to this kind of food,” she said apologetically. “Can I make dinner myself next time?”

“Of course!” Dad exclaimed, his face lighting up.

Dad actually wasn’t all that great of a chef. Better put, he didn’t like cooking, but when he finally pulled himself together, he could make downright delicious dishes. That was the reason I couldn’t figure out why Maria only tasted the salad out of politeness.

However, Maria didn’t only cook the next time, but the time after that, and the one after that as well. And it didn’t stop there—she took over managing the contents of our fridge without anyone noticing. A forest of different sprouts and all kinds of seeds and greens appeared in our refrigerator, and then on our table as well. Then there was a ton of other weird things, some of which smelled great or looked interesting, but I still couldn’t imagine making an entire meal out of the bizarre array. Even so, those are the kinds of foods she started making at our place.

Maria came by almost every evening bringing more and more new plants and tubers, and would make a pretty green salad or a soup that smelled appetizing, but which unfortunately wasn’t fit to eat. At least that’s what both my dad and I believed.

It turned out that Maria wasn’t just a vegetarian, but a vegan. While vegetarians usually just don’t eat meat, Maria didn’t eat any foods that came from animals in any way—not even dairy products or eggs, although not a single animal is killed to get them. We found out she didn’t even eat honey, because she believed that bees don’t like it when their honey is taken away.

More and more often, I started going over to Merit’s place to study, and stayed over for supper by what seemed like total coincidence. But it was never coincidental. I’d planned it all out, detail by detail. I was hungry, exasperated, and desperate.

One day when Dad dropped me off at practice, I found a hamburger wrapper in his car, and figured out why he was never hungry at dinnertime anymore. He ate fast food after work! Another day, I even caught Dad staring at Fred’s canned dog food

with a thoughtful look on his face. I knew how he felt. If I hadn't gone emptying out the fridge at Merit's place almost every day, then I'd probably be staring at Fred's dog food with the same expression.

Dad gradually became more and more brooding. I knew what he was thinking about. I was sad, too—Maria was great, but I felt like if things kept going that way for much longer, then I'd be forced to move in with Grandma. One day on the way to school, I caught myself staring at a big, plump Dalmatian. The dog reminded me of cows, and cows reminded me of meat. And meat... We didn't have meat anymore, just like we didn't have potatoes, or even rice. And when Dad did manage to sneak those foods back into our refrigerator for a few days, Maria would glare at them as if they were potential suicide agents, and asked if we had any idea what we were doing to ourselves.

"I don't know how much longer I can take it," Dad said gloomily one day. "I've even been going out for a burger and fries at lunch sometimes."

"Merit's mom packs extra ham sandwiches and snacks for me in her lunch box."

"When I went to Veiko's birthday party, I think I ate half a bowl of potato salad all by myself. And the whole time, I just kept feeling guilty that you couldn't have any," Dad admitted.

"Last Saturday when you gave me money to go to see a movie... I didn't go. I went out for pizza instead, and afterward, I spent the rest of the cash on chocolate."

"One day when I was out walking, I saw a little girl carrying a bag of candy, and for just a second, I wondered what would happen if I snatched the bag from her and ran away... But then I remembered that I'm basically still a free man, so I went and bought beef jerky and a big bar of chocolate with hazelnuts."

"One day, I didn't water the sprouts growing in the kitchen on purpose," I confessed.

"I went shopping for refrigerators a couple of days back. I figured that if I were to buy a secret fridge and hide it in the garage, then when our stomachs

are rumbling, well..." Dad said dreamily.

"I can't live like this anymore," I said. "Can't Merit's mom adopt me?"

Dad shook his head. "I'm going to keep you, and..."

"And dump Maria?"

Dad nodded.

Liina and the Survival Hike

"You should definitely take your next catch out for a hike. Difficult situations are a fast way to figure out who's the right person and who's not," my dad's friend Riho commented when he was visiting one day.

Dad had just finished complaining about how some women who appear wonderful can quickly turn out to have an intolerable quirk once you get to know them better, and Riho was trying to give him good advice.

Naturally, none of us could guess at that moment that the next woman Dad started dating would take him and me on a hike herself. And not just any old hike with packed sandwiches, a thermos full of warm tea, and a tent for sleeping, but a hike complete with blood, sweat, and tears.

It was going to be a survival hike.

/—/

Liina confiscated our tent, among other things. We figured she must have a bigger and better one, in which we'd sleep. Once we'd parked the car and started walking, we thought it wasn't going to be an overnight camping trip. That would also have explained why we had so little food along with us.

Nevertheless, we'd drawn all these conclusions silently in our own heads, and based on the way things appeared. We hadn't asked Liina about her own plans even once. As you might guess, Liina wasn't who she seemed like at first, either.

After we'd been plodding along for about an hour, Liina started asking Dad and me strange questions.

"What would you do if you were lost in the woods?" she asked.

Looking around, I tried to figure out if I'd still be able to guide us back to the car. I reckoned I would, although the woods seemed identical in every direction. Liina probably didn't intend to get us turned around on purpose, I supposed, but the question still made me uneasy for a moment.

Dad wasn't fazed. "I suppose I'd use my phone's GPS," he said, shrugging.

"Wrong answer!" Liina replied. "First of all, you should stay calm, of course. And secondly, you should see where the sun is at and check on what side of trees the moss grows. Moss always grows on the northern side, you see. That way, you can figure out the points of the compass and can start heading in the right direction.

"What do you do if you run out of food while camping?" Liina asked next.

Dad laughed. "We look for the nearest store on the map, I believe."

"Wrong answer!" Liina crowed again. "You should forage for edible plants and roots, and hunt or fish."

"You should still know how to pack enough supplies," Dad mumbled.

"But what would you do if a war broke out?" Liina asked, obviously worked up. "Where would you go if you had to leave home?"

Dad looked over at me a little worriedly. "There's no point in getting all hypothetical, now," he said.

"But what if there's an environmental catastrophe? Say the electricity goes out in cities and water stops coming from the faucets. And money is no good, because the shops are all closed. Have you ever thought you should have a house isolated in the woods somewhere for a situation like that? A place where you can farm and get water straight from a well?"

"We've already survived one environmental catastrophe," Dad murmured, probably referring to Maria. He checked his watch a little anxiously. "I suppose we should start heading back if we want to get out of the woods while it's still light out."

"But we came hiking," Liina said.

"Yeah, but before it gets dark..." Dad mumbled.

"We're staying in the woods overnight." Liina said, staring at us and slightly worried. "Did our wires get crossed somehow?"

/—/

Translated by Adam Cullen

