



“Morten, Emilie, and the Lost Worlds”

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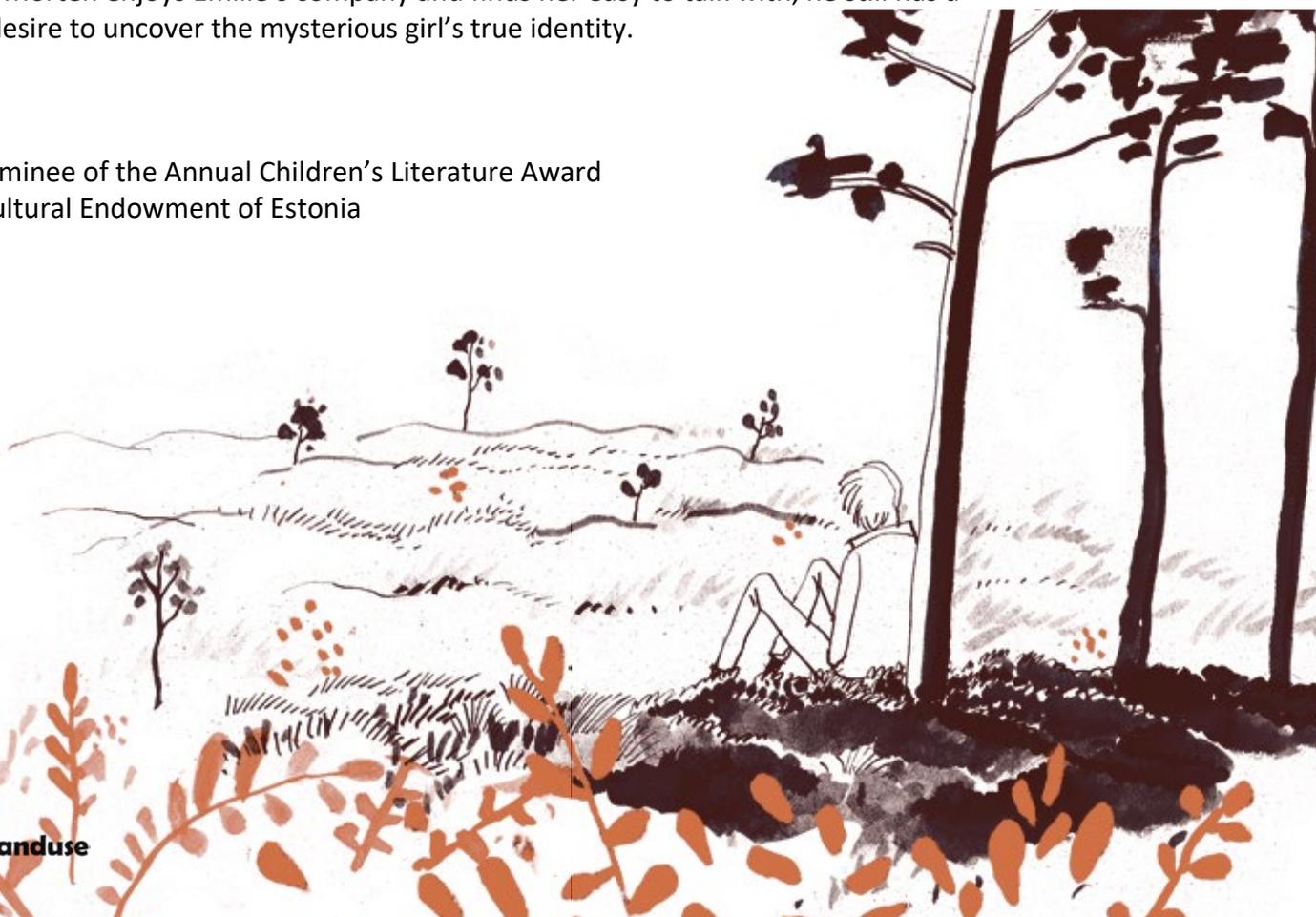
Storybook, fiction

12+

After his grandparents' death, Morten is forced to live with his abusive alcoholic uncle in a lone cabin on the edge of a swamp. His mother is working abroad, trying to earn enough money for a down payment on an apartment. The boy has never met his father. Escaping to a nearby bog island to practice nature photography is Morten's only chance for coping. On one of these trips, he meets a strange girl he's never seen before in town. Emilie is pale, speaks in an unusual way, and appears to be totally unfamiliar with many regular things. Although Morten enjoys Emilie's company and finds her easy to talk with, he still has a nagging desire to uncover the mysterious girl's true identity.

Award:

2020 Nominee of the Annual Children's Literature Award
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[...]

1.

Morten scanned the camera's viewfinder over the windows of the apartment building. Lights had already been turned on in some, allowing him to see the people moving around inside. Others were still dark—either the occupants hadn't come home yet or they had some reason to prefer darkness.

Morten wasn't actually interested in what the people were doing, or in why some windows still weren't illuminated. There were only two reasons for his staring: one, he was used to viewing the world through a camera lens, and two, there was almost nothing he wouldn't give to be inside of any one of those apartments right now.

Simply because it would be warm inside. Warm and cozy.

Morten closed his eyes and for a moment, he tried to imagine being inside a heated, brightly lit space. It wasn't much of a success, because the biting wind penetrated through his light jacket. The boy opened his eyes and zoomed into the next stranger's apartment; into a seemingly ideal life.

While packing up his camera after the first raindrops started to fall, he noticed a big black dog that had apparently just lost its master. It was weaving frantically back and forth over the sidewalk, trying to pick up its owner's scent.

For as long as he could remember, Morten had wanted to be a wizard. Someone who could make all his dreams come true with the mere wave of a wand. If he were a wizard, he would have been able to cast a spell to bring the dog and its owner back together again. At the moment, however, all he could do was feel sorry for the animal and hope the poor pup made it safely home in the end.

If only. For at that very moment, the dog ran out into the street without warning and barely avoided being hit by a red SUV. Morten closed his eyes again, the screeching of the SUV's wheels still ringing in his ears. He didn't want to see what happened next.

When he was little, he had often

pretended to be a wizard. All he needed was a magic wand and one of his mom's old skirts that could be cut up and turned into a cape. And his imagination, of course.

Morten still wished he could make magic happen. The only difference was that it'd been many years since he last played with a wand and a cape. Yet, the things and events he'd have liked to change had only increased as time passed.

The dog was nowhere to be seen when Morten opened his eyes again. He looked at his watch. There was still half an hour left until the bus came. The cold had already crept into Morten's bones, but there was nowhere he could go to warm up. He couldn't take shelter in the coach station, because the smell of food would have driven him crazy. He had to stick it out until he got home. That was simply the way things were. Uncle Urmas had no doubt cooked up his usual fried potatoes and Morten would somehow survive this day, just like every other.

Thinking about food was an all-around bad idea. Seven hours had passed since his school lunch and Morten's stomach was rumbling nonstop. Still, he only had enough money for bus fare to last him till the end of the month, and he couldn't spend a single cent of it. Not one.

Morten was roused from his thoughts by something prodding his knee. To his surprise, he found himself staring into the eyes of the black dog that had nearly gotten run over just minutes ago. The dog's chestnut eyes bored into him as if it was pleading for help. Morten reached out a hand and cautiously placed it on the dog's head. The animal came a couple short steps closer and sniffed at him rather affectionately.

"Don't you bite me, now!" Morten warned as he inspected the dog's collar. He had to turn it this way and that before finding what he was looking for—a metal tag engraved with a phone number.

Twenty-five minutes later, Morten was wolfing down a meat pie on the bus. At first, he had politely refused when the middle-aged bald, goateed man who had come to collect the dog tried pressing a fifty-euro bill into his hand. But the man insisted, and he finally gave in. He

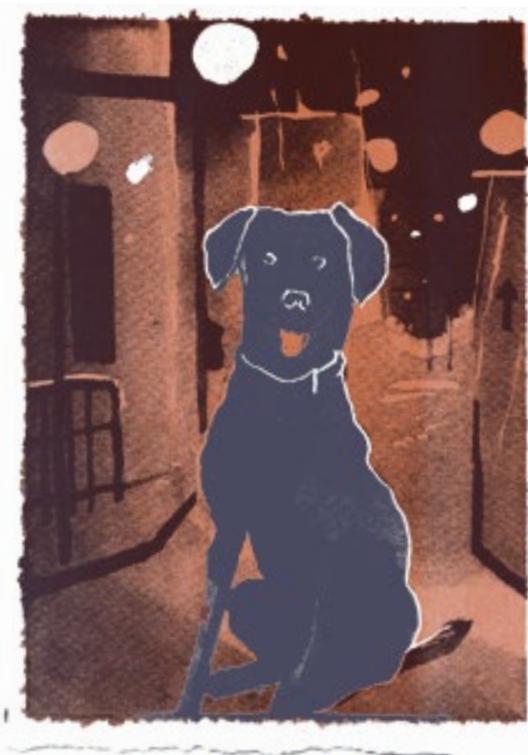
simply couldn't accept it the first time, even though the fear that the man wouldn't repeat his offer nearly paralyzed him.

Morten did the math in his head and calculated that if he bought one savory pie and one banana from the shop every day after school, then the money should last him nearly one and a half months. He stuffed the last bit of meat pie into his mouth and grinned at his reflection in the window. Today had proved that there was always a way out of any situation, no matter how bleak.

* * *

Before he fell asleep, Morten crossed the day off on his calendar. He'd gotten through another. All he could do was live one day at a time. It was easier that way. All that mattered was to get through one day. And then another. Still, he never thought about that next day until he was lying in bed at night. Even then, he mostly just focused on feeling glad that he'd managed the one behind him. That day hadn't broken him.

Morten couldn't think too many days ahead—otherwise he'd lose focus. If that happened, it wouldn't be long before he fell into a web of false dreams and self-pity that dampened his will to go on and kept him from simply focusing on survival.



2.

But the very next day, Morten was back again. Right back in that bus, that city, and finally, that school. A school where he didn't belong. A city where he didn't belong. Working towards a life where in fact he obviously didn't belong, either. No matter that it was one he wanted. One he wanted more than anything else in the world. It was the only possible solution; the only hope he had. A way out of the scum his uncle called 'life'. One his mom had fled from a long time ago.

At first, everyone in Morten's new class treated him with mistrust because he had, almost literally, ridden in from the boondocks on horseback. Of course, this misjudgment overlooked the fact that he was so poor he didn't even own a bike, much less a horse. So poor that he got free school lunches and walked around all winter wearing cracked boots that gave him wet socks as soon as the snow started to melt.

Nevertheless, Morten's class gave him a chance. They didn't tease or ignore him, but simply left him alone at first, trying to cautiously gauge what kind of a guy he was. And Morten had done everything he could to appear as normal as possible. They hadn't fully accepted him as one of the group in spite of all his effort, probably for the simple reason that he didn't have the money to do anything with his classmates after school—not to go out to eat or to the cinema. And hanging out with them on the weekends was out of the question, of course. As a result, he still felt like a stranger and a freak—like someone who wants more than he actually deserves.

The mildly kind and friendly way Morten's classmates treated him was mainly due to two facts, at least from his perspective. First of all, he studied like crazy, which made him one of the top students. Secondly, he had a camera. Although nowadays anyone could film as much as their heart desired using their phone, a real camera was a whole different class. On top of that, Morten had an eye for filming and photography. It was a talent that none of his classmates could ever buy, even though most of their families spent entire

fortunes on holidaying during school breaks— not just to Tenerife or Turkey, but even as far away as Asia and South America.

Morten had bought the camera a couple years earlier with money inherited from his grandpa. It had certainly cost a pretty penny, but he'd never regretted the decision. That camera and his good grades were Morten's only ticket to another world—to a world better than the one he'd inhabited for three years already, ever since both his grandma and grandpa passed away in short succession and their country home, where he had been living with them and his mother, was left to his mother's older brother, Uncle Urmas. Their lives were turned upside down in just a couple of years. Urmas sold off most of the valuables, drank away the money, and allowed the buildings to fall apart. The farm Morten called home transformed almost beyond recognition in a rather short time. His life had changed beyond recognition too, because his mother had left to work abroad a year ago, hoping to make enough money for them to someday move out of what was now Urmas's house. *To move away from home*, Morten thought bitterly. Still, he couldn't wait for that day to come.

The bell rang for passing period. Morten quickly stuffed his textbook and notebook into his backpack. He'd promised to help Andreas hand out fliers for some event to be held by a student organization.

Yes, he'd even made a couple of friends in class by now. Or something along the lines of friends. Morten had never spent any with them outside of school because he didn't have the money, and whenever they'd offered to pay for him, he always turned them down. He hadn't visited any of them at home, either. He didn't want to go. Morten was sure that all he'd do was constantly compare what he saw with his own situation, and that would probably just make him feel depressed. Maybe they didn't want to invite him over, either. Maybe the boys' parents were afraid he'd steal something. Maybe they'd pack him food to take home. He didn't know, but any way you looked at it, he would've left feeling badly.

As soon as Morten had zipped up his backpack, Andreas was there thrusting a thick stack of fliers at him.

"Here, take 'em! You cover the second floor, I'll do the third, and we'll meet up after!"

Morten nodded. He had thought they'd be passing fliers out together. It did make sense, though—separate was certainly faster.



And there was no reason why Andreas should know that Morten still felt unsure of himself. Morten felt like he was made of glass and everyone could see inside of him; could spot the emptiness and uncertainty raging there. Could see the way his heart sank any time anyone spoke to him.

“Hey! There’s this event coming up,” Morten said, blushing and holding the fliers out to the first two girls who walked by.

He didn’t even dare to look them in the eye.

He was afraid of them.

Naturally, he didn’t let it show. Morten usually gave it nearly 200% effort whenever he talked to girls so that none would suspect he was actually nervous they’d make fun of him for dressing weirdly. So they wouldn’t be able to tell he reckoned the only reason they were speaking to him in the first place was because they saw him as harmless, because there wasn’t a girl in the world who would ever want to go out with him, anyway, and therefore, they didn’t have to think too much about chatting with him.

Morten could tell something had gone wrong already. The girls had stopped in front of him and seemed to have no intention of walking on.

He looked up. At that moment, he felt more astonished than frightened.

“Did you want to ask anything else?” he mumbled, looking at the shorter, light-haired girl.

She nodded.

“That’s a really cool jacket. I wanted to ask—where’d you get it?”

Morten turned pale. It had finally happened—the thing he’d feared all along. Someone teasing him about the way he looked. Making fun of the second-hand clothes he wore, even though they came from a high-quality second-hand store abroad.

“Finland,” Morten mumbled, then quickly walked away, leaving the girls behind. He intended to hand the fliers back to Andreas immediately.

[...]

5.

Fog had draped over the bog. Whereas the morning mist had seemed somehow bright and cheerful in the first rays of sunlight, this was rather grim and even somewhat forbidding. Morten was reminded of the stories his grandpa had told about people getting lost in the bog, purposefully led astray by ghosts and demons, or even carried off to hell.

He quickened his pace, trying not to let his mind wander and telling himself they were only stories probably meant for the same reason as why people today went to see horror films. Yet the fog crept around him like a shadow and he suddenly felt more terrified than ever before.

Morten certainly tried to put on a brave face, but as if giving proof to the chilling thoughts forming in his mind, a figure began to emerge from the mist. *It must be Urmas*, he thought.

The boy froze. For a moment, he considered whether he should keep walking straight or circle around. Home was already so close that he needn’t fear getting lost or drowning in a bog lake, either.

It didn’t take long for Morten to make up his mind to go the longer route, even if it meant getting his feet wet. He had no intention of crossing paths with Urmas. What was the man doing out here, anyway? It was hardly likely he’d come looking for the boy. Morten changed course and hoped his uncle hadn’t spotted him yet.

Squinting to see more clearly, however, the figure in the fog didn’t appear to belong to Urmas at all. It was shorter and somehow frailer. A girl. Not a man, in any case.

A girl in the bog?

Morten no longer slowed his steps. His curiosity was aroused. How had the girl gotten here? Could she be lost? What if she’d been circling around for hours and was starting to lose hope?

As he got closer, he could tell she was a girl about his age. She had long dark hair and big, pretty eyes. Dressed only in a long skirt and a curiously light jacket, she stood staring at him with an expression that was just as astonished as his.

Morten spoke first.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Nothing.”

It was a rather odd response, given that they were in a place devoid of other people and the sun had set already a half hour before. Morten noticed that the bottom hem of her skirt was stained dark from water. Judging by the girl’s clothes, she didn’t appear to be out hiking, which led him right back to his initial question: what on earth was she doing in the bog? It was early April, which meant there were no berries or wild herbs to gather, either.

“What do you mean, nothing?” Morten persisted.

The girl shrugged. “Nothing.”

He could see her eying him with equal curiosity. Was she just as perplexed as he was?

“Do you need any help?” Morten asked.

The girl certainly didn’t appear to have escaped from a hospital or an asylum, but the situation wasn’t exactly normal, either. Her eyes were completely lucid—she obviously wasn’t crazy. Morten had to admit she was very pretty, and for that reason, he very much hoped she had some kind of a logical explanation for walking around alone in a bog at that time of the evening.

“No. Do you?”

It was undoubtedly one of the strangest conversations Morten had ever had, but he was pleased have met her, regardless. Even if the girl turned out to be a little screwy, it was better than nothing. At least he’d had someone to talk to that day.

“What’s your name?”

“Emilie,” the girl said, quickly adding: “but you can call me Millie.”

“Millie? Isn’t that a little . . .”

Morten caught himself before he could finish. More than anything else, he was afraid others would think he was weird and tease him, and now, the first thing he nearly did with a new acquaintance was criticize her name.

“What were you going to say?”

The girl seemed to notice his hesitation.

“I was going to say that Millie . . .”

Morten felt himself blush. “That I like Emilie better.”

“Then you may call me Emilie if you

wish. And what is your name?”

“Morten.”

“Morten,” Emilie repeated. He could tell she had never heard the name before.

Not that he himself knew any other Mortens—what’s more, it was a name mostly given in Norway and Denmark. His mother had named him that because it was the name of the lead singer of one of her favorite bands when she was young.

“What’re you doing out here so late?”

Morten couldn’t help but try to find out the reason she was in that unusual place. Unfortunately, it didn’t go as smoothly as he hoped. The girl smirked and returned the same question.

“Where do you live?” Morten asked instead, hoping at least one of his questions would break through her resistance.

“Nearby.”

“Our farm’s the only house anywhere close to here.”

Emilie shrugged. “Then I suppose it isn’t that nearby.”

“Alright. What’s this place of yours called?”

“Vanatoa.”

Morten had no idea where a “Vanatoa Farm” might be found. It was possible it could be another village over. He checked the time—it was later than he’d thought. Mom called him at 9 p.m. every Thursday, but there was no signal out in the bog. He needed to get going.

“Sorry, I’ve got to run home now,”

Morten said. “Would you like to walk out of the bog together?”

Emilie shook her head.

“What’re you going to do here in the dark?”

“Look at the stars.”

“You serious?”

Morten felt like the girl was pulling his leg. There wasn’t a star in the sky, which made it logical for her to claim she wasn’t ready to leave yet. But why stargaze in a bog? Stars were the same everywhere—only light pollution just made them hard to see in the city.

Emilie nodded.

“Yes, I am serious. What did you think?”

Morten shrugged weakly. He couldn’t

just speak his mind and say he thought she was probably off her rocker.

"And you're not afraid?" he asked to avoid answering.

"Not anymore. What about you?"

Morten smiled. "No, me neither."

He reassured himself that the slight sense of dread he'd felt when he first glimpsed the girl in the fog didn't count.

"Alright, I'm going to go," Morten said.

"Maybe we'll meet again someday?"

Emilie nodded. "I believe we will. I come here quite often."

The whole way back, all Morten could think of was the unusual girl and whether she had really meant it when she said it was possible they'd meet again.

Translated by Adam Cullen

