

Comrade Kid and the Grown-Ups

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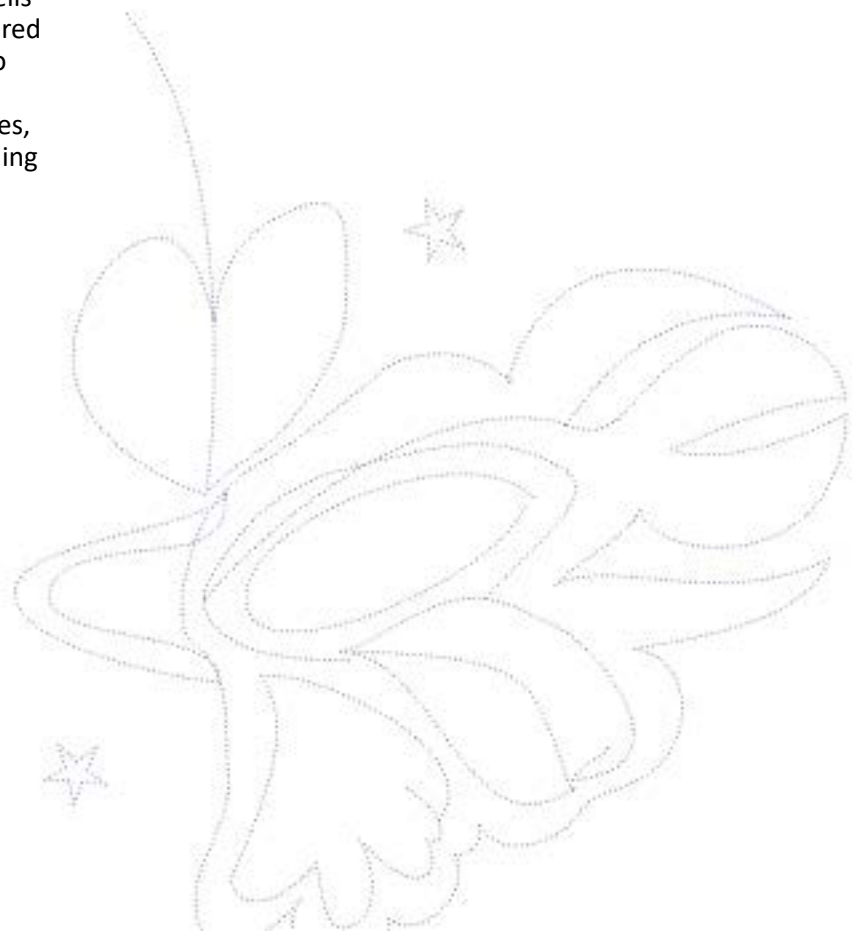
Age: Family book

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Hungarian

More than anything else, little Leelo wants to be an upstanding kid: the kind whose stockings never sag and whose hair ribbons never come undone; the kind who doesn't draw princesses on kitchen doors or break a single one of her mother's precious teacups. And she is trying especially hard to do so now, after men in black uniforms took her mother away and she's left living alone with her father. "Be a good little girl, then Mommy will come back soon," Leelo's mother tells her as she climbs into the back of the truck covered with green tarpaulin. Leelo does her very best to be good, because upstanding kids' mothers will never leave their children! But as hard as she tries, the little girl's mom just doesn't seem to be coming back...

Awards:

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Reading sample

[pp 28–30]

We reached the side of the highway just as the bus was hissing to a stop. The door opened and facing us were the backs of many, many black and brown coats, as well as one pink face.

“Unfortunately, we cannot let you board, Comrade,” the pink face said glumly. “The bus is overburdened as is, and what’s more, you’re here with a child...” She herself had even plucked her eyebrows to fit better!

“That’s a sad state of affairs, indeed,” Pappy said, but his voice wasn’t sad at all—I thought it even sounded highly cheerful and upbeat. “Pretty young ladies just can’t imagine how unhappy a lonely grandmother will be when her granddaughter doesn’t make it to her birthday party...”

“Hmm,” the pink face murmured as the corners of her pale red lips rose. She then cast me a curious glance and called back towards the black and brown coats: “Comrade passengers, let’s try to squeeze in a little tighter! There’s a tiny bit more room in the back!”

“But we’re going to GrandPA’s birthday party,” I whispered to Pappy, tugging on his coat sleeve.

“Why did you say that GrandMA will be unhappy? I’m no Little Red Riding Hood!”

“Shh!” Pappy whispered back. “Who really cares about dads—moms are always the most important; people make adjustments for them! And the conductor on a bus is the same as a captain on a ship!”

“The conductor,” I repeated, memorizing the word. Mummy called those kinds of women “ticket girls”, but that didn’t sound half as fancy as the word conductor.

“Comrade passengers!” the pink-faced conductor shouted again. “Please make a little space, allow this granddaughter to get to her grandmother!”

The black and brown backs now pulled away from the bus doors a smidgen—just enough for the two of us to fit. It truly was a tight squeeze, and the scant air that could fit between the brown and black coats smelled of gasoline and damp clothes. The pink-faced conductor sat at a glinting metal bar. She wore a black beret with a silver pin, and hanging over her chest was a strange black patent-leather purse with white and light-blue ticket rolls dangling from it.

“A thousand thanks, miss Conductor!” Pappy said, handing the woman money. “One ticket to Jõgisoo, please!”

The conductor-woman deftly tore a slip from the ticket roll.

“Here you are, comrade passenger! I assume that comrade kid is under the age of five?”

Comrade kid?

That was really something: COMRADE KID! I didn’t hear what Pappy answered, nor did I pay any more

attention to what he and the conductor were saying: I repeated softly to myself: “Comrade kid! Comrade kid!”

Yes, that meant I was already close to being a grown-up! Not a “good kid” or a “bad kid”, but a comrade kid! Comrade kid was something much more impressive than “Leelo” or “lil’ one” or “kid”, or even “Emil Zátopek”!

I realized immediately: I didn’t want to become an athlete, a washerwoman, or a teacher—the only truly fascinating profession is a conductor’s! What could be more beautiful and exciting than sitting behind a glinting metal bar in a bus packed full of people, a purse with gleaming clasps and several rolls of tickets hanging over your chest, calling other people comrades!

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[pp 40–41]

This time, arriving at Grandma and Grandpa's house was different than usual. Mummy and I were ordinarily the first to go inside—Pappy always wanted to look over the yard and the apple trees first, and to chat with the dog if it was outside. Actually, he just wanted to make a "stylish and straight-backed entrance", as he himself would say: first of all, he would take his guitar out of its case in the entryway, and would then break out singing: "I give you my greetings, my birthday boy! I give you my greetings a thousand times more!" Everyone's faces would beam with happiness when Pappy came in, and the house was filled with music and good vibes.

This time, we'd forgotten the guitar at home, but Pappy hung around the front steps for a while, all the same. He lit a cigarette and said to me: "Wait here for just a minute, let me have a smoke."

Having taken a couple puffs off his cigarette, Papa tossed the butt into the gutter and said: "Alright! Fortune favors the brave—let's go in."

The faces of the women in the kitchen, who were forking meat from a pan onto a tray, brightened even without singing or strums on guitar strings. "Brother! You got here just in time," Aunt Liilia exclaimed cheerfully.

"And what a surprise it is that your family shows up right in time for dinner!" Aunt Anne huffed. "Take off your coats and let's sit down right away! But where's Mommy? Is she sick?"

Papa and I exchanged glances.

It was what it was—I had to confess my guilt.

"I was a bad girl and Mommy went away," I mumbled, trying to get my confession over with as fast as possible.

Aunt Liilia started laughing—her laugh sounds like someone shaking dried peas in a tin can.

"Oh, you two are quite the comedians!" she said, opening the entryway door. "Helmes, come inside! April Fool's Day is already over!"

For a moment, I felt like Mommy really might be hiding there in the entryway. But she wasn't. She wasn't by the front steps, either, which Aunt Liilia checked just in case.

"The thing is... our Mommy did go away for a little while," Papa said. "She went off with some strapping young Russian boys—who can resist them!"

"What are you jabbering about?!" Aunt Anne snapped angrily. "You, a couple of educated people, making silly jokes here!"

Papa was silent.

"That can't be right!" Aunt Liilia declared. "Helmes had the patience to wait for you the whole long war, and now this, so suddenly. Where'd the young man come from?"

"Kids don't lie," Papa said, smiling mournfully. "Yes, she left, between a couple of Russian riflemen—just like her own mother did two years back..."

For a few moments, the kitchen was blanketed by a silence so deep that I could hear the sound of the old clock hanging on the wall of Grandpa's office: ti-ick, to-ock, ti-ick-to-ock...

"Oh, my Lord!" Aunt Liilia gasped, set the tray down on the kitchen table, and collapsed onto a stool.

"Oh, my Lord—another new deportation!"

"It wasn't a deportation," Papa said, gulping.

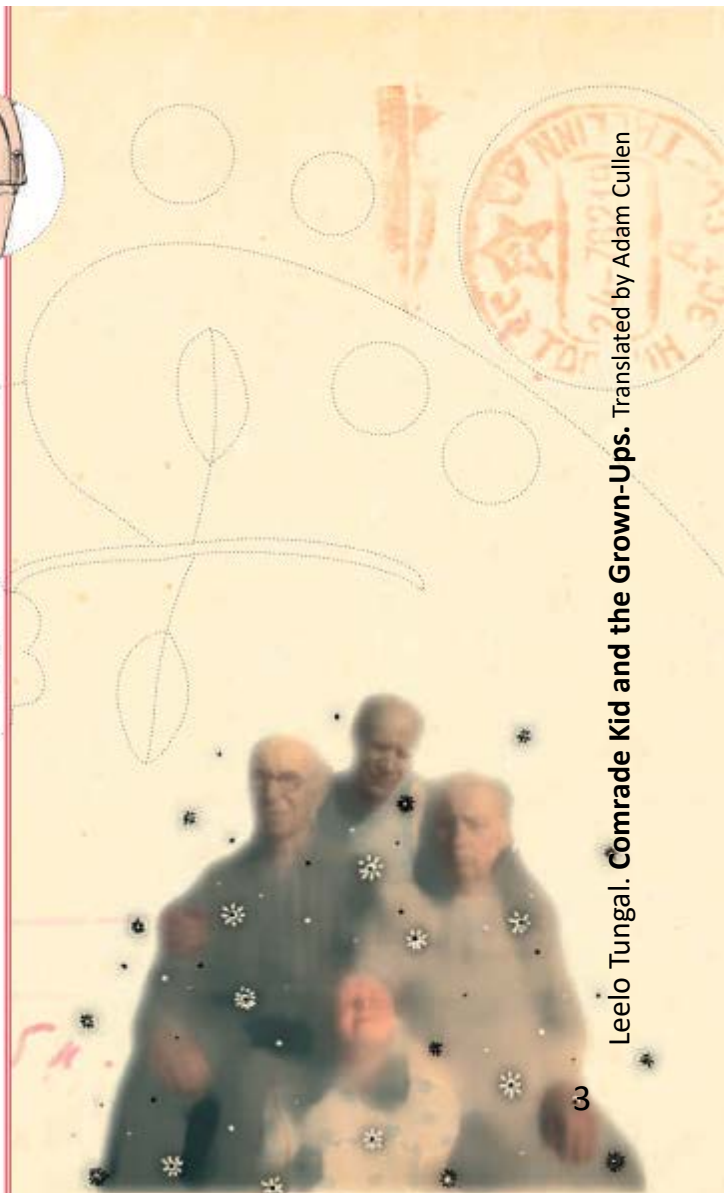
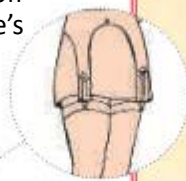
"She was arrested... The initial charge is treason against the homeland... Treason against our Soviet homeland."

"How can a schoolteacher commit treason against the homeland?" Aunt Liilia asked, shaking her head.

"Helmes didn't belong to any political parties when this was still the Estonian Republic; she wasn't involved in politics at all..."

Papa said quietly: "I suppose it must be because she taught kids the Estonian national anthem and took them singing at the monument to the Estonian War of Independence... We had a tricolor Estonian flag hidden between the sheets in the cabinet—they found that, too! Well, and on top of all that, the investigator said Helmes is the daughter of a kulak and the sister of an officer in the Estonian Army... He threatened that other accusations might surface in the preliminary investigation, too..."

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[pp 145–148]

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I worked up my courage and announced: “Mummy and Pappy aren’t home!” I was well aware that a good kid should greet a grown-up before saying anything else, but how can you possibly say hello to someone after a belittling question like that?!

The man wasn’t interested in my singing mood anymore – he walked into the living room without a glance in my direction or saying a single word. I scurried after him and shouted again: “Mummy and Pappy AREN’T home!”

“I know that already,” the man mumbled, pulling open a large desk drawer. “Mummy’s already where she should be; we’re just beginning to look into Pappy’s case.”

“You’re not allowed to take out Mummy and Pappy’s things!” I warned him, choking up. “Pappy should be coming home soon!”

“Now, where were those photo albums at?” the man murmured, paying no heed to my protests. He rummaged around through desk drawers for a while, then moved on. This time, he didn’t start dumping the contents out onto the floor—he walked straight over to the bookcase and threw open its bottom cupboard, as if reading my mind that I wouldn’t tell him the albums were there...

“You can’t do that!” I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t force a single word from my mouth. I knew too well that the man in black would overpower me—and it would have been strange to attack someone crouched down on the floor, flipping through Mummy and Pappy’s photo albums one after another, completely ignoring you, as if he’d misplaced something in between the pages.

“Aha!” the man exclaimed triumphantly when he opened Pappy’s sports album. “So here’s our dear Pappy marching under a tricolor Estonian flag! God damned bourgeoisie heel-licker!”

And just like that, he tore the picture out of the album.

“Mummy and Pappy don’t allow pulling out their things!” I cried as I witnessed the man rip even more pictures out of the album, leaving only whitish blotches of glue on the dark pages.

The man in black lifted his head and stared straight at me with his light-colored, beady eyes: “These, little miss, are no things, but evidence—vot!”

It took him more time to go through the album where Mummy was still young, because there were words written in white ink under every picture and the captions seemed to especially pique the man’s curiosity. “Oh-ho! Is that so! Uh-huh!” he mumbled to himself as he read the names of the people in the photos. “Well, would you look at what we have here—Ernst Idla’s gymnastics courses!”

The man ripped a photo from the album and waved it in front of my face: it showed a group

of women in exercise clothes jumping on the grass. Their faces were so tiny that there was no way I could pick Mummy out.

“Idla—it’s a well-known fact that he works for Swedish espionage!” the man in black cawed. “It turns out that little mummy of yours is a spy, to boot! This smells like another paragraph added to the charges!”

I certainly couldn’t smell anything in the living room apart from the reek of the man’s leather coat and tall boots, but now, I noticed he had gotten to a small album that was several shades of pink. “Our precious little pink-marbled album!” Mummy used to say whenever she started gluing photographs into it.

Be things as they may with the other pictures, the man in black’s hands weren’t allowed to touch THAT album! No—I’d rather die first!

I snatched the pink-marbled album from the floor before the man in black’s fingers could reach it, and ran into the kitchen.

“What the hell!” the man exclaimed, catching up to me in a few bounds. “Hey, give it here right now, you little bastard!”

Our dog Sirka, who would never hurt a fly, leapt at the man, snarling, and sunk her teeth into his coat sleeve. The man shook the dog off and kicked her so hard that she flew into the corner of the kitchen, where she lay whimpering.

Meanwhile, I dashed outside and without a second’s thought, I made a break for the school house. Where else could I go? I’d only pretended to be Zátópek and the man in black would have caught me in no time on the forest road, but at school, I’d at least have the hopes of hiding somewhere.

My soft slippers squelched in the puddles, but even without glancing behind me, I could tell that the man in black would have his hands upon me at any second.

The school house door opened up as I approached and—just at the right moment!—three men came out: Pappy, mister Artur, and “Bike-Ride” Jaan.

“Pappy, help!” I screamed with all my might. At the same instant, the man in black seized me by the shoulders and shook me so hard that I dropped little pink-marbled album. The man snatched it up and wiped the mud off the cover with his coat sleeve. I tried to get the album back, but the man shoved me so hard I was nearly knocked back onto my bottom.

“What is the meaning of this?” Pappy growled, suddenly at my side with his fists clenched. Both of his friends were also glaring at the man in black so angrily that he appeared to hesitate for a moment.

“Inspector Varik,” he said briskly and pointed to me. “This little squirt wanted to run off with evidence!”

“What, has the Russian KGB already started

torturing little kids, too?" "Bike-Ride" Jaan asked.

"You should be thanking me for not using my weapon to prevent the destruction of evidence!" the inspector said with a smirk. "I could have shot this little squirt on site and not one dog would've barked at it!"

I spread my arms wide and Pappy picked me up.

"Don't cry, lil' one," he soothed, which made the tears start streaming from my eyes—as if I hadn't even had the time to consider crying before.

"Don't let the man in black look at my album!" I hiccupped into Pappy's ear through my sobs. "You know what's in it! There are pictures where I'm totally naked... You can see my belly button and everything..."

But Inspector Varik had already flipped open the little pink-marbled album and was paging through it even more furiously than he had with Mummy and Pappy's photo albums.

"Leelo, 2 months... Leelo, 6 months... Leelo, 2 years..." he read aloud mockingly. The man inspected the album from cover to cover several times, as if the pictures might have changed in the meantime. But they all stayed the same: the first pages displayed those shameful pictures where I was laying bare naked on the checkered blanket that Mari wove, and in the last pictures, I was looking squarely into the camera, wearing a tassled hat and our local folk costume.

"What the hell?..." Inspector Varik spat and shook the little pink-marbled album in the air angrily—luckily, Mummy had glued all the pictures in carefully, so none of them fell out or landed in the mud.

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