

Kristiina, the Middle One

Text by Leelo Tungal
Illustrated by Kirke Kangro
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Age: 9+

Kristiina, the Middle One is a humorous story about a slightly eccentric family in the 1980s. The family includes a father, a mother, and three daughters: the schoolgirl Helen, 6-year-old Kristiina, and baby Imbi. They have a dog called Lassie, and often get visits from Grandma and Grandpa. Kristiina is a bubbly and enterprising girl, and her life is never boring: a bottle of ink breaks, so she smears it all over herself; she hangs her house key off with it; and she teaches the lifts at her music school how to beat out a rhythm. It's a family story filled with love, warmth, and funny situations!

The illustrator Kirke Kangro is Leelo Tungal's daughter, and coincidentally also the middle daughter of the family, which provided a wealth of inspiration for the book!

Award:
1992 Nukits Competition, 2nd place



Reading sample

The Old Baby

Some people are pampered and coddled starting from the moment they are born. Well, I, for one, would sure be embarrassed if I were bald and toothless and constantly wet my pants! But some people don't know how to do anything from birth—they have no idea they should be ashamed if they burp after eating, not to mention that they should apologize for it! Some people are made to be awful klutzes from the very get-go, but even so, they get more care than others...

I'm talking about my little sister, of course.

Oh, how we looked forward to her arrival! Mom knit and embroidered light blue doll-sized clothes every single evening, while Mee-maa ran from store to store and worked on fixing up the nursery. When Mom went to have the baby, Helen and I painted a smart-looking banner that read: "Hi, Kristjan!" Well, Mom originally planned on having a boy, but changed her mind at the last minute and had a girl. Who knows—maybe a boy would have been a little more reasonable, because Imbi herself is such a big bundle of trouble and is basically good for nothing.

I used to stare at babies lying in their strollers outside stores and think: How wonderful it'd be to get a brother or sister like that, too! But now, I know that although those infants, with their little woolen caps and bright-colored pacifiers, might appear clean and polite on the surface, half of them have definitely wet their pants, and after they eat, all of them go: burp! or brraapppp!

Mee-maa was right when she said that kids used to be better in the olden days—today's aren't much to look at. This baby has been around for several weeks already, but there are no signs of improvement. I told Mom flat out that keeping Imbi indoors isn't worth the trouble: we might as well get a puppy, instead. Klaarika's dog Pennu learned how to sit and how to beg in just a couple of weeks, and the sounds he makes are much nicer, too—indefinitely calmer than our baby's. And Klaarika's dog is even a mutt! Still, Mom just laughed and gave me a hug. I can't wrap my head around where this little spectacle came from: lately, all anyone does is sooth and hush that little screecher, while other normal people are ignored entirely...

Mom told me today is Imbi's birthday, and that if I promise not to eat the flour, then I could help her make the cake batter. I wonder why they even make flour, when you're not allowed to eat it? There's not a cake in the world as good as pure flour, in my mind: sometimes, cake-making is just a waste of

flour, plain and simple! I reckon that when I grow up, I'll be a baker, and will only make the kinds of cakes that have a good flour taste to them.

Well, I naturally promised Mom that I wouldn't eat the flour, and I kept my word, too—I only tasted a teensy-weensy bit, and hid half a handful between the pages of a cookbook so it'd be easy to get to when Helen came home from school. Helen is my real, genuine sister: she has a ponytail and a backpack and a school uniform. She is in second grade and is almost two years older than me. You can tell that we're proper sisters simply from the fact that Helen also loves to eat flour.

Mom and I mixed the cake batter, and she had already put it in the oven to bake when, suddenly, I realized all that talk about Imbi's birthday couldn't be right! She had been brought home just before New Year's, and it was already her birthday?! Me, Helen, Dad, Mom—all proper people have a birthday once a year, but our infant was still brand new. Maybe Mom had made a mistake?

Mom took one cake candle and one candleholder out of the kitchen cupboard, so someone's one-year birthday must have been coming up...

Then, the baby started crying, so we went to check on her. You can't say she isn't clever in her own special way: as soon as Mom picked her up, she quit her hollering in a split second! I inspected Imbi as Mom changed her diaper: the so-called sister of mine didn't actually look very young; just like she'd quit growing. She even had some chubby rolls by her knees and wrists—maybe she really was a year old already? But where was she before, then?

"Mom, did you bring us somebody else's old kid?" I asked.

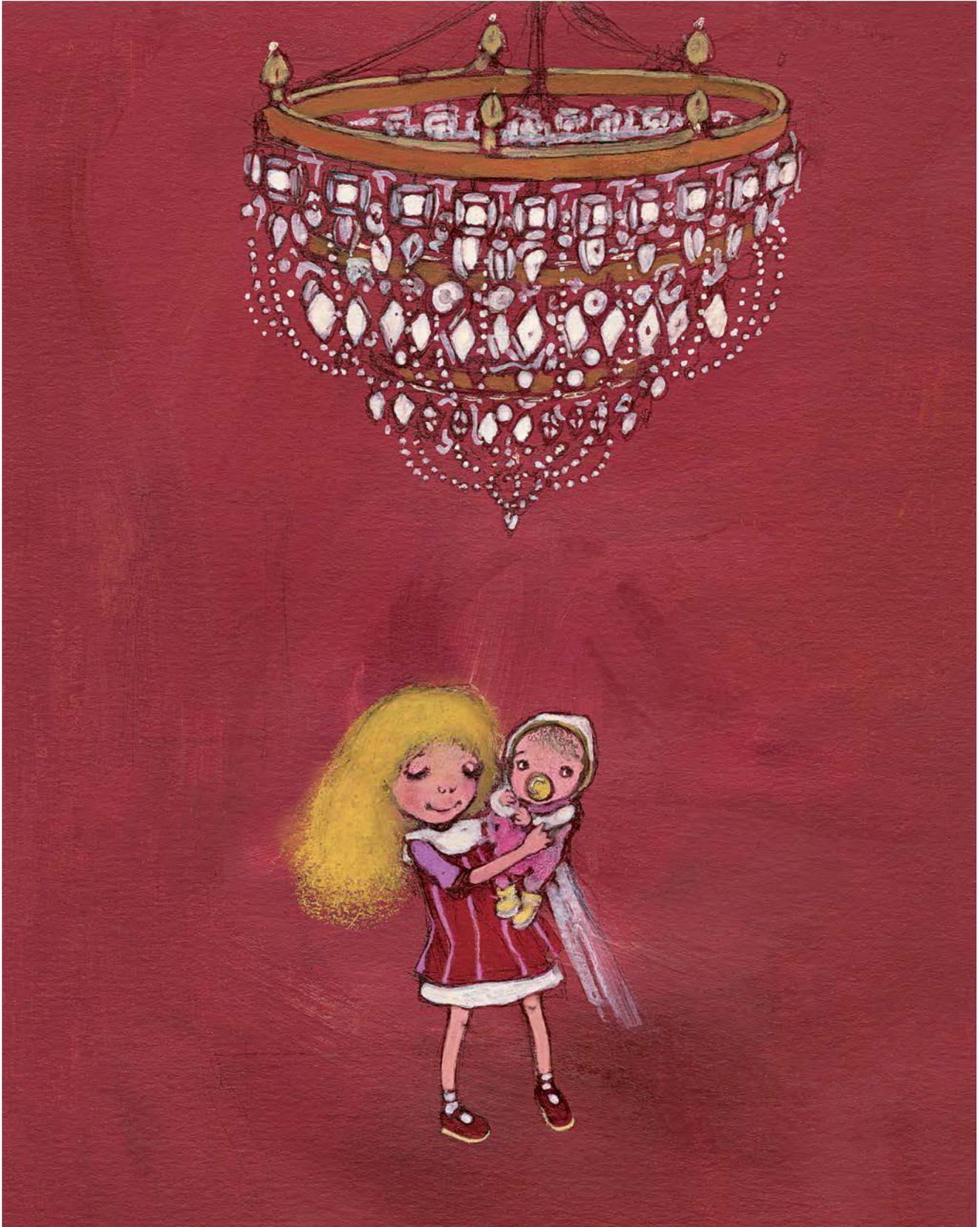
Mom's eyes widened: "What do you mean, 'old'?"

"Well, I mean, if she's turning a year old today already? And she's got rolls all over, and..."

Mom smiled. "Our little Imbi is turning one month old today. And we have rolls because we eat well."

Well, it sure was a fact that Mom ate well, but when she talked like that, with her lips pursed and her tongue loose, it meant she was speaking for Imbi. It was so weird and unfair, in my opinion! You throw a birthday party for a ham-handed one-month-old, and you act as her mouthpiece, to boot!

When Dad came home from work, he asked: "So, how are you all doing here?" Mom replied: "Just



Leelo Tungal. Kristina, the Middle One. Translated by Adam Cullen

fine! We had a nice little meal, took a nap just like we're supposed to, and wet six pairs of pants."

I was mortified: it sounded just as if Mom and I had also...

"I certainly didn't, in any case," I said to Dad. "And Helen didn't, either!"

"So, it seems like Imbi and Mom got into trouble all on their own," Dad chuckled. "It smells so nicely of cake here—what do you say we sit down at the table?"

We set the table in the living room for Imbi's birthday. Helen was nowhere to be seen, and when I went to go get her, I got my hair pulled.

"Get out of here! I don't want to see you ever again!" my older sister hissed at me for no good reason.

I knew very well that although Helen and I share a room, I'm not allowed to interrupt her when she's studying. But how can you call stretching out in bed with your textbooks lying on the floor at the foot of it "studying"?

So, that was the thanks I got for pinching Helen some flour! Lately, you didn't hear a single word of gratitude in this house anymore! Helen could at least have thanked me for prettying up her colorless, boring highway picture! A life like this made you want to break down into tears.

Helen finally showed up when the table was ready. I vowed that I would never speak to her for the rest of my life, or even longer. Serves her right!

Mom told us: "Kids, eat your cake!" but I wasn't hungry at all. Helen sat at the other end of the table, making nasty faces at me and not eating, either.

"Did you two get into a fight?" Dad asked.

Mom felt both my and Helen's foreheads, and said: "No, neither of them have a fever. So, what's wrong?"

"Kristiina's an idiot," Helen sputtered. "She scribbled all over my picture and... and you've got to go to school tomorrow, Mom. My teacher Mrs. Lepik said so."

"Well, well, wild thing!" Dad exclaimed. "So, what have you gone and done there?"

"I told you: Kristiina doodled all over my notebook!"

Helen sobbed. "She made an awful dumpling on my per-spec-tive drawing."

A dumpling?! I can't even draw a dumpling! And I don't know a single person who would go and voluntarily draw a dumpling when the world has dogs, suns, heads, dresses, and other pretty things that are a downright joy to draw! But, of course: whenever anything happened in this house, I was always the one to blame!

Dad told Helen to show him her drawing notebook and her class record.

Good heavens! It turned out that what Helen had called a dumpling was the pretty puppy I had drawn on her boring highway picture with a felt-tip pen! I hadn't forgotten that when Helen's watercolor painting dried, she sighed: "My picture turned out awfully boring!", and that while she was taking a bath, I made the picture more interesting. The dog on the highway certainly looked a little like a sheep in the end, but next to it, I wrote who he was and why the poor 'creature had crooked legs. It came out as such a pretty picture!

Mom and Dad looked at Helen's notebook, and burst out laughing.

"Dog is yung hes legs wont hold hem," Mom read. "It sure is Kristiina's doing!"

"Mm-hmm," I admitted honestly. "Except what I wrote was: dog is young, his legs won't hold him."

"What's wrong with you?! Why are you laughing?!" Helen yelled through her tears. "Everybody else has normal sisters or brothers, but both of mine are the worst there can be."

"Hold on," Dad said, "why has yesterday's A in your class record been changed to a C? And in red pen?"

Helen flushed. She looked away and was silent.

"Natural sciences: cattle and swine," Dad read. "Tell me, please, what's wrong with these cattle and swine, then?"

"Nothing's wrong with them," Helen whispered. "Well, actually, Maiu and I both got Cs for cattle and swine yesterday. And Maiu said she sure didn't want to get spanked because of some puny little pig. And she said we should make our C an A, because otherwise her father would spank her at home..."

"Maiu said this, Maiu said that," Dad mocked her. "But what did you say?"

"I said I'd get spanked, too..."

“Honey!” Mom exclaimed. “When have you ever been spanked? Why did you say that?”

“Well, I was ashamed that...” Helen said, sniffing.

Dad spread his arms. “You were ashamed that you don’t get spanked? Well, I’m just speechless! You really should be given a sore bottom for doing that! Shame on you, Helen! You’ve turned into a liar!”

Helen started crying and Mom said: “What’s there to cry about, now? I suppose I’ll have to go call Mee-maa and have her come babysit tomorrow. How else can I go to the school?”

“Mee-maa might have some kind of e-vent going on again,” Dad reckoned.

“I’m sure I’ll talk her into it,” Mom said. “I’ll go right out and give her a call, otherwise it’ll get too late. Dad, you go see how things are with those cattle and swine of Helen’s meanwhile. Kristiina will look after Imbi.”

Dad blew out the candle on the cake and went to go study with Helen. I stared at my dog on Helen’s picture: what was so bad about him, anyway? The teacher had drawn a big red hook at the bottom of the picture, which probably meant that not even a very young dog would have such crooked legs... So what: Imbi’s legs were pretty crooked, too, but no one shamed her for it!

Imbi was gurgling softly in her crib: her pacifier had fallen out. I stared at the miserable little bald-headed babe: she sure wasn’t cute, but maybe she had a good heart? Suddenly, I remembered that Imbi herself hadn’t gotten to eat her birthday cake or drink any Fanta—she wasn’t even brought out to the birthday party! I picked her up and showed her the table where her birthday had been celebrated. I wanted to show Imbi our room, too, but I didn’t dare go in, because I could hear Dad’s ornery voice coming through the closed door, saying: “Get it in your head: a bull is a cow’s husband, and they’re both cattle. A bull is a male ox and a cow is a female bull... Oops, I mean a bull is a male ox and a cow is a female ox, do you get it? Where have you been raised!”

“You’ll be learning that in second grade, too,” I told Imbi, and took her back to her crib. Imbi spat out her pacifier and started whining again. I fetched a pinch of flour from the kitchen and stuck it in her mouth. As I did, I thought: “If she spits the flour out now, then she’s definitely not my sister! If she does, she really must be someone else’s old, used baby!”

She ate it up, and even licked her lips clean.