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Die Meisen von Uusimaa singen nicht mehr

The Uusimaa Chickadees No Longer Sing

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GREY-HEADED CHICKADEES

I

He stood behind the projector in what they called the cubbyhole, the projection cabin of the small cinema in the institute basement. It was the middle of the night, and he was alone. Dust on the instruments, the smell of dried beer and a focused light that warmed his hand, when he raised it against the beam, like a fire. He had no idea of what he was doing here, and as the clattering set in he was gripped by excitement, like someone in the nineteenth-century seeing a film for the first time.

They had sent him to the archive to scan a rare reel of film; that was why he was here. But because he was unfamiliar with the digitalization process and afraid of making a mistake, he tried his luck as a projectionist to begin with.

The original negative was lost; the reel he had loaded was faded and grainy, a copy of a copy that was also unlocatable. The sound was poor as well; it sounded dull, as if the cramped space were pressing on his ears. Through the window, which was as small as a ship's porthole, he had a view of the empty cinema, ten rows lit up by the screen. A film by Susanne Sandler was running, *The Uusimaa Chickadees No Longer Sing*. It was the only nature film she'd ever made.

The film began with a pan along wall panels made of green-glazed wood. Instead of an opening with aerial shots of coastlines and calving glaciers, as was standard practice in nature documentaries, the camera followed the grain of the boards. Out of fissures, rings and veins grew a lakescape. A creaking and scraping, the sound of blows against a heating pipe.

A close-up of a face, subtitles appeared: 'Aulis Lindros, captain of the icebreaker Northland Star.' A voiceover set in. It was Susanne Sandler; she asked the captain to read. Aulis Lindros lowered his eyes, a book lay open before him, and he began.

'Dry ice has greater frictional resistance against steel than steel on steel.'

The text that the Finnish captain read aloud was about the characteristics of the ice in the Bothnian Sea, where the Northland Star operated. In the low-salinity Baltic Sea, he read, the ice has a hard and brittle consistency, 'a danger for the icebreaker'.

He wondered whether the Finnish man understood the German words. The sentences he read aloud were mainly rhythm and melody:

'In the Bothnian Sea nowadays
ice-ploughs are used,
named Alexbow ice-ploughs
after the Canadian Scott Alexander.
A dual-plough ram
on the stem of the ship
tears open the ice sheet
and pushes the moving pieces
sideways onto the ice.'

'And the grey-headed chickadee?' Susanne Sendler interrupted, the camera still trained on the captain. Aulis Lindros frowned as though trying to remember something a long time ago, and pursed his lips: 'Dju – dju – dju – dju – dju.'

Later: a thicket of deciduous trees and shrubs, a forest that looked Nordic and tropical at once, where ferns with their expansive fronds appeared like palms and birches in mourning dress with their drooping branches were reminiscent of leafy jungle vines, through which the light of the sun flashed in star-shaped rays. Small birds fluttered through the leaves; they were the grey-headed chickadees to which Susanne Sendler had dedicated her film, and their wingbeats combined to form a sound as loud as a roar of applause. Only one thing was missing – there was no song; the chickadees weren't singing.

In the next shot: choir practice at the ornithological station. The singers stood in a row behind a woman in a pale summer dress. The choir consisted of not even ten people, and yet the voices sounded as full as though there were hundreds of them singing. To finish off, in the Oulu nursing home, the evacuated islanders' memories of their former home, which they'd had to leave after the grey-headed chickadees stopped singing.

Never before had he seen a film so clearly determined by its author's approach. *Who am I?* and *What is my relationship to the time in which I live?* Every shot raised these questions. Susanne Sendler treated reality with creativity. She didn't chase after it; she made a new reality. He had never seen anything similar in any other film. *Truth, fate, documentary reality* – all terms his fellow students cited when they were spouting defences for their theses of a world – she cracked them open, shattered them. From now on, he wanted to make films only like this.

A brief howl from the projector, followed by vibrations. He put his hand on the fan and felt the heat beneath the casing. He listened. The projector was working, *Trr Trr Trr*. Everything seems fine, he thought.

He tried to follow the rotations inside the projector mechanism and watched the ribbon of film building up layer after layer around the take-up spindle. He could see every picture; that was the material. He grasped how fundamental Susanne Sendler's decision was to use film. He could stop the projector and take out the film. He could run his fingers along the perforations on the edge of it and breathe in its specific smell. This was the reality to which a filmmaker had to be true. It was all about the material.

The digital cameras now popular among his fellow students produced pictures that claimed to come close to the feel of analogue film, by mathematically imitating its softness and chromatics. A trick, a lie that the film students fell for. They leapt at the new camera technology, wolfed down indiscriminately everything that passed in front of their lenses and hoarded the images on their hard drives, which were virtual rubbish dumps of pixelated memories, memories in the imitated reds of Technicolor.

What they didn't consider was: to create a digital image, the recorded object has to be hacked to pieces and ultimately wiped out, *a massacre of the world*. The analogue image, however, was nothing more than a politely taken imprint, *light captured by dust and chemicals*. The film he was watching was about birds; they played the leading roles. Yet Susanne Sendler couldn't have asked the chickadees for permission. Wasn't it only decent of her to use film?

Like most of Susanne Sendler's work, *The Uusimaa Chickadees No Longer Sing* didn't fill the entire length of the reel. After the credits he lifted the spool from the take-up spindle, carried it to the rewind bench and wound back the film. He put the rolled celluloid back into the projector mechanism and the film began over again.

He noticed the chalk clouds on the filmmaker's fingernails, spotted the reflection of a microphone boom in the dark violet of a puddle, and saw the spittle threads breaking in the captain's mouth as he spoke the first word.

For the tenth time, the institute logo appeared at the end of the credits, then the film snarled up. Perhaps it had torn on the film path or in the picture gate. They'd warned him about that, he remembered, in the introductory seminar. The motion is halted, a rip occurs, a new jump, the motion sets in again, halted again, and then the fan cuts out; these things happened. He stopped the machine and crumpled the damaged material into the fireproof cabinet.

No one had seen him entering the institute that night, no one knew he was the last person to watch Susanne Sendler's only nature film, that it was he who had destroyed the only copy. Tomorrow he would ask about the *Uusimaa Chickadees*, put a search enquiry on the database. Sometimes films disappeared; these things happened.

II

The plane flew into a bank of clouds. Outside the window, absolute darkness in the middle of clouds, a gloom that swallowed up everything but the signal light. He wouldn't

reach Uusimaa, the island in the Bothnian Sea, until around midnight. He was tired and he wanted to sleep.

The upholstery of the headrest smelled of unwashed hair and the pane of the oval window was also punctuated by greasy smears. Bent forwards, his forehead leaning against the tray on the seat in front, he sat for a while and waited for sleep, until a vibration set in that expanded and soon engulfed the folding table. Near to the cockpit, behind the curtain of night-blue cotton with its deep folds that didn't move, the vibration might only be weak. The steward and stewardess waiting on folding seats for the plane to reach cruising altitude perhaps only felt it as a slight tremble. But above the wings where he was sitting, it was more of a quake. Now the signal lamp had gone out as well.

'Earth shaking,' his daughter Elaine had said when a heavy goods transport drove tubular towers and rotor blades for new wind power stations along their road, Rue Antoine Dansaert in the Quartier de la Senne in Brussels. That day the doors of the kitchen cupboard had come open and crockery had smashed. Marta had stepped on a shard, but what was that compared to the force he felt acting on his seat now.

He heard a dull thud from the overhead locker, his hard suitcase bumping against the door. In it were his camera, the lenses and the sound recording device. Soon the oxygen masks would fall down and the woman pilot would come on over the loudspeakers: 'Brace, brace!' Screams, explosions, smoke. They would crash, and he would be the only one of nine passengers and a four-person crew, the only one of thirteen people on board to die – an unlucky number – because he was sitting above the wings.

He hadn't wanted to sit next to anyone, so he'd chosen a seat in the middle of the plane, far away from the exits. Several rows ahead of him he saw two Finnish civil servants, both women; he could smell the sweet perfume of their shampoo. All the others, though, were in the front and back rows of seats, where it was statistically safest on one of the last scheduled flights from Brussels to Helsinki.

He had encountered the two women in the aisle on his way in. They had rammed their wheeled cases into his heels as they argued. He had turned up at Brussels Airport far too early that afternoon because he had luggage to check in. But apart from a queue at the desk of a South American airline and the crew of a Congolese flight, grouped around a game of draughts in a still operating ice cream café, he found the airport almost abandoned, populated only by the security staff who guarded the hangar entrances and baggage carousels, the barricaded row of shops and the toilets.

He straightened his back and pressed his shoulder blades against the seat. A gap emerged between his buttocks and the backrest. His shirt, plastered to his body with sweat, came loose and he felt the cold of a draught. That shampoo scent. It smelled of birch trees. He leaned forward and watched the Finnish civil servants more closely. One of the women had her hair shaved at the nape, grey skin shimmering through her short hair. Her friend had a thick plait. That scent of a Scandinavian summer would be his last pleasant sensory impression, he thought. Soon enough the stink of smoke, smouldering plastic and worse. The image of the plane crashing was so clear and vivid that he had to put some effort into

thinking of something else.

Uusimaa's grey-headed chickadees were singing again. Twenty-one years ago their breeding areas had fallen silent. From 1996 to 2017, not one single chickadee tweeted on the island in the Bothnian Sea. The muting happened solely on Uusimaa and in no other place in the habitat of the north Eurasian bird, from northern Russia to Alaska. Not on the Norwegian Lofoten archipelago, which was shot at by NATO torpedoes, nor on the radioactively contaminated Kola peninsula, where Soviet scientists had opened up hell in their attempt to drill the earth's deepest hole, and nor in the Yenisei estuary not far from the industrial megacity Norilsk, the northernmost city in the world, which was at the top of the list of Russia's most polluted cities. Only on Uusimaa, the beautiful pure island in the Bothnian Sea, did the birds give up singing. Just as inconspicuous as the grey-headed chickadee's plumage, the blurred markings on the brown head, the dirty white belly, was its simple song. It was based on a single sound, a stretched and rapidly repeated *dju*. Yet when it died out, it also meant the end for Uusimaa. There were calls for tougher conservation laws; the blame was laid on humans. Still, no explanation was found for the birds' silence, and the news of it spread like an eschatological prophecy. Research institutes commissioned studies, theories were circulated, conjecture and rumours, but what was most tenacious was the belief in an approaching end of the world. Disaster would strike beginning from Uusimaa, and soon the entire Bothnian coastline from Oulu to Tornio on the Swedish-Finnish border was thought of as cursed. Even catching and ringing, cataloguing and observing ten generations of birds did nothing to break the spell. For twenty-one years, the directional microphones installed in every nook of the island recorded nothing but the screaming of gulls and the Bothnian waves – until this February. After a long period of silence, they suddenly recorded the first sounds, the first sounds after all the years.

The ice was breaking on the way to Uusimaa. The next day would be seven minutes longer than this day, soon the day and night would be equally long, and the grey-headed chickadees would mate. Chickadee chirrups, deafening. The first spring wind of the year would carry the sounds across the forbidden zone, across the roofs of the abandoned summer houses and the tips of the ancient apple trees.