

Commentary and translation by Jill Graham Timbers

The *Order* (Käsky, WSOY 2003) is set in 1918, right after the end of the brutal Finnish civil war that resulted in the deaths of some 30,000 Finns, most by summary execution or in detention camps. Much of the novel takes place in an island detention camp where a military judge tries to determine what happened between a prisoner and her captor during eight days they were lost. In context, the disturbing passage excerpted here appears to lie outside the main story line and serve as background to illustrate the mood of the period. This chapter about a family that has lost a son and acquired a war orphan stands on its own. Only at the end of the book does the reader discover how young Eino is actually threaded throughout the whole novel. This excerpt presents a painful dramatization of the psychological destruction of war, and its impact, which lingers long after weapons have been set aside. The full book is beautifully written and very timely, dealing with questions of conscience and duty, truth, memory and perception. The novel was a finalist for the prestigious Finlandia Award, has appeared in six languages already, and is now being filmed in Finland.

Frans wakens Eino gently, almost tenderly. He strokes the blond hair, damp with perspiration at the nape; he lifts the child's round hand from the pillow and encloses it in his own. The act has an apologetic tone, as if he would a thousand times rather let the child rest in the bed where he is pressed tight against his boy-uncle Samuel.

"Mama complains that nowadays we never get to go anywhere," Frans says in a voice of regret. "Like Osku's burial. Got all upset they wouldn't allow a farewell ceremony for the boy. She's sensitive, that mama of ours. Thinks we should be able to celebrate the deceased hero the way the better families do. I'm thinking it's high time to correct that mistake. Dress warm -- and you, too, Samu -- it's bitter out there..."

The boys do not ask anything. Risto is already awake. Saara-Maria, Mama, nervously dresses little Vieno in her town coat. She herself is wearing a flowered everyday dress and a sweater.

"What marvelous idea is this supposed to be, now," she mutters, but nonetheless does what she's told.

Calmly Frans steers his band outdoors, pilots the four children and his wife along the moonlit path, warns them of unexpected holes and thickets.

At the gate he turns and inspects them with a hint of dissatisfaction.

"Why the sour faces. Hey kids, this is fun, dammit, a family outing. Just look -- Mama has food along, too. I'm the one who fixed it. Samu, you take the basket, Mama has enough to carry with Vieno."

He himself has a spade. He carries it lightly over his shoulder as if he were on his way to a day of work.

"Gotta have a picnic along," Frans goes on jovially. "Wouldn't seem like a party otherwise."

What an unreal but tender scene, the family out on a nighttime adventure, a faint hint of summer in the raw chill air. The ground has thawed. Mist over the meadow. The scent of earth and budding trees blends with the smell rising from the beach of dis-

carded fish remains, brown algae and open water. Though the skyline is still dark, even in its darkness it is translucent, readying for daybreak. Soon the first sounds of oars will be heard as boats slide away from the shore.

But not yet. At this moment the excursion leader has stopped his band at the edge of the meadow.

"Troops, halt! At ease. Basket open! Eat!"

In disbelief the children gape at the bread, herring, eggs, potatoes. The food is tossed in a jumble at the bottom of the basket. Eino looks inquiringly at Samuel, who gives a furtive shake of his head.

"Why'd you have to toss them in all on top of each other like that?" the mother asks. "You should have waked me, I would have... What will we eat tomorrow? And the day after?"

"Seems women can always find something to complain about. Our sort is only good for working our ass off in a wet shirt. Just try to organize something, and the endless grumbling begins."

"These days it's guzzling liquor that gets your shirt wet. Let's eat now so we can get back to bed."

"Exactly. Stuff it in. Stuff yourselves till you burst!" Frans commands. He starts to laugh in delight at the children's disbelief and his own generosity. "Take more, take more, there'll be no grumbling about being hungry this night."

And so they eat. Since Pa Frans says so. Food clings to their hands, spills down their fronts, gets stuck in the smaller ones' cheeks. It makes one big mess, but it sure tastes good.

Frans himself does not eat. He has struck his spade into the ground, he's digging furiously.

Eino looks at Saara-Maria, who is sitting silently. He swallows his bread and moves next to her.

Frans stops digging at about the same time the basket is empty. A change has come over him. He is no longer the same gentle man that led his brood on this outing. No. This man, a commander, is waging war, a reckless war against an unsuspecting but insuperable enemy. A person at war against invisible demons. The

last war of a desperate fighter armed only with a spade.

“Eikka can take over. It doesn’t take smarts, just strength. And a bit of willingness. I hope it’s not too much to ask of the gentleman. Or is it?”

“No,” Eino answers.

“No what?”

“No, Grampa.”

“What grandpa am I to you?”

Eino is silent. He doesn’t know what to answer.

“Am I your grandpa, you bastard?”

“Yes.”

“You saying I look like your grandpa?”

Silence.

“So why is it then that you make me think of a goddam tinker rather than of Frans or Oskari Rapola?”

Frans laughs hollowly. Digs a bottle from his pocket and has a swig.

“I’ll give you a little tip. Just a tiny one. Could the current situation, me here supporting a kid who’s not even family, perhaps be due to the fact your mother’s interest in men was – how shall I put it – rather wide-ranging?”

Eino stands silently. Head bent. He understands that Pa Frans expects some sort of admission from him.

“My god what a bungler. Think you can figure out a use for that spade, kid?”

“Can I dig?” Samuel asks.

“Absolutely not,” Frans barks. “I want to see if the boy’s got any man in him. Since his mother is what she is...”

“Stop it now, Frans,” Saara-Maria orders sharply.

“I’m just telling a few truths about that woman.”

“You’ve already made enough noise about her. Same stories every time you’ve been to visit Einari Koski. Don’t you believe a word of it, little Eikka!”

Eino shakes his head. He tries striking the spade into the ground. It makes a small notch. He strikes again.

“Put your foot on it,” whispers the boy-uncle Samuel.

“I don’t understand this nonsense,” says Saara-Maria. “Making children dig holes in the middle of the night. Might think instead about what I’ll fill the oven with tomorrow.”

“Just stuff your head in it,” says Frans, and bursts into a laugh.

Overcome with his own wit, the man sits chuckling on the rock. “Yes, just stuff your head in it.”

“Drink your liquor now,” the mother sighs, “so we can move on.”

Frans takes a swig, then concentrates on glowering at Eino’s efforts. “Try to hustle a bit, boy. We don’t want to screw around with one grave all night here.”

“Grave? Just what exactly do you have in mind?” Saara-Maria asks.

“What I can do,” the man says. “You might show a little gratitude for once, woman. Many would bury a bunch like this in dried-out lake beds. But I reserved a strip of the best meadow for you all...”

“We’re going home right now,” Saara-Maria says, seizing the spade from Eino. Frans shoves her away.

“Women,” he says. “No gratitude. Nor backbone. A guy does everything he can to at least give the spawn a proper sendoff, when it looks like even this suffering is going nowhere, but the bitch just yaps on. You’re the one who’s been sneaking around coddling that one, even though because of him the shop doors are shut to us. Jaegers and other butchers tug at the porch door till even the animals get nervous. I can’t drag you behind me any longer. Waiting for them to escort me to the edge of the pit. Eventually there’s got to be room in your stupid skulls to...”

Eino has stopped digging. He tries to move near Mama. But Frans steps between them.

“Dig, boy! Dig! A man doesn’t whine over each new turn, dammit. I guarantee your father Oskar Fridolf Rapola didn’t whine when the order came. For godssake, have you gone and pissed your

pants now, too?"

"Stop it, Frans!"

"To the contrary. I am just getting started. Due to the lack of a pastor, I believe I as the father may speak a few words on this occasion: I just mentioned my son Oskari. He died in his prime, as the cliché goes. And so one asks: Why? I would venture, if I am permitted an opinion on the death of my firstborn, that his early departure without burial formalities was due to the fact that for months already his efforts to build an independent Finland had been unacceptably feeble. Or not necessarily feeble, but seen from the point of view of the government, downright fucked up. My son Oskari, you see, imagined himself a great socialist. But boys, I'm telling you straight, in that revolution business he stuck his hands right into shit. And why this came to pass, it came to pass for solely and exclusively one reason. The reason behind all stupidities of men. You do know the answer?"

Frans takes a hearty slug from the bottle. The children nod their heads obediently.

"Pussy."

Frans pauses a moment, to give the announcement the weight it deserves.

"Get that into your heads. Your brother and the so-called father of this boy Eino perished solely and exclusively because of pussy. Don't misunderstand me, now: pursuit of the joy-box is an understandable thing. Understandable and healthy and even desirable activity for a young man. But Oskari Rapola lusted so hard for the treasure of a certain female named Martta that he was willing to toss aside all his masculine judgment. And what happened? Contrary to what we have been led to believe, it is not blessed to be poor in spirit. Not in Oskari's case, at any rate. He died. And he was buried. But not the way a man is buried. He was covered over like a dog. Without a pastor. Without a funeral service. I'm tempted to add, and I will add, without coming to his senses. Period. The end. And the bitch hot-footed it down the road. Without even a thought for her own child. This bungler here who isn't even fit to dig a hole.

That tells me there's damn well no Rapola blood flowing through him, but even so he's driven the whole bunch of us to the brink of starvation. So dig, brat, dig, so all of you can be freed from the suffering."

"It's us this grave is being dug for?" Saara-Maria asks in disbelief.

"You can stay around, but I'm not going to look at those miserable brats any longer. Precisely."

Samuel suddenly snatches the spade from Eino, whose muddy fists have mottled his face with smudges. Samuel does not resume digging but rather holds the spade in front of him, hands apart like on the balance beam at school.

"And what does this hero suppose he's doing, if I dare ask? Hunh?"

Samuel's face is bright red, his chin thrust out defiantly, his mouth a tight line.

Vieno clings to her mother's side.

"What did Daddy say?" she asks. "Is that hole for us? Why is there a hole for us?"

"God in heaven..."

"Daddy's not going to bury us!" Vieno shrieks in her clear child's voice.

A flock of wild ducks takes flight from the rushes. The air is filled with their frightened cries.

"What did you say, girl?"

Vieno stares at him.

"Daddy's not going to bury us!" she repeats and points with her small finger at the birds soaring in the sky. She starts to laugh, her high-pitched laugh mixed with sobs competing with the cries of the ducks. Frans bends over and sweeps the girl up in his arms. He raises Vieno over his head, his arms straight, and spins around, laughing, too, till he almost trips over a tree stump.

"Put the girl down! This minute!"

Saara-Maria stands before Frans, holding a bread knife at her throat.

“I’ll cut here if she is not on this ground this instant.”

Surprised, Frans stands still, arms straight.

“Now what is Mama...?”

Saara-Maria presses the blade deeper into her neck. A bright drop of blood seeps from under the blade. Frans puts down the girl.

“What’s the matter with you, woman?” he asks. “Take it easy.”

He glances sideways at the children.

“Mama is tired. Now you can see for yourselves how exhausted Mama is. So hard she works because of you. No one else has a Mama like this, you’d better know it. Sit a minute, my darling. Rest a little.”

Saara-Maria shakes her head. The bun which is always so carefully pinned is loosening behind one ear.

“Yes, I am tired. Dreadfully tired. But not because of the children. It’s because I can’t take it any more with you. You are deranged. Mad. I can’t stand it any more.”

Frans reaches out his hand for the knife. Saara-Maria backs away. The trickle of blood soaks into the folds of her sweater.

“Admit it.”

“What?”

“Admit you’re crazy.”

“Darling, my own dear wife...”

“No. I don’t want to hear it.”

“But...”

“Do you admit it?”

“Okay. Okay. If that’s what you want. I admit it.”

“You admit what?”

“I admit that I’m crazy.”

Saara-Maria eyes him as if through a thick fog. At last she lowers the knife.

“Now home, every one of you.”

The man takes Vieno’s hand into his own.

“Not Vieno. Daddy’s girl. The only one of all you block-heads with even a little sense of humor.”

Frans collapses onto the ground to sit. He raises the empty bottle in vain. Disappointed, he throws it away. His eyes tear up.

Eino looks at the weeping man in astonishment. He has never seen Pa cry, not when the news of Oskari’s death came, not even because the liquor was used up.

“It’s Star we’re burying here,” Frans says, bawling out loud. “But how on earth do you dig a hole for a horse in this frozen ground? Died of a broken heart. Horses are like that. Gave up waiting for Oskari. Since he’s not coming anyway.”

By now tears are streaming from Frans’s face onto his neck, a trickle of snot from his runny nose glistens.

“And soon the same fate will face us all. We’ll fall over dead one after the other now that we have been labeled lepers and they don’t even let us eat any more. Is that what we are supposed to sit here waiting for? Oskari’s not coming no matter what you do. That’s how it is, waiting for the dead.”

He wipes his nose with his sleeve and his eyes with his hands.

“It’s hard enough for people, but for an innocent animal that’s never done anything bad to anyone, it has to be pure hell.”

Saara-Maria detaches Vieno’s hand from Frans’s grip and clasps the child to her. The other children follow Mama, as she hastily leads them away.