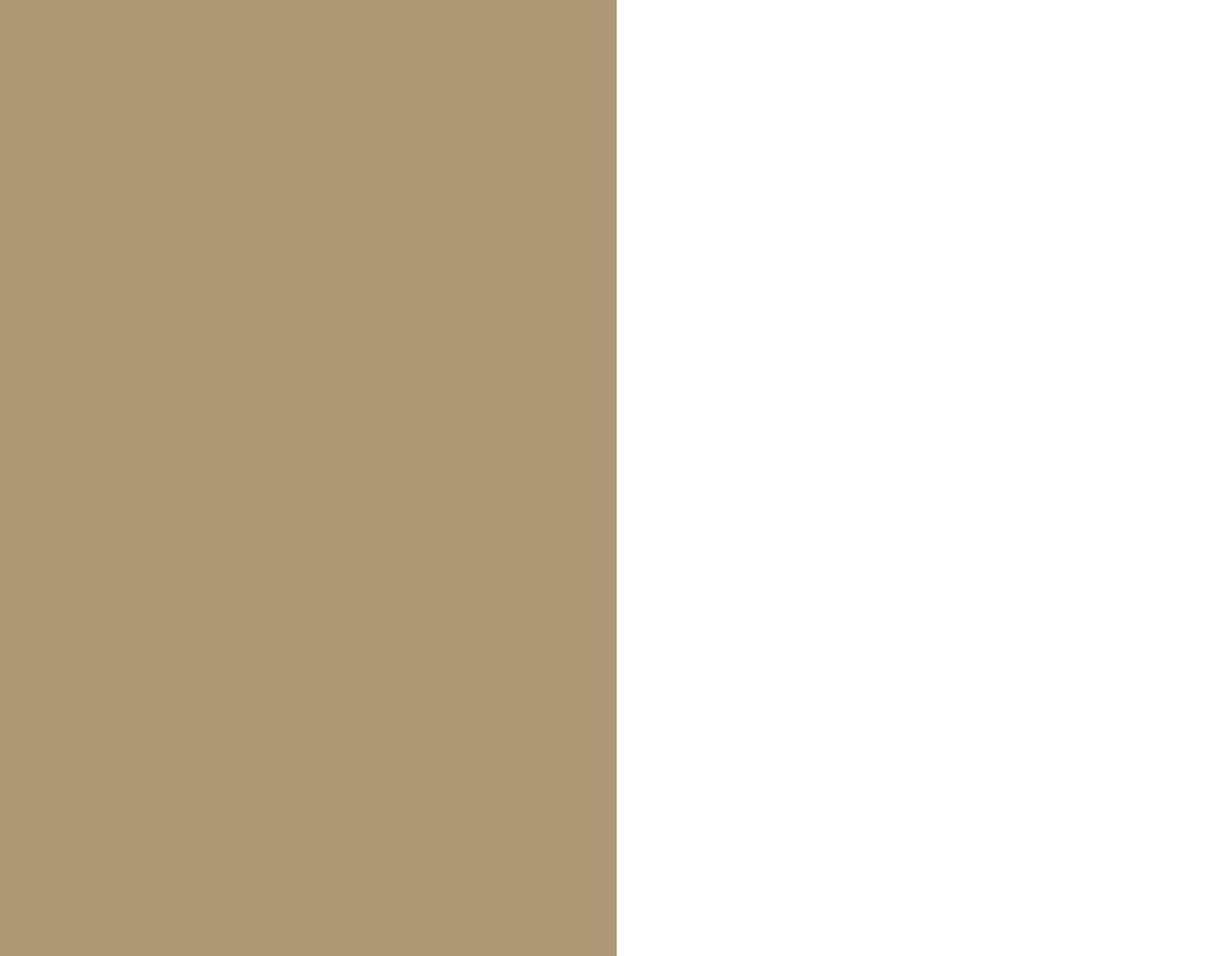


Four Finnish Stories

Carlos
Puente



Käräjäkivet Books



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Puente



**Three Graves in
Helsinki
8**

***Ateenan aamu*
16**

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***Tempus amplius
non erit*
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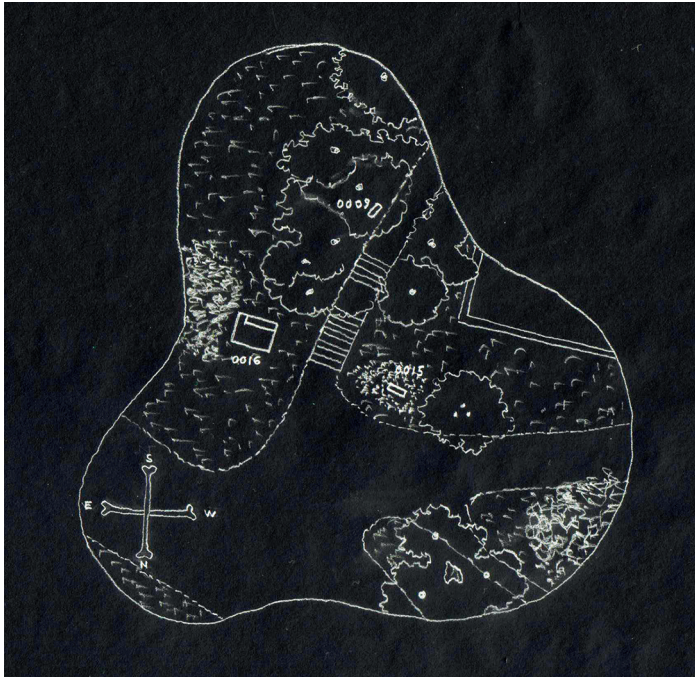
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In memory of Javier Azofra
1942 - 2018



Three Graves in Helsinki

A Winter Story

In Helsinki's Hietaniemi Cemetery, Sector 21 houses illustrious tenants from the world of arts and letters. In three of the graves in that area—0009, 0015, and 0016—rest, accompanied by their wives, Mika Waltari, Tapio Wirkkala, and Alvar Aalto (the last by both his wives, Aino and Elissa).

Aalto's and Wirkkala's graves are close to each other, perhaps due to trade affinity; Waltari's not too far away.

Their shapes, and the way they present themselves to the stroller, differ quite a lot: classical and guarded Aalto's, rustic and feral Wirkkala's, modest and tidy Waltari's.

In the largest one, Aalto's, the inscription is engraved on a big white *pavonazetto* marble headstone. As in the architect's portrait painted by Roberto Sambonet, an intricate filigree of lines traverses the marble, which on the left side is cut into the profile of an amphora, bringing into view a dark stone that lines the back; in front of this emerging background, half an Ionic capital rises. The ensemble has the resolute will to not go unnoticed, and its stone proscenium stands ready to receive the homage of bouquets and crowns.

Wirkkala's, to the right if we look at the graves from the front, and hardly six meters from the other, erects, in precarious balance, a dark stone *crux commissa* that is the capital letter of its occupant's first name. Coarsely carved, stuck on the grass and surrounded during summer by a mob of small flowers in colorful disarray, its horizontal arm prevents the names carved on the vertical stone from strolling toward Lapland—at least Tapio's.

Between them, a sand path takes us to some steps that elevate us to higher ground where, to our left, we immediately find the Waltaris' grave. It's the smallest of the three. Its tombstone has a metal lantern as a companion (the path is dark in the world of the dead), and hostas, now dormant, as well as ferns, edge it. In the inscription, in capital letters, the ae's do without their horizontal rung and transport us to Egypt. Right in front, on the other side of the narrow path, Tauno Hannikainen conducts forever Sibelius's *Valse triste*.

The first two graves look to the north to blind us during our contemplation of them; the third, as could be expected, to the left bank of the Nile.

In the coldest and darkest nights of the dark and cold Finnish winters, surprising and little-known things tend to happen in this place, one of which I'm about to tell you.

There is no moon. There are no visitors either and, of course, there are no squirrels. It's 2 a.m. and the sky is greenish, just like when the Lady of Cold is about to appear in the Moominland Midwinter. Tove Jansson, by the way, also inhabits this cemetery, but she won't take part in our story.

In reality, the person who appears, leaving grave 0016 stealthily to avoid disturbing his wives, is Aalto; he walks (although I don't think this is the most appropriate verb to explain the displacement of a dead person), dressed as Tintin, up to grave 0015, where Wirkkala rests. He gives a little tap on the *tau's* hat, and Tapio appears right away, with trekking boots and smoking a

pipe. In the white whirlwind of his head, it's hard to distinguish hair from smoke.

A second later they are already sitting on the nearby steps that go to the Waltaris' grave. Right by them we see, without knowing how they have appeared, several bottles of *Finlandia* vodka and some *Ultima Thule* glasses. Aalto and Tapio are talking. Talking? Some will say that what sounds like voices is really only the light creaks of the frost, but I tell you they are talking. What are they talking about?

Aalto mentions how much better it is, in the long run, to be given an award for designing a vodka bottle instead of for making a flower vase, judging by the yield that, since Tapio arrived in the cemetery thirty-four years ago, they are getting from the stockpile of bottles the award granted him, especially during such inclement nights as tonight. Tapio comforts Alvar, reminding him of the spark of emotion he must have felt seeing the shape of the lakes from the air and imagining their transformation into glass. Aalto's face becomes dreamy. "Ah! Those airplanes..." Aalto was always more into flying; Wirkkala, however, as we would say in Spain, was from where the ox steps or, better said, from where the reindeer steps. How many icicles must have fallen on him during his treks! You can see them in the shape of his glasses.

They hardly ever speak about Finnish architecture and design, and if they have ever spoken of it, I will not replicate their opinions here. I will only say that Alvar grumbles a little when the subject of the wooden cage where his boat is shut away in Muuratsalo comes up, or when Tapio asks him, with a wry smile, about the neighbors that are rising in the south side of Park Töölönlahti. Other than that, most of their relaxed chats are about the Mediterranean when Aalto sets the tone, or about the tundra at the border with Norway when Wirkkala takes the lead; after the third drink, Wirkkala needs to be restrained so he won't run away to fish for thymallus and roast them in a skewer. In the last few years, he has also been very excited about two young Lusitanian architects who have resurrected (what a word

to use in a cemetery!) the idea of Urho Kekkonen's memorial in Saivaara; however, even though in his current situation he is not in a hurry anymore, everything goes so slowly...

All of a sudden, the faint but growing murmur of a psalmody joins our two characters' voices: "*I, Sinuhe, the son of Senmut and of his wife Kipa, write this. I do not write it to the glory of the gods in the land of Kem, for I am weary of gods...*" Aalto and Wirkkala turn around to see how, unhurried, sliding on the stairs without touching the steps, arrives Mika Waltari. He is in a dark velvet robe with light-colored trim, a white silk scarf at his neck, and Moorish slippers. It may seem like a scarcely suitable attire for the climatological circumstances, but we need to keep in mind that Aten heats up a great deal.

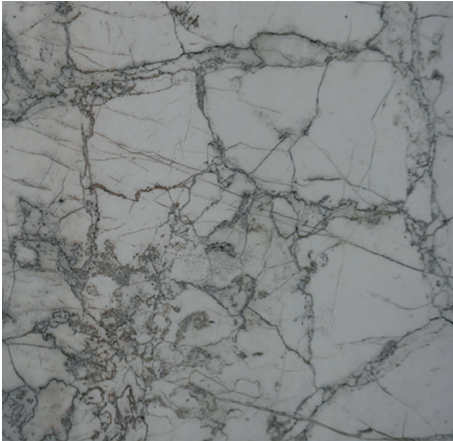
Alvar and Tapio welcome their neighbor, and as good hosts, making room for him between them, they offer him a drink. No, they do not have Egyptian beer from the Eighteenth Dynasty, nor do they have *Chartreuse*, but they do have vodka. After he accepts it, they let him go on with his monody.

"... why shouldn't we drink wine and be happy in the place the river has brought us to? For it is a beautiful place and we are hidden by the reeds. Storks are crying among them, and I see others flying with outstretched necks to build their nests; the waters gleam green and gold in the sunlight, and my heart is as arrowy as a bird now that I am freed from slavery..."

Time passes slowly and more than a bottle has already gone down. Aalto, who has been showing signs of impatience for a while, can't contain himself any longer and says, "Mika, skip all this boring pharaonic intonation and go straight to the middle of the book, where you speak about Crete."

And then Waltari, his gaze lost in some spot where a light that could melt all the ice in Finland shines, recites:

"Nowhere in the world, then, have I beheld anything so strange and fair as Crete, though I have journeyed in all known lands.



Marble of Alvar Aalto's grave

As glistening spume is blown ashore, as bubbles glow in all five colors of the rainbow, as mussel shells are bright with mother of pearl..."

Alvar and Tapio open their mouths so wide that the latter loses his pipe.

"Their art is strange and wayward. Every painter paints as the fancy takes him, heedless of rules, and he paints only such things as in his eyes are beautiful. Vases and bowls blaze with rich color; round their sides swim all the strange creatures of the sea. Flowers grow upon them, butterflies hover over them, so that a man accustomed to an art regulated by convention is disturbed when he sees the work and thinks himself in a dream..."

Tapio springs up, snaps his fingers, raises his arms in a cross (*commissa*), and starts to dance a full-blown *sirtaki*.

"...Buildings are not imposing like the temples and palaces of other countries, convenience and luxury being the aim rather than outward symmetry. Cretans love air and cleanliness; their lattice windows admit the breeze..."

Alvar joins the dance.

Hours go by. It's past 8 a.m. A sort of blurry brightness can be glimpsed in the southeast. The three figures and their bottles and their glasses are dissolving in the air like a hazy mist. But their whispers ...The whispers stay there; they tangle up on the stones of the graves, they hang from some tree, and if you go to this cemetery and listen attentively, even on a summer day, you may hear a word, or a sentence...



The "scenary" in a winter morning. Aalto, Wirkkala and Waltari graves