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The Great Hate

MERI FELL ASLEEP THINKING about all the people she hated. She found it soothing, the only cure for her insomnia. Her enemies lived in a funhouse maze, a haunted castle at a small-town amusement park, and Meri glided through the dark corridors, past the fake cobwebs and plastic skeletons. Or she scaled cliff after cliff of despised faces, swung her grip from Pentti Mannonen's chin to Katri Aro's throat, tested her footing on the soft support of Julia Pentola's scalp. Or she swam through the shattered hulls of sunken yachts, where silk-skinned corpses revolved, their eyes open and glazed, their mouths twisted in their final recognition that they should have followed Meri's advice and left her alone.

But whether she drifted or climbed or swam, each hatred eventually opened into the others until they were all connected, all exposed to their neighbours. They made patterns, swirls of similar yelling matches, grids of contrasting confrontations. Esko Harkkonen's annoying quirks—wiping the restaurant silverware with his handkerchief, scratching the dandruff out of his hair and onto his dinner plate—blended with Sonja Metsalainen's explosive hacking and sniffling as she smoked her cigarettes. Milton Turner's shy stammer played off against Glenda Tate's noisy indignation. The whining of Pia Snellman merged with the complaining of Juho Turkki, forming a single ineffectual drone. And as Meri moved from person to person, hate to hate, her thoughts spiralled around the whirlpool of the one hate at the center of all the others, the Great Hate, the hate she felt for Nathan Short.

Before Nathan, hate held almost no grip on Meri's life. When she left her film school in northern Finland to work for a small TV production company in Helsinki, she could seldom remember ever having felt more

than a passing resentment towards anyone. She hid her soft brown eyes behind her soft brown glasses, took diligent notes during the production company's Monday morning meetings, and accepted every minor photocopying assignment or parcel pickup no matter how late it meant she had to stay after her regular working hours.

Timo Tervo, another film student, joined the company the same day Meri did. Round-shouldered and loud, with hairy arms and a hairy neck and hairy, somewhat pudgy fingers, Timo always ate Valencia peanuts at his desk. He cracked them open in his mouth and chewed them with lip-smacking fervour. Then he spat the shells on a little plate in front of his computer. This cracking and chewing and spitting irritated Meri sometimes, but she decided to ignore it.

Timo never volunteered to do any photocopying. He never took the extra time to wash the coffee cups after the Monday meeting or double-check the tape supplies for any of the editors. Instead, he asked if he could be an assistant producer on an upcoming Finnish miniseries, and pressed his ideas for new TV projects on everyone in the office.

Meri thought he was making a fool of himself, and so did most of the other employees. Within a couple of years, however, Timo had established a reputation as a reliable assistant producer, and Meri was still doing nothing but secretarial work—answering the phone, running errands, arranging schedules, and ordering camera and lighting equipment for sets she would never visit.

In the spring Timo asked Meri to see him in his new office, where he spat his peanut shells into an enormous porcelain bowl he had recently ordered from Japan.

"You know my idea for a documentary about child abuse in Helsinki?" he asked.

"Sure," Meri said. Timo had thrown hundreds of ideas at her over the months, and she had long ago stopped trying to keep track of all of them.

"I just got the financing," he said. "I'm going to start filming this spring."

To keep from fidgeting, Meri held the lapels of her tweed jacket. She designed all her own clothes: tweed jackets, tweed skirts, tweed ties, tweed blouses. Dyed in different shades of brown, her clothes were meant to look conservative at first glance but somewhat quirky on deeper inspection, with extra-long pockets slashed open at steep angles, and green velvet piping on the sleeves and hems, and subtle threads of silver and gold stitched in zigzags and waves along the tweed's rough surface. Meri always hoped that

people would talk to her about her designs, and she was disappointed at how seldom others seemed to notice them, as if the modest signals she wanted to send out were pitched too low or too high for anyone to detect.

"Antero told me I can use you to help me shoot this," Timo said. The left side of his face tensed as he cracked a peanut in his mouth. "I was hoping you might be my production assistant. What do you think?"

Meri let go of her lapels. "I'd love to be your production assistant," she said.

"Great." Timo spat a fresh shell into the porcelain bowl. "One thing, though."

"What?"

"You should start dressing differently when we begin to work with the crew."

"Why?"

"I want to make sure they take you seriously."

"I'll see what I can do," Meri said.

That weekend Meri threw away all her tweed outfits and burned every piece of clothing she had ever designed.

She spent a year and a half on Timo's documentary. As a production assistant she did most of Timo's work for him, and received none of the credit. Yet Timo appreciated her quiet loyalty, and she enjoyed feeling useful. At their shooting locations he would stand beside her as they whispered together about some lighting or scheduling problem she had discovered. Then he would ask her to let him know as soon as the problem was fixed, and would go off to have a beer with whatever crew member he was dating at the moment.

When the documentary was finished Meri took a holiday in London.

She went with Olli, her husband. They had been married for three years: he was a soft-spoken graphic designer, the son of her father's best friend. She was happy with everything in their relationship, except she didn't enjoy talking to him and she preferred not to touch him.

They stayed with some Finnish friends who had a flat in Soho. On their third night in the flat Meri said she felt like going out for a little walk by herself.

The Soho streets were dark and wet. A cold rain blew across the plate-glass windows of the pubs and restaurants—blew with bracing fresh-

ness across Meri's face and rustled the folds of her overcoat and tossed her hair back and forth over her cheeks and lips and blinking eyes. She liked the liquid, almost melting gleam of the cars in the night, and the needles of rain borrowing the blue glow of a neon restaurant sign or bringing out the haloes of ruby red around a drifting pair of taillights.

Soaked, she ducked into a crowded pub, ordered a pint at the bar, and started talking to the man beside her. He told her his name was Nathan Short. Then he said "cheers" and raised his pint to her, and she wiped away a wet strand of her hair so she could see him better, and the next seven years shattered and collapsed.

They collapsed only in retrospect, but that didn't make the damage any less complete. Seven years after that first evening in Soho, Nathan cancelled Meri's work contract and told her he had found someone more qualified for her job. Up to that point, up to the moment he made the announcement to her in his office, she would have said that this had been the most delightful and fulfilling period of her life. And after that meeting, which she no longer remembered apart from the sheepish frown Nathan showed her when he started talking, her past with him hung for an instant in quiet suspension, a city of glass hovering above a desert, and you couldn't tell if it was poised on its way up or its way down, or if it was just a mirage smeared along the horizon of the sun-baked sand.

Over the next few weeks she tried to talk to Nathan, but he wouldn't see her and wouldn't return her calls. Then he left for his latest research trip, and she had no idea how to contact him.

She wandered through Soho, but it wasn't Soho anymore: it was a demolition zone, filled with the rubble of every night she had looked across the street and seen Nathan waiting for her in a booth, every time she had glanced down at his shoes clipping alongside hers over the dark wet shine of the pavement. She was amazed at how quickly and completely the past could be reversed, at how every comforting thought or memory could be turned over to reveal a lining of razorblades on the underside of a satin dress, or a ring of spikes within the throat-cinching band of a slim gold necklace.

She applied for jobs. At an interview with a London production company, the man speaking to her fell asleep. His chin bobbed lower and lower throughout their discussion, and his wrinkled eyelids drooped farther and farther, and finally his head slumped forward as he started to snore.

Meri, who had been telling him about her work experience, poked his shoulder.

"Sorry," he said, jolting awake. "Long night, I'm afraid. A drink or two too far."

"I understand." Meri knew she should be gracious but could feel the anger growing, filling her fingers, which curled shut and then slowly opened.

"Where were we?" the interviewer asked.

"My last job."

"As?"

"As a production assistant."

For the second time she tried to explain the work she had done on Nathan's science documentaries, but the interviewer's chin began to bob, and his eyelids began to droop, and she could see he wasn't listening.

With a sharp snap of her wrist she reached out and slapped him across the face.

He jerked up in his seat. "Did you just slap me?"

"I certainly did," Meri said. "And if you give me any trouble about it, I'll smack your false teeth out of your mouth and flush them down the nearest toilet."

Then while he massaged the deepening outline of the handprint on his cheek, Meri placed her application papers on his desk and left the office.

Her rage astonished her. It went everywhere with her, a trap door that could spring open under anyone who happened to trigger it. Earlier she would have assumed that her reaction to losing her career—to losing her expected future with Nathan—would be silent depression, picturesque despair, hours of isolated weeping as she holed up in her flat and cut all ties to everyone around her. She had imagined herself shrinking, shrivelling, drying up into brittle dead leaves or old scraps of paper, then blowing away and scattering along the streets until she disappeared.

Instead of shrivelling, though, she felt swollen, ready to burst with her fury. A fireball of anger was constantly billowing inside her and pressing for a way out, broiling beneath her skin, straining against her skull with a pressure that never relaxed and never stopped growing. All of her friends in London had been Nathan's friends first, and she correctly predicted that most of them would stop seeing her. The exceptions—the ones who made

a genuine effort to stay in touch—suffered the full blast of her contempt. She tested them, listened closely for the slightest hint of condescension or disrespect, accused them of planning to hold parties where she wouldn't be invited, and refused to discuss any of her feelings with them or accept any of their words of comfort or support. She ranted against England, a country she actually adored, and indulged in fatuous generalities about British provincialism and class-consciousness. And if she could tell she was offending someone, if she could sense that a friend like Marvin Waters, who had been nothing but kind to her, was reaching the point where he didn't want to hear another attack on London snobbery, she would become even more aggressive, even more unfair.

Timo Tervo, still cracking his peanut shells and spitting them out, visited her flat one evening and said he was in England to do some interviews for a documentary.

"The hair on your hands," Meri said, "it's longer than it used to be."

Timo looked down at his short, pudgy fingers. "Is it?"

"Yes. And blacker. And thicker. And uglier. Can't you pluck it or something?"

He gave her his toothy grin, which always pulled slightly to the left. "I didn't know it bothered you."

"It did and does. But not as much as your peanut fetish."

"That's less a fetish than an addiction." Leaning towards the coffee table, he picked up one of her ashtrays and ostentatiously spat a shell into its ceramic dish.

"Why are you here?" Meri asked.

"I need a production assistant."

"Why now?"

"Because now you're available."

"I hate working with you, Timo."

His grin resurfaced, bigger, toothier. "Who doesn't?"

"You'll have to offer me a better salary this time."

"Fine."

"And I'll need a proper title."

"What's wrong with production assistant?" Timo asked.

"Producer," Meri said. "I want to be listed as a producer."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I have to like the subject matter. What is it?"

"Neurological defects." He leaned back from the coffee table, webbed his fingers behind his stocky, short-necked head. "Prosopagnosia. Agnosognosia. Blindsight. Know anything about them?"

"Prosopognosia," Meri said sharply, reacting to the smugness of his tone, "is face blindness. It's when you lose the ability to recognize faces. You see a person's features—the nose, the eyes, the cheeks—but you somehow can't put them together, can't assemble them into a recognizable form, even if you're looking at your wife or your daughter."

"Close enough." Timo narrowed his eyes, aiming at Meri along the barrel of an imaginary rifle. "And blindsight, of course, can be considered—"

"Blindsight," Meri said, cutting him off, "is almost the reverse of prosopagnosia. It's when you can't actually see something visually, but your mind still recognizes the information. So, for instance, you could walk around a room and avoid bumping into a couch or tripping over a staircase even though you couldn't see their images."

Timo laughed gruffly, annoyed that she had interrupted him. "You know, Meri, you've changed a bit since the last time I saw you."

"More than you, obviously," Meri said. "You're still the same pompous ass you've always been."

This time Timo's laugh was softer, with a slight warning edge to it. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll hire you, on your own terms, if you can tell me what agnosognosia is."

Smoothly Meri said: "Agnosognosia is when you deny a neurological defect even when someone gives you clear proof of its existence. Say your motor functions have been affected by a head injury, so your lower body is paralyzed. Still, when you look directly at your legs and should see that they won't obey your commands, you insist they're moving, bending back and forth, swinging up and down. It's supposed to be a form of brain damage, but as far as I can tell it's the way most of us live our lives."

Timo grunted and set the ashtray back in the center of Meri's coffee table.

"Come to my office tomorrow morning," he said. "We want to start shooting right away."

This was when Meri began to assemble the Hate Collection.

The Hate Collection was a gallery of everyone who angered her, everyone she despised. Timo was part of it, and during their production work in London she added many others. For the first time in her career she started to make enemies among some of the crew: a production assistant who lost a master tape, a gaffer who showed up late for a shooting session,

an editor who refused to follow instructions. Timo took Meri aside occasionally and ordered her to stop yelling at people, and she would simply swing her anger towards him, telling him it was his fault they were behind schedule, his fault the director was having a nervous breakdown, his fault the documentary was a disaster. He would yell at her in turn and tell her that since she wanted to be a producer she had to share the responsibility if things went wrong. Then they would both shout some more and storm away and come back a few minutes later ready to resume shooting.

But it wasn't just her co-workers she hated. It was a waiter at a fast-food place who smirked when she accidentally spilled coffee on her skirt. It was her cousin Leena's husband, Esko Harkkonen, who lost his temper when Meri confronted him about the way he had discouraged Leena from going to law school. It was Glenda Tate, the ex-wife of an ophthalmologist Meri had started dating: spoiled and petulant, Glenda would phone the ophthalmologist on weekends and tell him he was ruining his children's lives by exposing them to a woman who worked in the entertainment business.

For the film's post-production and editing, Meri went to Helsinki. Trapped with Timo and the editor and the director in a small dark room day after day, night after night, Meri couldn't help exploding. She fought with Timo about the sound mix, the pacing, the scenes to leave in, the scenes to leave out, and the typeface to be used for the opening credits

Their biggest argument was about an interview with a neurobiologist who said that brain research was so much in its infancy that all the terminology used today might be completely discredited twenty years from now. Meri and the director both felt the interview was critical for the documentary's balance, while Timo and the editor thought it would leave the audience doubting the truth of everything in the film.

"We're taking it out," Timo said, rubbing his eyes as he looked away from the monitor. "It's not open to discussion."

"If you don't leave it in," Meri said, raising her voice, "you're a coward."

"You're calling me a coward?"

"Yes."

Infuriated, she grabbed the bag of peanuts from Timo's hand and threw it across the room. Timo said she was fired, and the next day she caught an afternoon flight back to London.

After this, hardly a week went by without some sort of argument, some sort of fight or confrontation with somebody. The Hate Collection expanded. Meri scolded a tourist who stepped on her foot in Piccadilly Circus. She went to Glenda Tate's office and told her off in front of her fellow accountants. She lost a job at a Camden bookstore for refusing to serve a rude customer, and lost another job at a travel agency for smashing her computer screen with a paperweight when the Internet went down.

Her rage was now a perpetual explosion, an endless nova, radiating fury so far beyond any original cause or explanation that it seemed weirdly abstract, as if it no longer related to anything but itself. Yet it shamed her less than it fascinated and entertained her. When she tore into Milton Turner for saying that Finland was part of Sweden, or when she made a scene at a London bank because the teller refused to believe Helsinki had a valid electronic payment system, she could see the comedy of her behaviour, the absurdity of using a bazooka to clear a cobweb, an avalanche to fill an icebox. It was during her wildest outbursts that she heard most plainly how ridiculous she sounded, and often she felt herself dividing, splitting apart. One version of her would shout and rampage with utter sincerity, with a fanatical belief in her righteous duty to stand up for herself, while other versions of her would step back and observe her tirade through a prism of enjoyment or laughter or distaste, critiquing her performance from many different angles at once. She could never say for sure if her anger was beyond her control: it seemed to her that she was both hot and cold, both the helpless puppet of her hatreds and an indulgent master who could have exercised far more restraint if she had chosen to do so.

To her surprise, she discovered that there were a number of benefits to being unreasonable. If she alienated more people now, she also built stronger friendships. Before the Hate Collection, she had tried to make sure everyone liked her, and had spread herself a bit thin over too many lukewarm acquaintances. Most of those people dropped away, and the ones who remained either understood her anger—understood it implicitly, without requiring her to make self-serving or self-flagellating excuses—or cared enough about her to find ways to deal with her. Marvin Waters, during one of her broadsides against the British, told her in his soothing, light-hearted voice: "Honestly, Meri, I can handle a touch of bigotry now and then, but don't you think the portions you're serving are a bit large?" He never raised the subject again, and Meri, impressed by his poise, went out of her way to treat him more respectfully and recommended him for a job as a production designer a week later. And the ophthalmologist, who was as quiet as Marvin and even more polite, seemed to find her flare-ups

less offensive than hilarious. He was the only person allowed to laugh at her when she was upset, and instead of growing more furious she would grimace and smile and say with a sigh: "I know, I know, I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

Her anger also helped her in some of her work situations. The experience of losing three jobs in a row sobered her a bit. It taught her that she had to restrain herself in the workplace just as she restrained herself with Marvin and the ophthalmologist. Restraint, however, wasn't always the best policy for handling the egomaniacs common to most film productions, and her temper was sometimes an asset when she faced bullying financiers or stubborn crew members. The film about neurological disorders, the one she had made with Timo, turned out better than she had expected and did very well on the international festival circuit. This gave her the chance to produce other documentaries, both in London and Paris, and she began to feel that her anger was pushing her career to a higher level, propelling her beyond obstacles that might have defeated her when she was younger. Instead of giving up after Timo fired her, she kept contacting other producers and looking for other documentaries, and refused to be distracted by her brief stints at the bookstore and the travel agency. Then when a French company hired her to make a film about a Parisian zoologist, she overcame all the production problems—not enough money, not enough time, too small a crew—through calling on her new reserves of rage to help drive everyone forward. And when she produced a film on cryptography for an English company, she rescued the shooting from catastrophe by opposing the company's decision to replace the director, a talented young woman who could never quite hide her casual disdain for the film's main financiers.

At a documentary festival in northern Norway, at the bar of the ice hotel where most of the filmmakers had gathered, Meri ran into Timo and had a few beers with him. He was, she noticed, rounder and hairier than ever.

"Where are your Valencia peanuts?" she asked.

"I gave them up," he said.

"Why?"

"My wife. When I proposed to her she handed me a list of things I had to change about myself before she would say yes."

"Smart woman," Meri said.

"Fortunately I'm perfect now, reformed in every way."

"Not your hands. They're still disgustingly hairy."

"My wife likes my hands. If she doesn't have a problem with them, neither should you."

"Agreed," Meri said. "What are you doing these days?"

"Starting up my own production company." He offered her a cautious preview of his left-pulling grin. "The main office is in Helsinki, but I'd also like to open an office in London. Interested?"

"In heading your London office? Are you sure that's what you want? I seem to recall we didn't end on such good terms last time."

"If I cut off everyone I ever yelled at," Timo said, "I wouldn't have anybody left to work with."

Meri looked at her fingernails. "I know exactly what you mean," she said.

As she fell asleep in her London flat, the ophthalmologist snored softly beside her, and the pillow bunched up under her head, and the folds of the curtains turned their shadows across the ceiling and along the walls whenever a car passed on the street outside. Meri sensed a change was coming. She sensed that she was cooling down, losing the heat of that first prolonged explosion, and she didn't know if she should be pleased or disappointed, exhilarated at the lapse of an obsession or worried that the obsession was now a permanent part of her.

Lately the Hate Collection had started to include people she liked, people she wanted to keep as friends and colleagues. She had bickered with her ex-husband's charming and intelligent new wife, Katri Aro, and had engaged in a petty dispute with one of Timo's other partners, Pentti Mannonen, over the design of the company's business cards. Shifting her head on the pillow, she resolved that next year she would bring her anger under tighter control, and make it a strategic tool to be released only for her benefit, even though she feared that the more she tried to contain it, the more it would find devious and unpredictable ways to emerge.

The shadows of the curtains rolled over the ceiling, returned to their original pattern, and then rolled the opposite direction as a second car passed on the other side of the road. Meri's thoughts followed the shadows, and drifted along a dark wet street. She was walking towards him now, clipping over the pavement, moving through the red-and-blue shimmer of the backlit needles of rain, across the rows of plate-glass windows, along the liquid gleam of the curving black taxi hoods and the ruby red haloes of retreating taillights. And as she approached him, as she came closer and closer to the Great Hate, she felt the pull of a vast and intriguing absence ahead of her, as if she was looking into a face she could see but never recognize, or

somehow making her way blindly but surely through an obstacle course of invisible cars and bodies, or looking down at the swing of her legs along the wet pavement while everyone around her told her she was paralyzed. Then she watched the shadows roll across the ceiling again, and shivered with delight.