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Piglets for slaughter

“There are nine million bicycles in Beijing...”, sings Katie Melua and this means that it’s time to get up. Kasia quickly manoeuvres her way between empty bottles and elements of clothing scattered across the corridor. Heikki, her flatmate, had a good time last night again. The kitchen looks like a war zone. She removes several empty cans from the table and chucks them in the bin. In their place she puts a bowl. Into the bowl she pours chocolate cornflakes and adds cold milk. Sugar is the only thing that can wake her up at 5 am. Outside the window the night is black and the Hakaniemi market square is illuminated. This winter there is so snow again and Helsinki does not have as much charm as it did two years ago. However, it’s equally cold. A quick shower, thick tights under her jeans, a good brand down jacket (a present from Ilari) and she’s out. Just a few bus stops to Kamppi and there, as every morning, the meeting of newspaper distributors is awaiting her. Also today there is not a single Finn among them. “Hey, look”, says Lu showing her a page in the Metro, “somebody has written about Malik”. Kasia reads the text and smiles for the first time today. “I would like to thank the black man who hands me a newspaper every morning, smiles to me and says ‘Good morning’ – thank you for having cheered me up every morning over the last three years”. “Malik, you’re a hero”, Kasia points to the text and translates it from the Finnish into English to Malik, a Nepalese man who, indeed, never stops smiling. For the next four hours Kasia will also be smiling and handing passers-by the morning Metro. Perhaps she also cheers somebody up today.

Four hours of learning Finnish is definitely too much. It is said that Mandarin is more difficult than Finnish, but it’s hard to believe. For how does one make sense of the fact that verbs decline? The classes organised by the job centre are attended by immigrants from all over the world. Most of them, like Kasia, have come here following the love of their life. For Kasia the love is gone, yet she remains. She does not know herself why she has decided to stay in this cold and not very friendly country. Probably due to her ambition which keeps her awake at night. “You, immigrants, are too impatient”, a sonorous voice of the teacher interrupts Kasia’s reverie, “you want to come here and get a good job, and a high position at that, straight away. We, the Finnish people, usually start with cleaning jobs and this is also what you should begin with”. Everyone in the classroom knows this, however this sentence said aloud by an employee of a job centre arouses their justified protest. Among the learners many have university degrees. In their own countries they had better jobs, positions and respect. Why should they suddenly start all over again? Just because their grandparents did not take part in the Winter War, and their fathers never contributed to the building of Nokia’s empire?

Thus Kasia, just like most others, begins from scratch – from scrub. After the Finnish course she goes to her other job. When most workers have left the Keilaranta office buildings, Kasia walks in. Almost always a few of them stay after hours and sometimes exchange a few words with her. “Mitä kuuluu?” asks Jari and Kasia answers in Finnish that she is fine. For a second she thinks she might tell Jari what the teacher from the job centre told them, but then she changes her mind. What’s the use of starting this discussion again? Jari is one of few Finns who know that Kasia has an MA degree and that before she came to Finland she was a teacher. For most Finns she is simply yet another immigrant who cleans up, distributes newspapers or arranges trolleys in a supermarket. “You’ll see, you’ll have your diploma officially recognised by our authorities and you’ll get a job in a school on the spot”, he comforts her now and then. Today he also asks, “How are your papers? Have you got your

decision yet?” “No, not yet”, answers Kasia, “but then it’s been only a month and they said the waiting period is up to three months”. A month ago Kasia sent her diploma to the Ministry of Education to obtain teaching qualifications in Finland. She can’t teach without them. But even with the right papers in her hand – will she ever get a job at any school here? After all, how many immigrants taught you when you were in primary school? “You have a diploma from the European Union, so surely you’ll get the decision any day now”, says Jari. “It’s a pity though that then you won’t be coming here any more. You are the best cleaner we’ve had for years”. Kasia smiles. She’s heard this before, that she always smiles and is so thorough. She even got a rise. Ever since she can remember Kasia has always wanted to be the best. And she is.

The home is silent. How fortunate that Heikki spends his evenings mainly outside. If only he did not come back in the middle of the night and usually with some chick in tow. Still, as long as he’s not here Kasia can finally do some studying. But first a quick check of her email – and again there’s no response from potential new employers. Admittedly, she has no officially recognised diploma yet, but Kasia has already been sending application letters to schools. Who knows, maybe she gets lucky. However, today the inbox is empty again except for some spam. “User Mama is available”, Skype announces and for a brief moment Kasia wonders if she should not quickly switch off her laptop. If she fails to do this quickly, mom will call her and she’ll have to be careful not to blurt out the truth. Her family in Poland still believe that she is with Ilari and lives in a bungalow in Westend; everyone is still asking “well, when is the wedding?” She could have told them straight away, but she never did and now it’s kind of too late. She’ll be in Poland for Christmas (but, shoot, she has to buy the ticket soon because otherwise the prices will rise – and why are there no cheap flights between Finland and Poland?), then she will tell them everything. She’ll have no choice after getting off the train alone. But not today. Not yet. Today she’ll have to act as if nothing has happened. Luckily, there is no camera in her laptop.

It’s easier to pretend that Ilari is in the other room, working, as often was the case.

“Hey, *mamek*, how have you been? No, Ilari has not come back yet today. You know how long they work here”, Kasia lies without missing a beat. “Don’t complain, dear. If a husband works and earns money then you should be happy”, her mom scolds her and adds straight away “You’re still coming for Christmas, I hope”. This quite unusual way of asking a question makes only one answer possible. “Yes, mummy, we’re coming. We haven’t had the time to buy the tickets yet. But when we’ve bought them this week I’ll let you know immediately”, Kasia says, as usually during a conversation via Skype distractedly browsing through internet pages: Facebook, the news, celebrity gossip. “You know, I’ve been thinking, maybe this year we should invite aunt Irenka for Christmas. She always asks after you when we meet”, mom’s voice breaks here and there, but this is normal for Skype. “And do you know that aunt Irenka has set up a Facebook account? I’m just looking at their photos from the Masuria”, Kasia clicks at another picture, and says “You should have an account, too, mom. It’s not that difficult”. “Ah”, mother replies, “I’ll wait for you, when you come for Christmas Ilari will set it up for me. Wait a moment, my phone is ringing. Halloo! Danusia! Yes, hello, I’m talking to Kasia on Skype...”, mom’s voice gradually fades and Kasia sees her talking on the phone in the kitchen. “Want to help? Then help wisely”, Kasia reads an inscription on the screen. It’s a new link on Tomek’s Facebook page. The link sends her to some charity organisation and Kasia clicks at it automatically. Kiva – Loans that Change Lives. “There, I’m back. Danusia called and told me to say hello to you. You know that they...”, Kasia has half an ear on her mother’s monologue while reading about microfinance. On the right she sees photographs of people from all over the world, some in front of their small stores, others

on their own farms. Kasia's attention is drawn to a picture of a young girl in a rather dark room. Kasia clicks on it and zooms in on the image. The young girl is Yalda from Lebanon, and the place she's in is a pigsty. On the ground, in front of Yalda, there are piglets. "Because, you know, I've been wondering about buying a new table for the kitchen. When you two come and I also invite Irenka with her family I don't know if there'll be enough room..." Kasia clicks to see how this works. The minimum loan is 25 dollars. For this sum someone can buy a motorbike or a place for a store and then can start his/her own business. The site shows plenty of examples of how 25 dollars can change people's lives. 98% of entrepreneurs pay back their loans. They buy grain or a sewing machine and they begin to earn money to support their families. And they pay back their debts. "And maybe you could prepare something Finnish this time. I know this food is not the best, but you know, as a curiosity". Kasia returns to the conversation with her mom, "Sure, mummy, I'll think of something. Maybe we prepare some dish. You know, I have to go now, because Ilari has just texted me he's coming home. I must reheat his dinner". Kasia changes her Skype profile from "available" to "unavailable" and goes back to Yalda's photo.

Yalda is thirty-five (although she looks younger) and has three children. She wants to develop her pig slaughter business. She would like to buy more piglets for slaughter and earn money to send her children to school. Kasia goes to the kitchen and makes a few sandwiches for herself, typical Polish sandwiches with white bread and butter, cheese and tomato. She'd add some ham, but Finnish ham is uneatable. She takes the plate with sandwiches and tea with her and goes back to her laptop. She clicks on "register in 5 minutes": first name and surname, address, how have you learnt about Kiva... The computer automatically fills in most of the personal blanks. Select the entrepreneur you would like to make a loan to – Kasia clicks on Yalda's photo. Transfer your money – one click and 25 Euro travels from Kasia's bank account to the organisation's account. Kasia wonders when Yalda receives the message that she's been granted a loan. Perhaps as early as tomorrow, though the procedures probably take longer. As soon as she gets the money she'll go to buy some piglets and then some piglet fodder. The 25 Euro was part of Kasia's savings for the ticket to Poland, but never mind. She can buy the ticket a bit later. She'll get her salary next week, after all. Besides, Yalda will certainly pay back the loan. As long as the piglets grow nicely. Kasia realises that she knows very little about Lebanon. She goes to Wikipedia and types in "Lebanon". Staring at the computer screen, with her sandwich halfway between the plate and her mouth, she thinks with satisfaction about little piglets being fattened for slaughter.

Translated from the Polish by Ewa Kowal