Night of the Cranes

-There was a dispute in school today Farmor, Oske shouts as she enters through the kitchen door.

Måns smoothly and quietly slinks past Oske through the door and into the house. He usually sits on the staircase waiting for her when she returns home from school. He always gets excited when he sees Oske by the big sluice post and he stands up and greets the family member to whom he has the strongest bond. He shows his affection by stroking himself against her leg with his tail stretched up towards the sky, purring very loudly.

-Who’s a pretty kitty? Oske says softly and she bends down to pet the black purring cat.

-Meow”, Måns answers.

He looks at Oske, the yellowish-green eyes glimmering with kindness and then he meows at her again, as loudly as he can. Oske goes out into the hallway, takes off her outer garments before going to the chamber to change her clothes. It is like that at Oske’s; when you come home from school, you take off your school clothes and put on your everyday clothes. Oske still has her bodice under her shirt and the knitted long stockings on her legs; it is still winter after all, even though one sometimes can see gumman Tö trying her best to sweep the snow away with her broom.

”When gumman Tö has finished sweeping prinsessan Vår knocks on the door. Everybody knows that”, Oske thinks.

-Where are you Farmor? she shouts again.

At that moment, someone stomps on the stone staircase outside the door and Oske can see Farmors curly black hair through the kitchen window.

-There was a dispute at school today!

-My dear child, what are you saying?

Oske is unusually upset, Farmor reckons. She looks angry and gives Farmor a stern look as she meets her in the doorway to the house.

Farmor immediately puts down the preservative jars on the kitchen table. In the glass jars are the meatballs that she will serve for supper and Farmor’s just been down in the butlery]to get them. She sits down on one of the chairs in the kitchen so that Oske will see that she is really paying attention to her and to what she says. Farmor doesn’t know the last time the dear child was in such a rage. Oske’s eyes are glowing and her arms are flailing.

– Dear…, Farmor says in an attempt to calm her down.

– It’s not fair! Oske says. They’re all my classmates and she’s just sucking up to them. It feels like she’s fighting with me over their friendships. I mean, we’re all friends, you’re never just friends with only one but… when Sigge let Hillevi have the best part of one of his sandwiches today it was just so…!

A couple of weeks after the spring semester had started at school, in January, a new girl had started in Oske’s class. The new girl had moved from Stockholm and her father was the new factory director at the old tile factory in Hallaskruv. Moreover, as if that wasn’t enough, a couple of weeks later another boy had joined the class. He was from the West Coast and he knew all there was to know about fish. Everybody thought that it was exciting and fun to have two new classmates and the teacher liked having two new pupils.

However fun it might have seemed, slowly the climate in the class changed. It was as if the air around the new children changed the old air in the classroom, the corridor, the dining hall… Eventually Oske didn’t even like the new girl’s name.

How can someone have such a stupid name as Hillevi? And, while she thought about it, who in the world is named August if you’re a boy anyway? No one!

After Christmas break nothing has been the same and Oske can’t stand it anymore. She just has to complain to Farmor, even though she doesn’t want to. Usually she can manage by herself when things get rough but this time it’s different and it’s too hard to try to figure out the difficulties alone. It’s as if there is a completely new set of rules in school and Oske doesn’t know them!

The sad feeling overwhelms Oske and tears start to well up as she, although rather briefly, tries to tell Farmor about the hardships and pains that she’s experiencing. She’s interrupted by a sudden noise. The big brown box phone on the wall in the girls chamber lets out a loud call and Farmor goes to answer.

-It’s for you, Oske, she says. He says that his name is August.

Farmor gives the receiver to Oske, and then she has some time to think about what she’s been told. Farmor knows that there have been changes, two new children, in Oske’s class and she remembers how happy Oske was the first time she came home to tell Farmor about it. She had no idea that the happy feelings had been replaced by difficulties and Farmoe is worried about the things that Oske has told her. Therefore, she listens, with one ear, to Oske’s phone conversation and starts preparing for the afternoon coffee and see to the meatballs. Then she stops, for just a moment, to get a better grip of what Oske’s saying on the phone.

-Hello, this is Oske. Hi! Sure August, Agge is fine by me. How nice for your father that he managed to keep in touch with his old friends. Yeah, I think that Farmor would love some absolutely fresh Baltic herring and it’s fine by me if you stick around for a while afterwards. When will you get here?”

During a couple of seconds, Oske doesn’t know what else to say and the conversation is over as fast as it was surprising. Farmor is now in a hurry to prepare the table, getting everything ready for afternoon coffee.

-It was the new boy in my class. You know the fisher from the West Coast. He wants to come over this evening. His father, mister Ankarsson is going to sell fresh Baltic herring, which he got today from his friends on the West Coast. They were going to get on their bicycles right now and will be here in a little while. Do you want some Baltic herring Farmor? When mister Ankarsson has sold some to you and to Inga he will set off on the bike again and Agge will stay here. That’s alright, isn’t it?”

-I thought you find this new boy a hassle?

Farmor looks at Oske, with a twinkle in her eye. She can clearly see how a few tears remain in the child’s eyelashes.

-He’s not, Farmor, not really. It’s Hillevi who’s making everything so difficult. I don’t know how to make things the same as they were before. The girls just whisper and giggle nowadays. We never used to do that before!