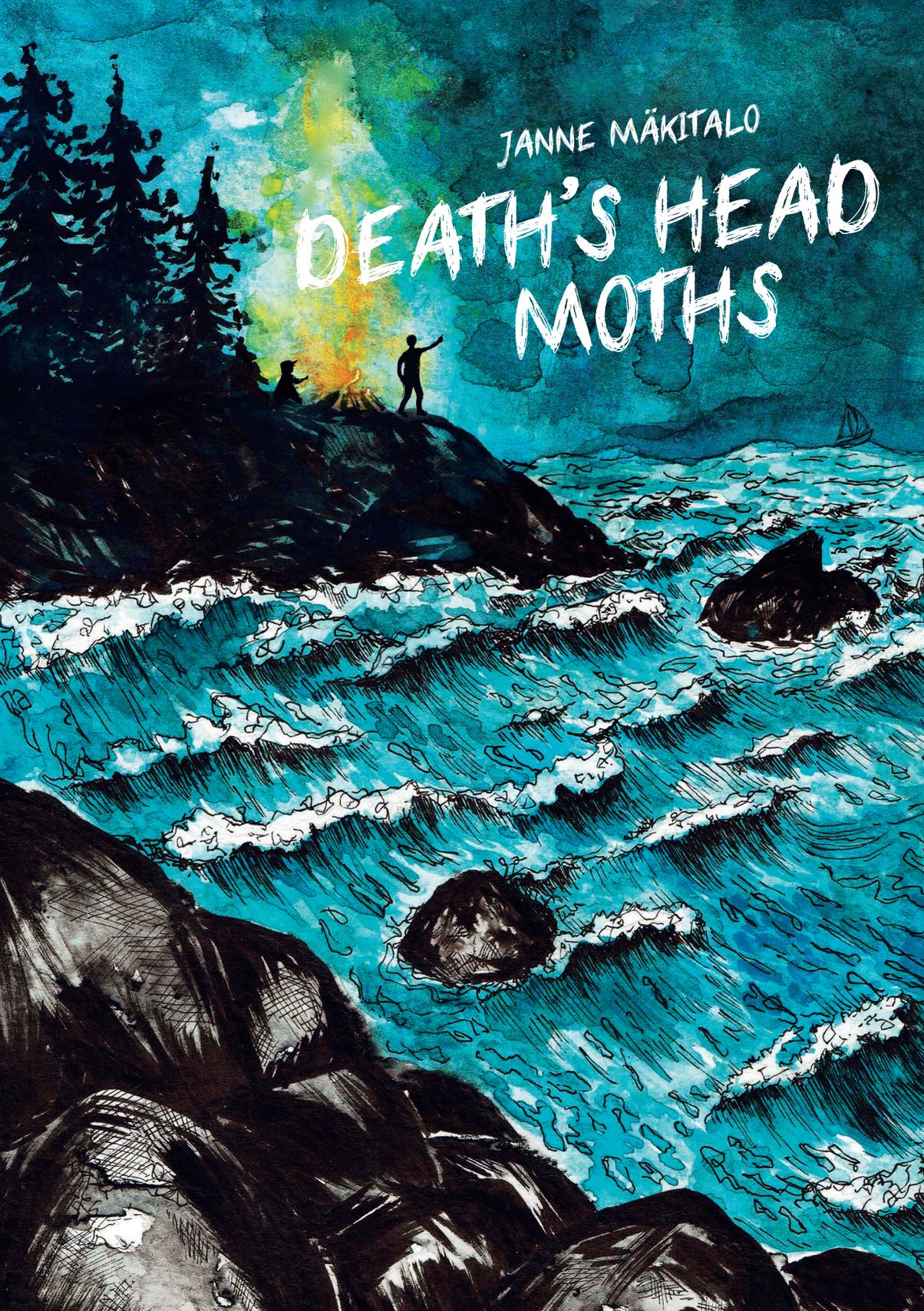


JANNE MÄKITALO

# DEATH'S HEAD MOTHS



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## ***1. COURT HILL GRAVEYARD***

“TIMI, GO SIT IN THE BACK!” the teacher demands and points her finger at me, like she wants to squash me with it.

My face is flushed and I’m furious as I drag myself to the computer desk in the back and start staring at the back wall. Goshdarnit! No matter what I do, it’s wrong. Always! Eighth grade has been BS from the beginning. Seems like it’s been forever, but school just started a couple of weeks ago. I’ve had it, I’m outta here! Not listening to this crap anymore.

Luckily it’s the last period of the week, Finnish. I’m chewing on my pencil stub and glance at the clock hanging on the wall. Its black hands seem to be stuck on the shiny white face. I feel like screaming but the Finnish teacher, Terhi Ruohonen, is a witch and will lose it if I push her any more. She teaches us Finnish and art and as if that weren’t bad enough, she is our homeroom teacher too. We can’t stand each other. I let it go and look around. The first thing I see is Tero. He is the weirdest, most awesome guy ever. I try to wink at him. He doesn’t see me, which I should’ve guessed. He’s good at paying attention. And at raising his hand and listening to the teacher, although

he really doesn't care. He would probably even wash Terhi's car. And her back.

The white plastered wall holds a few drawings next to the clock and cabinet. None of them are mine, of course, but Tero's scribble is on display, as always, with five other pictures. They were for some drawing contest and our theme was Treasure Island. I might as well kill time and look at them now, with nothing better to do. I look more closely and see all kinds of treasures: gold coins, jewels, diamonds, emeralds and rubies. Everybody used crayons. I should've too, but I didn't care. I told the teacher that mine was an old black-and-white picture and that my treasure was a hockey stick.

I got a passing grade out of pity. Well, the "good drawings" had colored islands surrounded by plants, trees, fields and all things green. No animals really, but a few of the drawings show butterflies fluttering in the fields. I like butterflies, because I used to collect them when I was younger.

Tero's piece is somehow simpler than the other pieces. There's a path that goes through a dense forest. The forest looks somehow gloomy, yet mysterious. The path leads to a campfire, where a few guys are sitting around the fire, staring into the flames. The background is dark blue and black water-color wash. Darn, I wish I could go to a place just like that!

Without the teacher, without grown-ups. Just me and Tero. And maybe Ville and Jussi.

Back to staring at the wall. I see a small crack. I wish the wall would come crashing down and we could all escape and go home. I would bolt!

”The predicate is usually placed before...” the teacher goes on and on about something that I don’t understand and that doesn’t matter.

My head hurts. The teacher stares at me when I cover my face with my hands. Now she looks away and mumbles into the blackboard. Just then Tero slips something into Linda’s hand, who sits next to him. Linda passes that something onto Jussi.

“Psst, look,” Jussi says.

“Thanks,” I whisper and squeeze the tiny note he gives me in my hand.

”Hang in there. Think about tonight!”

Think about tonight? Huh? I read the note again. Oh yeah! I smile and give Tero a thumbs-up.

“STOP GOOFING AROUND AND FOCUS!” Jeez, her screaming scared me. “WOULD YOU LIKE TO STAY AFTER SCHOOL AGAIN?” Ruohonen asks.

Now I'm sweating. I say nothing and just shake my head. 15 more minutes.

Brrrring. As soon as the teacher lets us leave, I'm the first to dash out. I run to the bike rack and race home as fast as I can, although my ride home is longer than anybody's in class. It's early September, the sky is just about clear, the sun is shining, and I sweat through my shirt in no time.

At home I change my shirt and gulp down a sandwich. Then I play some PlayStation and listen to Spotify for an hour, until I crash onto the bed to take a nap. I have to catch some z's... Mmmm, fhlp, I wake up drooling. What an awesome nap! What? It's almost 6pm and I realize I've slept over two hours. No problem, I needed the sleep and there's still time, we're meeting just before 7. I feel excited and skip to my bike with my backpack, which is not full of school stuff this time! It's Friday night, the whole weekend's ahead – and I am free! I ride my bike all over the bike lane and on the shoulder too, but I don't care. The setting sun colors the sky red and the warm day is turning into a cool night as I get near Tero's house. I pop one more wheelie - with the lowest gear I can pop them even with this new 10-speed Dad got me last week.

I'm glad I get to stay up later tonight. Curfew is 8:30pm, but bedtime isn't until almost midnight, I think as I pass some

mom pushing a stroller. One more uphill then a turn to the left - and YES! – made it to the halfway point. Tero and I decided to ask Jussi and Ville along, too, to have the whole gang together. The gang of tough guys. Eighth-graders know no fear!

Panting, I ride the bike up a graveled road, without having to put my feet on the ground once I make the last turn into Tero's yard.

What the heck?

Tero, Jussi and Ville are crouched over their bikes as if ready to start a mountain bike race.

“Hey there!” Ville hollers.

“Hey.”

“Why the backpack, are you thinking of studying for a test?” Jussi taunts.

“You're so funny. I got some snacks,” I answer hoping there won't be any more questions.

“I want some candy, too!” Jussi adds

“Dream on,” I say.

“Ok, let's go,” Tero puts an end to our joking.

We race off and are done with idle talk. We speed in the twilight in our dark jackets with the bike bells ringing, cruising all over the bike lane from Glenbrook, where we live, to the county center, Waterton. Having covered the bike reflectors

with duct tape and turned the lights off, we're on a thrill ride tonight.

I've been looking for a thrill for a while, ever since school started after summer. Sitting in class hour after hour, day after day, is mind-numbing. You have to listen to the teachers' babble or do stupid group assignments with the good girls who do all the work. The only good thing is using tablets to do the work, because it's pretty easy to play games. Teachers can't check on you all the time. But all the academic subjects just suck. PE and shop are ok, at least there's some action. I'm actually pretty good at shop, because me and dad have been tinkering with stuff since I was little. The biggest thing we built was a tree house in the yard. Well, when it comes to academic subjects, history is fine, sometimes. At least this week it wasn't bad.

Waterton, where we live, has a lot of history and signs of ancient times. Apparently some prehistoric objects and remains have been found here. That's why history was ok this week: we took a field trip to Court Hill prehistoric graveyard. It's a small, hilly patch of woods right at the center of the county. Next to the supermarket, daycare and Pentecostal church, you can see the woods where we climbed up the hill on Tuesday following the teacher. It was oddly quiet in the

woods, even though there were a bunch of us and we were right at the center of the county. We followed a little path that took us to these pretty big rocks that were placed in a circle. Our history teacher, Mr. Lehtojärvi, is usually boring, but this time he told exciting stories about what went on around the rocks way back when.

We ride our bikes and see some girls walking in front of us. It's Linda and a couple of other girls from our school! I blush, because I have a little crush on her, or actually a big crush. I'm glad it's dark so the guys don't notice. We're just about to pass them. I glance at Linda and see her long, blonde hair on her chest and her gorgeous blue eyes. It all started at the school dance after summer break when I somehow managed to talk Linda into slow dancing with me. I think I had my eyes closed the whole time, but I remembered the closeness and the fresh scent of her hair for a long time.

After the dance I've dreamt about it a lot at night. I wonder if she likes me at all. I want to ask her, but there's no way I could do that! I force a smile and nod at Linda, but can't bring myself to look her in the eye. Linda smiles at me gently with her rose-colored lips and keeps on walking with her friends. Gee, what a girl!

Now we're by the daycare and Pentecostal church, just a short paved road away from Court Hill.

"Dammit!" Jussi yells.

BRMM BRMM. A couple of guys are revving their mopeds on the other side of the street, smoking cigarettes.

Eki and Rippe, the pricks from ninth grade! Always bullying the younger ones, but too scared to say anything to the other ninth-graders, I say.

"Let's go around the other way," Tero suggests.

"Good idea," I reply, and Jussi and Ville nod in agreement.

"Oh, I forgot, we have family night, gotta go," Jussi says.

"Sure you do, wuss!" I tease him.

"You don't have to believe me," Jussi sounds angry.

"Don't mind him," Tero says to Jussi. "Later."

"Bye," Jussi replies and bolts out of there.

We all have such different personalities. Jussi is a provocative nerd who gets all A's. Tero is like Jussi, gets good grades, but not quite as good as Jussi. Jussi wants to be friends with us, although he knows that we get into trouble, usually because of me. But he's good at dodging and staying away from trouble. Like tonight, family night was probably an excuse to get away.

Then there's Ville, who is a quiet follower and does what he's told. He really wants to be friends with us.

The three of us turn around and take another route. We take Bond Street, Waterton's main street. There are appliance stores, shops and a two-story bank building. We take a left at the traffic circle and head towards Court Hill.

"I gotta piss bad," Ville says and points at the nearby supermarket.

"Did you wet your pants because of the bullies or Court Hill?" I ask.

"Ha ha, very funny," Ville laughs dryly.

While Ville goes to the bathroom, I slip what's inside the backpack in my jacket. I'm about to whisper the details of the plan to Tero, but Ville is back in no time.

"Guys, look at that!" Ville points at the tabloid headlines in the store window.

*"Second robbery this week – BANKROBBERS TORMENT WITHERSVILLE."*

"Wow," Tero utters and stares at the headline.

"It doesn't matter, they're not gonna come here. Let's go," I suggest.

We get to Court Hill. The area is wooded and bordered by a field. Tero flips down his kickstand, but Ville and I just toss our bikes down in the grass.

“Guys, do you remember,” I start, “what the teacher said about this hill? Tough justice already in the Iron Age. The imprints under the rocks, weren’t they, like, burial spots where they cremated people and...”

“Stop yakking. Is it a good idea to go there?” Ville wants to know.

“Heck yeah,” I reply and chuckle because he doesn’t know the whole story.

I want to stir things up some more.

I thought that the most interesting finding the teacher talked about was the chief’s grave. He showed us a picture of it, too, where the chief was lying in a wooden coffin with armor, swords and spears.

Tero chimes in excitedly: “Yeah, and I remember him telling us about a rumor that Court Hill is haunted. He said it could be the chief avenging those who have dared to come to his grave.”

This is all my idea. I look up the hill and say: “Guys, it’s all good. Let’s climb up the hill one at a time. Everybody has to

stay up there at least three minutes. Let's use my cell phone timer."

"Then you don't mind going first, right?" Ville asks.

"I'm fine with that," I say and realize that it's all going according to plan.

Tero and I have concocted a devious plan to scare Ville and Jussi. Now that Jussi isn't here, we need to update it a little. Tero looks at me and I nod. We have an understanding that we'll still go ahead with the plan. By now it's completely dark, which is perfect.

"Ok, so I'll go first. We'll go oldest to youngest. I was born in October, before Tero and you're the baby, Ville, born in December. So that means you'll come last," I say and point my finger at Ville.

"First time around we'll go up and wait for the others on the rocks. Second time around we'll go alone and come down alone, you go first that time."

"Ok," Ville agrees.

This is all to give us time to set things up. I start creeping upwards. I slow down when it's so dark that all I see is the trees and bushes right in front of me. The air is foggy from the nearby Waterton River.

I don't feel like going further and sneak into the bushes to wait for Tero. I wait and wait, but no sign of Tero. Oh, heck no, they're not pulling a practical joke on me, are they? No, Tero would not let me down. My clothes are getting damp and I shiver from the cold. I hear a crackle. My heart is pounding.

"Damn!" I exclaim when a crow takes off right in front of me.

Finally I hear steps. I see a familiar, tall figure that I've known for years! I can see more clearly now...he wears dark blue jeans and a hoodie practically all the time. Lately he's been using gel to part his hair and some of his thick, blonde hair falls out of the hood.

A light breeze blows on Tero's face and his hair flutters in spite of the gel. Tero stops by a pine, holds still and looks around for me. He's probably waiting to see me stand on a rock waving and lighting the way up with my flashlight, like we planned.

"What the heck? What are you doing here?" Tero asks when he sees me in a juniper bush so close to the starting point.

"I just thought that...that this way we'll save time. No more questions, three minutes are almost up. Just hurry!"

We rush to the rocks. It feels safer to move about in the dark forest with two people, than alone. We take our jackets off,



*Eighth-graders Timi and Tero live in Western Finland and think school is boring. Their sense of adventure is awakened on a school field trip to Käräjämäki prehistoric graveyard. But when a late-night scary trip to the graveyard gets out of hand, getting grounded might ruin the early fall weekend. Or will it...*

*Tero masterminds a plan to sneak away and the boys head to Pyhäjärvi-lake in Säskylä. What starts out as a fun fishing trip turns into a frightening battle against the raging, stormy lake and malicious cottagers. The boys find out about a recent string of local robberies, which are just the tip of the iceberg of bigger things going on. Unraveling the mystery almost takes a fateful turn for the boys.*

*Death's Head Moths is a story of adventure, friendship and the resourcefulness of young boys.*



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