

KIRSTI PALTTO: THE WHITE STONE
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CHAPTER 1: SÁIJA

1.

The summer day has given way to evening and the house is quiet. Grey has seeped through the window. Elle, a young girl, sits on a chest in the bedroom dressing a doll called Márjá that her Mom made for her. Márjá's face is dirty, her leg has almost fallen off, but she is still Elle's best friend.

"Don't cry, Márjá, just go to sleep. Nobody will bother you. Issat and Niillas are out and Mom is milking the cows. I don't know where Grandma's gone... and Dad is up in the mountains marking the reindeer calves." Elle cradles Márjá for a while and puts her to bed, covering her well so that the mosquitoes can't bite her. Márjá smiles at Elle from under the blanket.

Elle walks into the main room, sits down at the table and sighs. It is not nice to be in the house all alone. Mom asked Issat and Niillas to take her out to play, but her brothers didn't want to take her, saying she was too small.

Too small! She sniffs. Five years old last winter, she feels like a big girl. She looks out the window and sees her toys in the yard. Niillas and Issat have kicked her ball into the haystack. Her eyes move across the field, the river, over the hills and come to rest on Ptarmigan Mountain that has snow on its highest peak.

Grandma once told her that a Mountain Spirit lives inside Ptarmigan Mountain. He is a nice and kindly old man who looks after his people. Sometimes they live above ground, especially during the summer. They have reindeer and live in *goahtis* just like the Sami used to in the old days. Sometimes Grandma would see them driving their reindeer bulls and she had even talked to them. She told Elle that the person who befriends the *gufihtars* will be happy all their lives.

Elle remembers how Grandma used to sigh whenever she spoke about these people, as if her memory of them was beautiful but sad. Grandma used to stroke Elle's hair and warn her not to tell anyone the stories that she had told her about them.

Elle stares up at Ptarmigan Mountain and sighs once more. Black clouds are gathering behind the mountain. Is there going to be a thunderstorm? Fear creeps over her. She leans over and watches the dark clouds approaching. If only Mom would come back from milking the cows!

2.

Knock! Knock!

Elle is so startled that she jumps. Who's that knocking? Is it the wind blowing birch branches against the window?

No, somebody is definitely knocking on the window!

Elle is about to run to the cow shed to her Mom when a little girl appears at the window. The girl laughs and beckons her to come closer. Elle approaches warily. The girl is about the same size as Elle. She is wearing a red Sami hat and a grey *gákti*. Elle has never seen her before.

"Come outside!" the girl shouts. "Come on out and play!"

Without stopping to think, Elle runs out the door. The girl is waiting for her on the threshold.

“Who are you?” Elle asks. “What’s your name?”

The girl laughs so hard that her dark eyes disappear. She takes Elle’s hand.

“Guess!”

“You are...” Elle looks at the girl. If it wasn’t for her clothing, she could be Aunt Risten’s sister’s daughter. But she’s even wearing reindeer leather boots! Aunt Risten’s sister was supposed to be coming from Sweden today and she has a five year-old daughter, but children don’t dress like that in Sweden...

“Can't you guess?” the girl laughs. “I’m Sáija and I live in Ptarmigan Mountain.”

“In Ptarmigan Mountain!” Elle shrieks and pulls her hand away from the girl.

“Don't be afraid, I'm not going to bite you,” says Sáija, her voice bubbling like an underground stream. “I come here to see human children. I have passed by here many times and have seen you. I thought that you would want to have someone to play with, because you’re nearly always alone.”

Elle steps away from the threshold. She does not feel comfortable around this girl. What if she’s trying to trick her?

Suddenly they hear Niillas’ and Issat’s voices from behind the house.

“Let’s hide so that Niillas and Issat can’t see us!”

They run toward the woodshed. There is a big woodpile beside it. Elle disappears into the woodshed and Sáija follows her.

It is dark inside. The girls huddle close together and hardly dare to breath. They can hear the boys coming closer and closer. If only they don’t look inside the shed! Elle squeezes Sáija’s hand hard.

Luckily, Niillas and Issat pass by, looking for the ball they lost while playing football. Let them look all they want, Elle thinks, she won’t tell them where it is.

The two girls cautiously leave the woodshed. Niillas and Issat have disappeared. Elle pulls Sáija in the direction of a small knoll behind the cowshed. They run toward some trees where they cannot be seen.

“What do you want to play?” Elle asks Sáija when they have stopped.

Sáija wants to play reindeer and reindeer herder. She saw Elle’s make believe reindeer village when she was coming down from the mountain.

“I just hope that Niillas and Issat haven’t destroyed it,” says Elle.

“We will build it again!” Sáija laughs.

“Yes!” Elle replies happily. “We will build a better one! We will put it in a place where they will never find it and where they can’t destroy it, those two brats.”

They walk on a little further and come to the place where Elle's reindeer village used to be. There is no sign of it.

“My two brothers!” Elle storms, stamping the ground. “They always bug me!”

But Sáija has already started making a new village, collecting twigs from the ground from which she makes a *gohti*. Elle makes another *gohti*. Soon, the village is ready. They collect pine cones which they pretend are reindeer.

They play all evening, moving, traveling and grazing the reindeer. Elle has never had such a good time.

“I will come again tomorrow,” promises Sáija when they part.

“Please come!” says Elle, joyfully looking at her new friend. She turns to run home. Sáija’s *gákti* flutters in the wind as she dodges twigs and disappears under the fence.

3.

Since then, Elle has been playing with Sáija every day. Niillas and Issat are left alone as Elle no longer needs their company. Her brothers are not happy with the change in Elle. They have looked for Elle's little village, but have not found it. They suspect that Elle has found something that is fun and they want to be part of it.

"Listen Elle," Niillas says one afternoon. "I'll give you a piece of candy if you tell us where your reindeer village is."

"I won't tell you anything," says Elle. She is amused to see her brothers so bewildered. She won't tell them that her village is under a thick pine tree at the edge of the knoll.

Her Mom is happy that Elle has turned into such an easy-going child.

"Elle is a big girl now," she says proudly.

"She is just trying to be a big girl," scoffs Issat. "Big girls don't play with pine cones."

Elle doesn't care what her brothers say. She puts on her shoes and is about to run to the knoll to meet Sáija.

"Why do you play by the knoll so much these days?" Grandma asks Elle. She believes in all kinds of underworld spirits, *gufihtars* and *stállus* — Who knows what might happen to her, playing there all alone...

"No reason," Elle answers. Sáija has told her that she mustn't tell anybody about her and that if she even hints about Sáija's visits, she won't come back to play with her anymore.

"Let her go," Mom says to Grandma, "there are no wolves on the knoll."

Then, turning to Elle, Mom says, "Don't play on the sandy slope."

"I promise," Elle says, and quickly runs out the door.

"What's up with that girl?" Grandma wonders, watching Elle as she leaves.

"There is nothing wrong with her," says Mom, "she's just a normal healthy girl." Grandma falls silent. She is thinking about the sudden change in Elle. The girl used to tag along after her all day, begging her to go here and there with her, not wanting to spend a single minute alone. There must be something on the knoll, Grandma thinks, moving away from the window.

4.

Sáija is already moving the reindeer around when Elle arrives.

"Do you know what I was thinking?" Sáija asks when Elle sits down beside her.

"What?"

"That you should come and visit our village!"

"Your village!" exclaims Elle, alarmed.

"Yes!" says Sáija. "Our village is behind Juniper Hill, up there on the top of Ptarmigan Mountain. It's not very far."

"I wouldn't dare! My Mom would get angry."

"We wouldn't stay long. You'll be back before bedtime. Your mother won't even notice you've been gone," says Sáija.

Elle remembers Grandma's stories about the *gufihtars* and the Mountain Spirit. She hasn't dared to ask Sáija if she actually lives *inside* Ptarmigan Mountain. Elle wouldn't dare go there! What if she couldn't escape?

"We won't go inside the mountain," Sáija says. "Our summer place is on top of the mountain. Come on, I'll bring you back before evening!"

Elle kicks at some lichen on the ground. She doesn't know what to do. She doesn't even dare to think of going so far away from home. The Mountain Spirit sounds nice, but still... What if she refuses? Will Sáija stop visiting her?

Sáija takes Elle's hand and reassures her.

"Come on!" she says, "Nothing will happen to you."

"But it's getting late..."

"Come on!" Sáija repeats and starts walking. She stops to look back at Elle, who is just standing there, biting her lip. Elle is afraid that her mother will suspect something and she would no longer be allowed to come to the knoll by herself. Maybe she'll even get a spanking.

"Just come on!" Sáija says.

Elle glances at Sáija's smiling face, and before she realizes it, she is running down the knoll toward Juniper Hill with her new friend.

5.

They follow a path through the woods that Elle knows very well. She has walked there many times with her mother, picking berries or collecting lichen and once she walked there with her father when he was taking their cows to the marsh.

As they walk along she also notices a birch tree that has fallen over the path. The sun feels warm through the branches and Elle is in a good mood again.

"Have you ever listened to the wind play music?" Sáija asks Elle as they come to the marsh.

"No! I thought that the wind only whistles," laughs Elle.

"It whistles too," says Sáija, "but it can do much more. Sometimes it tells stories, sometimes it sings."

Elle slows down. She hears the wind whistling in the branches. She tries hard to hear it playing music, but try as she might, she can't.

"Be completely quiet," says Sáija, stopping. Elle stares at the top of the trees and listens.

It's true! The whistling slowly changes. The wind is playing music: sometimes it tinkles like a little bell, sometimes it clangs like a cow's bell. Little by little Elle can make out words too. The wind is telling a story!

Elle hears a story about a fledgling bird that learned to fly too soon. The mother bird tried to keep it in the nest, but it escaped to the mountain. There it chirped and chirped so that the air was filled with echoes. Wherever the little bird chirped, flowers and birds appeared.

The wind's voice dies down. Elle glances at Sáija.

"Did you hear that?" Sáija asks her.

"I did!"

"Now do you believe me that the wind also tells stories?"

Elle nods her head slowly.

"The wind can do something else," says Sáija. "Do you want to see?"

"Yes I do!"

"You are not allowed to be afraid," Sáija says, squeezing Elle's hand. "The wind is my good friend. Do you promise not to be afraid?"

Elle promises. Sáija puts her hands over her mouth and whistles. Elle is a little scared, but doesn't say anything. Sáija whistles again. It seems like she is waiting for a response.

And then it comes! From across the marsh, they hear a whistling sound coming toward them quickly. Even though Elle has promised not to be afraid, her

heart is beating very fast. She grabs Sáija's hand to try to pull her away from the sound of the whistle.

"Don't be afraid!" shouts Sáija. Elle doesn't have time to say anything because the whistling has stopped and she feels her feet leaving the ground.

Elle is terrified. The place where she was standing just a minute ago is suddenly beneath her and she is flying!

"The wind will take us to our village," Sáija shouts. "Hold my hand real tight so you can stay close to me."

Elle's heart calms down. It is nice to fly! The marsh is far below them and they are flying over Juniper Hill like two crows. Suddenly they are back on the ground. They are standing in front of a village that is right at the bases of Ptarmigan Mountain.

"Thank you, wind!" shouts Sáija. "Come back to pick us up after a while!"

The wind whistles softly and disappears. Elle looks in the direction of the whistle and can't understand how they got there so fast. But Sáija is pulling her in the direction of her village.

[*The White Stone* is a story of a young Sami girl, told from her perspective, who finds a new friend in Sáija, a *gufihtar* girl (in the Sami tradition, *gufihtars* are people who live underground). Together, the girls travel to Sáija's world where Elle experiences many adventures and learns important lessons about the significance of her language and cultural heritage. If you are interested in reading the rest of the story, please let the Sami publisher Davvi Girji know at davvi@davvi.no. The translated manuscript, which Davvi Girji has agreed to publish, has been sitting at the publisher since May 2007 but very little has happened since. Your support is greatly appreciated!]