

The White Stone

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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 mother made for her. Márjá's face is dirty and 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. Issát and Niillas are out and Mum 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. She doesn't enjoy being in the house all alone. Mum asked Issát and Niillas to take her out to play, but her brothers didn't want to, 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 Issát 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 caring 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*¹ just like the Sámi 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*² will be happy their whole life.

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 Mum 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 mother 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 Sámi hat and a grey *gákti*³. Elle has never seen her before.

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

¹ A traditional Sámi dwelling made of wooden poles, turf and moss.

² Underworld people who resemble the Sámi with their way of life. They are wealthier than 'ordinary' Sámi and have large reindeer herds. It is possible to obtain a *gufihtar's* reindeer herd by throwing a knife over the herd. Sometimes a Sámi man may marry a beautiful *gufihtar* woman.

³ A traditional Sámi dress.

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 weren’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 on Ptarmigan Mountain.”

“On 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 down here to look at 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 Issát’s voices from behind the house.

“Let’s hide so that Niillas and Issát can’t see us.”

They run toward the woodshed. There is a large 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 breathe. They can hear the boys coming closer and closer. As long as they don't look inside the shed. Elle squeezes Sáija's hand hard.

Luckily, Niillas and Issát 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 Issát 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 Issát 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 Issát 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 their sister 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 mother is happy that Elle has turned into such an easygoing and independent child.

“Elle is a big girl now,” she says proudly.

“She is just trying to be a big girl,” scoffs Issát. “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*⁴. Who knows what might happen to her, playing there all alone.

⁴ A Sámi giant who lives in the forest with his wife and dog. Usually he is mean and plays tricks on people. If a Sámi man meets Stállu in the forest,

“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,” Mum says to Grandma. “There are no wolves on the knoll.” Then, turning to Elle, Mum 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 Mum. “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 Mum 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.

he has to wrestle with him. If he succeeds in killing him, he receives some of Stállu’s hidden gold and silver.

Elle remembers Grandma's stories about the *gufihtars* and the Mountain Spirit. She hasn't been brave enough 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 think of going so far away from home. The Mountain Spirit sounds appealing, 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 go 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 realises 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 reach 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 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.”

“Don’t 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 as if she is waiting for a response.

And then it comes. From across the marsh they hear a whistling sound coming quickly toward them. Even though Elle has promised not to be afraid, her heart is beating 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 really tight so you can stay close to me."

Elle's heart calms down. It is fun 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 base 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 Old Shaman

1.

Just as Elle comes downstairs, Grandma steps inside the house. Elle doesn't dare look at her, and quickly runs outside. Mum is out by the woodshed, piling up wood. Niillas and Issát are helping her.

"Are you sick? Why have you been indoors in this kind of nice weather?" asks Niillas.

"I was playing in the attic," Elle answers, looking away. She would like to ask Mum if she can go to Ptarmigan Mountain but she can't because her brothers are listening. They would just make fun of her.

"When is Dad coming home?" Elle asks.

"Dad's coming tomorrow and I get to go with him," brags Issát, who is older than Niillas.

"I'm gonna go too," says Niillas.

"You?" laughs Issát. "You wouldn't last a day up there. We don't take slow coaches with us."

The two boys start arguing about who will get to do the calf marking. Elle takes advantage of their arguing to talk to her mother.

"Mum," she whispers, glancing at the boys, "Can I go to Ptarmigan Mountain? I would only stay there for three days and I will definitely come back."

Mum glances at Elle and laughs. So these are the kinds of games that her little daughter has invented – to go to Ptarmigan Mountain.

Reassuring her mother, Elle says, “Don’t worry, I’ll come back.”

“Sure,” laughs Mum again. “But remember to come back in three days.”

First Elle doesn’t believe that Mum has really let her go. She has been fully prepared to prove to her that there are good people up there on Ptarmigan Mountain. Now she doesn’t have to explain anything. Her eyes shine with joy.

“I’ll send your regards,” Elle shouts and rushes into the house. She can go. Sáija will be happy now.

“Do, by all means,” Elle can hear Mum saying before she disappears inside.

Grandma is sitting by the table when Elle flies in.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” Grandma asks.

Elle stops suddenly. She glances at Grandma’s wrinkled face and remembers the picture at the bottom of the chest. She gets an odd feeling. Why did she see Grandma at the bottom of the chest? And why did she go inside the mountain? Or did she just dream everything?

Elle turns around quickly and leaves the house in a flash. She knows that Grandma was about to forbid her from going to the knoll. Elle had planned to take a bag with her, but she has to go without it now. She runs past the shed and up to the knoll.

2.

Sáija is sitting on a tussock when Elle comes to the knoll. When she sees Elle, she jumps up.

“Did your Mum really let you come?” asks Sáija.

“She did,” says Elle. “For three whole days.”

Sáija throws her arms around Elle’s neck and laughs.

“Can you make it past Juniper Hill okay?” she asks Elle. “Now that we don’t have to hurry, we won’t have to take the wind there.”

“I can,” Elle says bravely.

“Let’s go then!”

They walk along the same path beside the marsh as they did the day before and continue on in the direction of Juniper Hill. For a long time they walk silently, Sáija first and Elle behind her. “Soon we will come to the Old Shaman’s house,” Sáija says suddenly.

“Shaman?” Elle feels frightened and stops.

“Ye-es,” Sáija says slowly. “The Old Shaman doesn’t do anything. He just shouts and roars – nothing else. He just asks everyone who walks by his house all kinds of questions. If you can’t answer them, he doesn’t let you go any further. But if your answers are quick, and if the Shaman likes you then he will give you a gift.”

“You should’ve told me that there would be a Shaman.” Elle becomes angry. “I wouldn’t have come if I had known that.”

“Stop that nonsense,” Sáija tells her. “The Old Shaman is as harmless as a lamb.”

“I never go any place where there’s a shaman,” Elle cries. She sits down on a clump of grass and stares straight ahead angrily.

“If you are such a wimp, then stay there.” Sáija is annoyed and continues walking. Elle doesn’t even glance in her direction. Let her go. She won’t go to a shaman. No. Tears well up in her eyes.

Some time passes before Elle realises that Sáija has gone on and that she is all alone in the forest. She jumps up. Fear and anxiety fill her heart. Where is she anyway? And why? Luckily she feels the warmth of the White Stone inside her dress. She calms down immediately and takes it out.

“Sáija has left me,” she complains to the Stone. “Help me, my little White Stone.”

At first the Stone doesn't seem to hear Elle. Then it starts to tingle and sparkle in the glint of the sun's rays. Elle can hear its words:

The Old Shaman, with drooping pants,
Grinning face, toothless mouth,
Though shrewd, harms nobody.

“What?” Elle can hardly believe her ears. The White Stone is making fun of the shaman.

The Old Shaman, beltless gákti,
Laceless boots, hairless head,
Though shrewd, harms nobody.

The stone continues to sing. It seems to be dancing in her palm. “*Drooping pants, hairless head ...*” Elle thinks about the lyrics and bursts into laughter. She takes the Stone between her hands and jumps around and around, laughing. She is having such a good time that she doesn't even notice Sáija, who has come back to get her.

“Why on earth are you acting so crazily?” asks Sáija, putting a damper on Elle's fun.

“Oh, nothing,” she says. “I just decided to visit the Old Shaman after all.”

Elle starts running along the path again. Sáija shrugs in bewilderment and follows her. She doesn't understand Elle's behaviour at all, but doesn't ask her about it.

3.

After a while Elle and Sáija come to a big mound of earth.

“That is the Old Shaman's house,” says Sáija and stops. “Are you afraid?”



“No,” laughs Elle, taking a couple of steps towards the mound.

“It might be that the Old Shaman won’t bother to see us at all, but if he appears, don’t run away. And remember to answer all the questions he asks.”

The two girls walk hand in hand towards the earth hut where the Old Shaman lives. Not until they actually pass it, does the door in the mound suddenly open and a terribly dirty, ugly, old man appears.

“Well, who are you?” asks the old man in a thundering voice. He clammers up to the ground. He is skinny and bent over. Elle thinks that he is exactly as the White Stone said he would be.

“This is not right,” says the old man, ambling over to the girls. “Why are you, inhabitant of Ptarmigan Mountain, traveling with a human child?”

The old man bends down to look at Sáija.

“We are friends. And we are going to our village,” Sáija answers.

“Oh you are, are you?” yells the Shaman and turns to stare at Elle.

“And who, little smarty-pants, are you, standing there so puny and paltry?”

“I am Elle, Johan-Biehtar’s daughter from Cloudberry River.”

“Elle? I see,” says the Shaman, stroking his chin. “Well, Elle, do you know how many calf tails it takes to reach the sky?”

Elle doesn’t even begin to think how many.

“Fifty,” she says. Sáija is amused.

“Fifty? I see,” laughs the Shaman. “Well, do you know why my son ran off with a human being’s daughter?”

“The daughter must have been beautiful,” Elle answers.

The Shaman looks curiously at Elle. Maybe this little girl is not so paltry after all.

“Beautiful?” he asks. “How do you know?”

“I’m sure your son wouldn’t take an ugly girl,” replies Elle. The Shaman falls quiet for a moment.

“You seem to be a smart child,” he says. “Will you take my gift?”

Elle nods. The Shaman trots back to his house.

Sáija praises Elle and squeezes her hand. “You did well.”

“Luckily. I was so afraid that I wouldn’t know what to say.”

The Shaman returns. In his hands he has an enormous pair of leather boots.

“I am giving these to you,” he says, handing the leather boots to Elle. “When you wear them, your toes won’t be chilly. And when you wear them, you won’t get lost, even if you climb up to Rastegáisa all alone.”

Elle looks at the old, leather boots. They have shoe grass inside them.

“Thank you very much,” says Elle, even though she thinks that the boots are ugly and much too big for her.

“Now you can go,” says the Shaman. “Come back and visit me again, Elle.”

Sáija quickly starts to walk away, pulling Elle with her. The Shaman stays outside to watch them leave. It was good that the girls didn’t make a detour to avoid the old shaman’s house but came his way.

