

Eeva Joenpelto Elämän rouva, rouva Glad

Translated by Ritva (Cederstrom) Koivu

The Bride of Life

Chapter XXXII

Curtains were already drawn in the window, but a lamp was still burning in the kitchen. Saara's possessions had been lifted onto the steps, the horse-drawn cart was turning to the lane and starting back home. Saara raised her hand and knocked at the door. What else could she do? The light went off. Of course, they were always afraid of thieves and, of course, they were getting ready to go to bed already. Saara knocked again, loudly. Mother's footsteps were heard pattering behind the door, but she didn't open it.

"It's me, Saara!"

Still it took a while before the lamp was lit again and Mother cautiously unlatched the lock. Her throat seemed to stretch, her jaw started trembling; no criminal could have frightened her worse than the sight of her own daughter in the August night.

"Saara dear...What is it now? Why are you back at home and at this time of night?" Father stepped out from the front room, pulling his pants on. His hair stood up tousled as if he had been sleeping for some time already. He didn't even have his usual shrewd look. He was stunned by sleep and astonishment.

Saara carried her things in now that the door was finally open. She had decided that she wouldn't cry and that, in any case, she wouldn't tell them what had happened.

"You're coming with all your things? Is that all you have now? No, you're just coming for a visit. Or what?"

Saara threw off her coat. With a haughty look, she said between deep sighs, "I just couldn't stay there any longer. They made me work like a slave and you would never believe how nasty they were."

Mother made an effort to think, and father sat on the edge of a stool and wiggled his toes. "And nothing has been heard from Åke?"

"I couldn't stay there any longer. Never a moment of rest. Up, up even at midnight. And all..."

"Saara can rest here for awhile." Mother was pulling on a cardigan. "You go back when you feel that you can. Rich people are like that. No mercy for anybody."

Father had found slippers for his feet, the old checkered slippers, and padded around the room while his mind seemed to be resuming its usual calculations.

"You stay here then, but not too long. You must be careful in what you do. I've always said that you mustn't be stupid. You must be smart and patient. Smart like your brother."

"Don't you go and tell him that I'm home now." Saara could not sit still, she had to keep pacing across the room.

"But how..." Mother's tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"Yes, better not. And you'll be leaving soon anyway. Martti will be here for Christmas though, but that's a long time from now. Long before that you'll go back like a good girl."

“But I won’t go back, not ever.”

Father started suddenly whirling like a top in the small room among the auction-bought furniture.

“Have you gone and done something stupid, you poor girl?” Mother was ready to start crying.

“I’m hungry. Give me something to eat. At least don’t start crying.”

“You see...” now it seemed that Father was in pain, maybe he would soon start complaining about some kind of ache. “You see, if there’s going to be a divorce...That would be a big scandal... for that reason alone, you have to go back and very soon, too. So they can’t say that you were the one who left. You see, this is a question of big money after all.” Father started to spin around again.

“I’ll go and have a sandwich at least,” Saara said and walked towards the pantry. A simple thing like hunger finally aroused her mother.

“Haven’t they given you anything to eat? What could I find for you now? But not even food!”

“They are very nasty, as I told you. The mother-in-law particularly, from the very beginning. I’ll have bread and butter if you have some. And I got money, too,” Saara shouted from the kitchen to her father who had extended his walk to the parlor. “They gave me this.”

“What for? A lot of it?”

“I haven’t looked. See for yourself.”

Saara took the envelope out of her pocket, gave it to Mother, who in turn, with her arm and body stretched out, gave it to Father.

Saara sat in her old place and bit into a sandwich, her elbows leaning on the table. She wouldn’t tell them anything, not the real reason.

“Is there a lot of it?” It felt good to be able to shout as loudly as she wanted. “Can’t you count?”

“As far as I understand,” Father spoke in a serious voice because he respected money, “this is not very much. If you think about it, this isn’t much at all. You could have made more in two months as a postmistress. This is nothing yet. This is of no account. This is only.... You’ll have to go back there.”

“Give me the money, let me have it!” Holding a sandwich in one hand, Saara went and took the money from her father’s hand. “Is this all? Anyway, I’m not going back.”

Father stood still now but seemed angry because he had been holding in his hands some money which had then been snatched away.

“I’ll go to bed,” he said, offended at the whole world. “I probably won’t be able to get any sleep though. And I thought that they were bringing that yellow paint powder. That’s what I had been waiting for all day long. Then you come.”

“Yes, me! But I’ll be gone soon, don’t worry. I’ll get a job somewhere. I’ll move far away from here. You won’t have to see me or be ashamed of me.”

“Saara, Saara,” Mother was leaning against the cook stove and straightening her nightgown. It was grey, cheap and rumpled. “Of course you can stay here. You must eat now since they didn’t even give you any food.”

“No, they didn’t. You can’t even imagine it all.”

Mother looked at her daughter closely. “You haven’t had enough sleep either. You look different somehow, tired maybe.”

“Let me be. Don’t stare at me.”

“I won’t, I won’t. You eat now. I’ll go to bed. Oh, my teeth have to be cleaned first.”

Mother stood in front of a small, originally white-framed mirror, took a toothbrush from the shelf below it, padded to get a glass of water, dug the dentures out of her mouth, dropped them into the glass, picked them up and brushed them slowly, carefully, for a long time. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror, sighed at her wrinkles, sagging mouth, everything.

“At least we got running water last summer,” she mumbled toothlessly. “It cost a lot.”

Then she sighed one more time, fitted the row of teeth first into her upper then into her lower jaw and peered in the mirror again. She rinsed the brush, poured the water from the glass into the slop-pail and went to the bedroom to sleep beside her husband. “Don’t forget to turn off the light!” Mother’s voice sounded from behind the door, and she didn’t have to answer.

Up to this moment, Saara had felt strong. Now, she didn’t know how to go on. When Mother, a simple and good person, had been standing there brushing her teeth, Saara realized where she had been for over a year and where she was back again. There, in the other place, real things took place in secret; what was seen was always tidy. Here, everything was open, bare, even ugly. She didn’t know if she had the strength to go on.

That fall, Saara learned that lies came in handy. If she hadn’t told lies, what then? If you told wild stories you could even start believing them yourself. They pitied her, were nice to her. At the beginning of November, mother brought the news that that stuck-up man who had left his wife, meaning Åke, had been seen in town. He had been driving a car, she added, as if that were some kind of wonder. What was Saara going to do now? Wasn’t Saara planning to go back? Or was Saara perhaps waiting for Åke to come and take her there? What was this all about? Saara told them one more story, but she also began to understand that the time for stories was almost over.

She got into the habit of sitting in the cold porch, mute and angry, from one week to the next. Still she kept arranging, rearranging things in her mind, making them sound more beautiful. She was not thinking about the child very much and about its father hardly at all. The long, untrimmed branches of the bare apple trees were screeching against the glass panes. Saara wrapped an overcoat tightly around her and thought that she would freeze to death. At the same time, she hardly felt the cold at all and she wondered about that. Was it the poor unborn baby that kept her so warm? Watching her mother carry armloads of firewood into the house and slop-buckets out of it, Saara started smiling secretly to herself. She would be all right. When the child was born, she would think of something. She would go away with the baby and do housecleaning until the child was old enough to go to school and then she would get a job. She could do all that after the child was born. Suddenly, she didn’t feel any need to tell lies any more.

“Mother!” Saara went to the kitchen where mother was standing at the stove measuring water into a pot for starting the Christmas beer. There was the smell of malt that belonged to this time of year. The air was heavy; smoke didn’t rise up the chimney. Saara took off her topmost overcoat and patted her stomach. As Mother only kept measuring and counting, she stepped quite close to her with a tender smile on her face.

“Mother, you know what! I’m going to have a baby in the spring! Imagine, a baby, in the spring! Then it won’t be cold and dark!”

“Saara!” Mother dropped the ladle in the water. “Saara!”

“Don’t start asking whose it is now. That doesn’t matter. It’s mine and that’s all right.”

“That’s why you... And you say that it’s all right.”

Suddenly Saara was alone in the kitchen. Mother was lying down in the bedroom. Saara was perplexed. She had only told the truth, now that she herself didn’t think of it as anything unusual any more. She took off her cardigan and stood in front of the mirror to see how she had changed. From that small mirror she could see only her radiant face.

“Put more wood in the stove,” Mother called from the bedroom and it sounded as if she was blowing her nose several times.

“You make the Christmas beer. I can’t right now. I don’t feel...”

Strange, Saara thought, people were really odd. Nevertheless, she walked back and forth and made the Christmas preparations. She even asked about the Christmas tree, where it would be bought and when father would bring it in. Mother didn’t answer. She didn’t even want to see Saara when she went to the bedroom and walked about the room. She turned toward the wall and lay there, her feet outside the edge of the bed so as not to soil the newly washed bedspread. However, she had to come round, after being bent even to the ground, she had to straighten up again, little by little.

“So that’s what it was!” She staggered slightly as she came back to the kitchen, glanced at Saara’s stomach and blew her nose once more. “We’re not going to tell Father about this. Martti will be here too. What’s he going to say?”

“What business is this of his?”

“Of course it is! Good Lord, you always cause only trouble. And this kind of trouble!”

Saara was standing in the middle of the floor. By rights she should have felt offended, but she only felt like smiling now that everything was settled.

So they didn’t talk to Father or to anybody. One day mother brought Saara her own maternity corset, which she hadn’t thrown away. How could that possibly have fitted Saara, for she was much taller than Mother. She started trimming the Christmas tree with the same old trinkets they had kept from year to year, even humming the tunes of Christmas songs.

“And you just sing.”

“Why not? I sing when I feel like it.”

Mother said nothing to that, only kept opening the baking oven more often than seemed necessary. The matter was not discussed at all until Martti came home the day before Christmas Eve and was standing wise and all-knowing in the porch, then in the kitchen and the parlor, and finally, in his own room. Mother looked at Saara and walked after her son. Soon they came out again and then Mother, of course, was crying and leaning on the child on whom they had placed all their hope and faith and to whom they had given all their love and who had never let them down. Martti was offended; he kept tugging at his waistcoat, pushing his hands into his pockets. He was a fine gentleman, enraged because, when he had condescended to step down here among the folk, they had started telling him about their vulgar affairs. They talked about Saara as if she were not in the house at all.

“Why didn’t she get rid of it at once? Don’t cry Mother, people do that.”

“How could she have understood?”

“To go and become some workingman’s whore even if Åke did leave her. Where’s Father?”

“He...” Mother glanced at Saara who was leaning against the wood box, now at least surprised but not afraid yet.

“Father bought a load of carpets, plush carpets. Now he’s making the rounds and selling them. Somebody might buy them for Christmas.”

Martti was about to direct his disdain at his avaricious father, who sold carpets when no painting jobs were available, but he came back to Saara. He didn’t get close to his sister, only turned around.

“Think about it. I can’t show my face here any more, not in the whole town. I can’t meet Åke, and he’s from my student association after all. Why couldn’t you just keep waiting for him? Although, of course, Åke got tired of you from the very beginning. But if you had waited, he would have had to come back, eventually. You would have got money at least, a lot of money. But no, the girl comes back home thick at the waist. Goddamn. Then we’ll have to support her again. And there she’s just standing and staring as if nothing had happened.”

“Yes, it’s a shame,” Mother was tugging at the sleeves of her jacket, “but things like that have happened before in this world.”

“We’re not going to feed any bastards here. We’ll have to give the child away at once. She couldn’t have done worse even if she had tried.”

To everyone’s astonishment, the figure that was leaning against the wood box started screaming, not hysterically, perhaps just to let them know that insignificant though she was, she did have ears.

“You won’t take the baby. You won’t, you won’t...”

“Shut up! Nobody asked you anything.”

“That’s true, nobody did.” Suddenly Saara felt that she was being very reasonable. “You always told me what to do and how to behave. You never asked me. Finally I’m going to decide what I want to do.”

“What’s that? What could you possibly want? I have a good job already, I’m a doctor. From a family like this, but a doctor. This is too much for anybody’s reputation.”

“Not so loud now,” Mother tried to be a peacemaker or perhaps she was afraid that neighbors would hear. “And Martti dear -Who would even know, you live so far away? We would just live as quietly as before and soon the child would grow up.”

“There’s enough trash as it is. But I’m planning to get married and I can’t bring that woman here if my sister has a bastard.”

“Why not? How nice! You’re getting married!”

“I can’t because she’s a learned woman with a master’s degree and...”

Mother glanced at the Christmas tree, stood staring at the faintly swinging silver bell.

“I don’t know about the learned and gentrified. Like Åke. We were so happy at Saara’s wedding. Then...”

“But I’ll take better care of my business than she did.”

As her brother was preaching, Saara felt that she was getting smaller, diminished as always when her brother was present. All her certainty and happiness drained away. Only her middle seemed to stick out larger than ever.

“Let’s not talk about that now.” Mother seemed quite exhausted. “Christmas is coming.”

“Christmas! If I could I would go back at once.”

Mother instantly started fussing with something. Martti mentioned the bad cabbage smell and went into his room. Saara also sneaked away from the kitchen. From the clothes rack, she took whatever coats she happened to grab and went out to sit on the porch where she had spent so much time in the fall. The windows were frozen, it was pitch black outside, the wind was rising, the branches of the apple scraped wide arcs on the glass. They made noises that changed from choking laughter to rhythmic tapping. Saara did not cry, she thought she would never cry again, the worst was certainly over. Mother and her brother were talking again in the kitchen in low voices. They were probably arranging her affairs. Perhaps they were making plans about how they would snatch the baby from her when it was scarcely out of her body. But she would never allow that. She wouldn't let them force her in this matter. She had to be allowed to make up her own mind. She could still hear her mother and her brother talking undisturbed now, in controlled voices, tensely, angrily. Saara felt that she was once again outside the smoking-room, only this time she could take care of herself.

“Don't worry,” mother said to her in the evening, holding her hand on Saara's shoulder. “Martti is shouting but that'll pass. I'm on your side. I may not be much but we'll manage somehow. Father, too, took it rather calmly.”

On Boxing Day Martti started getting ready to leave. Nobody was really sorry. He was educated. That's what he was like now, like all other learned people and gentlemen. Saara whispered to mother that they hadn't remembered to light the Christmas candles even once. Would they do that on New Year's Day? And Mother was quite friendly to Saara.

With a suitcase in his hand Martti came to the kitchen, his face expressionless. He put his bag on the floor and took a paper out of his pocket and asked Saara to write her name in it.

“What is it?”

“Can't you even read? An open letter for a power of attorney. Just sign it.”

“Power of attorney...” Saara didn't even wonder very much. Oh yes, she even tried to laugh. Åke, too, had been sending those. With a pen in her hand she tried to remember what the power of attorney was needed for. Perhaps for the divorce? But she made an effort to joke and said, “Is it about lumber sales?”

Martti looked at her as if she were somebody insane from whom he had to go away as soon as possible.

“What else?”

Saara wrote her name. Martti waved the paper in the air to dry the ink, folded it and put it back in his pocket.

“Are you going to invite us to your wedding?” Mother asked as Martti was saying goodbye.

“We'll see now. It's a long journey. Maybe too expensive for you.”

“Whatever is convenient for you.” Mother was humble, she almost curtsied to her educated son. She consoled herself by thinking that she didn't even have suitable clothes to wear.

Saara was staring at the glistening midwinter snow in the yard. She didn't go anywhere, she just breathed in the fresh air of the yard. She was quite big already and she wrapped herself in Mother's old scarves. She didn't care for any maternity clothes.

Almost secretly she sewed small shirts and diapers out of soft, worn sheets, as well as she could. She was even-tempered and trusting, and Mother seemed very nice to her. Her cheeks had a rosy glow as she talked with Mother in the kitchen.

“Then I’ll tie her apron strings when she’s standing in front of me, and I’ll tie a bow in her hair. If it’s a girl, of course. Then I’ll teach her to be good and to behave well. I’ll take care that she’ll never get hurt.”

“You do that Saara dear. That’s what all good mothers do.”

“And I want people to smile at her in a real and honest way. They should be kind and friendly, and the sun should also be shining, all the time.”

“That’s what we all wish for our children. But where in the world would you find such a place, poor girl. And the sun shining all the time.”

Mother smiled, in a real and honest way. Saara was as enthusiastic, as eager as if she were about to receive a present.

“I’ll make such a place all by myself! I’m not afraid of anything.”

“That’s as it should be. No use being afraid. And, Lordy, it will be spring soon too, and Father’s getting work and everything will start over. At least you seem healthy enough.”

“I wish it’s a girl! And beautiful and wise. Then I would comb her hair and dress her up. Nobody would ever be allowed to speak angrily to her. I would always be with her. That’ll work out, won’t it?”

“Why wouldn’t it work out? Sometimes you can bring her here too, so that I can look after her. It can’t be as bad a thing as Martti makes it out to be. Father too has quieted down long ago.”

“Yes, and then I’ll take her to school, I won’t care about myself at all. She must have beautiful clothes and dolls and everything. And I alone will be responsible for her. I won’t take any advice from anybody any more. Wouldn’t that be a good way to become wise?”

“Maybe so. Anyway, you should rest all you can now. The baby won’t let you sleep at first.”

“Yes it will. She’ll be such a good girl.”

And a girl it was, she was born quickly, and almost painlessly, and the sun did shine and the trees were frothy with new greenery. On the second day Mother came to see her and brought anemones that she had picked from the yard. Saara smoothed her hair that had got sweaty and then dry again, put her hand on her breast and smiled. The room was full of women who had just given birth but none was as happy as she was.

“How can one be so happy about a baby? I couldn’t even sleep a wink. I really couldn’t. You should see the baby. What does Father say?”

“Nothing much. Sends his greetings. He has a lot of work now. But you try to rest a little now.” And Mother was so good, patted Saara’s hand and if she seemed to have tears in her eyes, they were probably tears of joy. Soon she started looking at the curtainless windows and cups on the night table.

“I’m wondering, really wondering.” It was the fourth day and Saara was still out of this world. She put her arm under her neck and beamed with pride.

“What are you wondering so much dear child?”

“Why is it that milk just keeps leaking out of the left breast although it’s flowing evenly from the other one?”

“That’s only at the beginning. It will even out later on.”

Saara sighed and looked at the ceiling. If there was one time of her life that she wanted to remember, it was this. For once she had been a success. She had given birth and the baby was a girl and healthy too, and she could nurse her. Nobody gave her any advice, except the midwives a little. They, too, simply meant well.

“I can tie a bow in her hair, too. Not yet, of course, but in a year or so. Then she’ll certainly have hair. The ribbons must be ironed, no rumpled hair ribbons for my little girl.”

“First you’ll come home. Then we’ll see.”

“Yes, and I’m not afraid at all. I won’t be the first mother to take care of her baby alone.”

“Not by any means.” But why was the old woman so quiet, why did she now cry and sniffle in a way that was different from last time? Why did she look as if she believed in some probably stupid fate. There was no fate and if there was, so be it.

Then mother, too, stopped visiting. Saara didn’t mind very much. Women left with their bundles and others came in still puffing and groaning. She talked to all of them in a cheerful way. She wanted to encourage everybody. Some fathers, too, came to visit their wives. She felt nothing. Those fathers didn’t seem like much. Sometimes even a young mother was crying when the husband came in drunk and sat there yammering something. The baby, the girl, was nursing very well. Saara would have wanted to hold the baby at her breasts much longer, but they always took her away so soon. Half sitting on the bed she looked at her little one, who was tucked under the midwife’s arm, as long as she could see her before the door was closed.

On the seventh or eighth day after the midday meal -and how thirsty Saara had been - she opened her gown ready to nurse and, looking at the door, waited for the baby. For some reason the midwives were slow; everybody else but she got a bundle. Then the oldest of the midwives came, and instead of the baby, she was carrying Saara’s clothes, and she told her to get dressed.

“Get dressed? The baby must be fed first.”

“Your mother’s waiting for you downstairs. You just put on your clothes and meet her there.” That’s what it was. They had taken the baby to Mother; they would go home now. Saara obeyed, got up and put on her now loose clothes, waved her hand cheerfully to the other mothers and started walking along the halls and down the stairs. She didn’t feel dizzy at all; she had been up a little every day. But downstairs she met only her mother, who had an air of forced, stony calm, and no baby.

“Where is she? I must fetch the baby!”

“Come on now. We have to go, the bill has already been paid.”

“Yes, yes, but I’ve got to get the girl first. I’m not going to leave her here. That would be crazy.”

“Listen, Saara,” Mother was quite small; she shouldn’t have been made to do this. They shouldn’t have required so much of her. She shouldn’t have been made to tell that woman, her own daughter, that the baby had been taken away, given for adoption, and that she would never see the child again.

“You cannot do this! You cannot do this to a human being!”

“Saara, listen...”

How could she have listened when she fell down onto a chair and the room started spinning around in ever-closer circles until it didn't exist any more. A midwife came to see her and a moment later a doctor probably, in any case a man in a white coat. He slapped her once on both cheeks and watched her. So when Saara woke again into the cold world, the first thing she saw was the doctor's calm, observant gaze and the stethoscope hanging from his neck. Her face twisted and she understood everything. "Get up now, madam!" And Saara did get up because the voice was a doctor's voice and she had heard such a voice before.

"Can you walk?" And Saara showed them that she could. She walked straight to the door. Mother was still talking to the doctor, apologizing probably, and then she came after her.

"This is not done! You cannot do this to a human being."

When they were outside, Mother said, "Look at this. The sun is shining as we thought it would be. And look at all the trees. Everything will start all over again, your entire life. It really will. And Åke's father has been so very kind that he has got you a job in a bank in Helsinki. That was very nice of him, wasn't it?"

Saara looked up at the treetops and saw nothing. She couldn't do anything now other than move her extremities that were probably called legs. She thought that this was how people went mad. Nothing mattered.

"Walk towards home now. Are sure you can walk? Or should we perhaps take a cab? And the baby is sure to get a good home. And you can start from the beginning, because Doctor Nygren..."

"Shut up! So, Doctor Nygren has found a job for me. Is that something to sing and dance about?" She seemed able to speak, even to screech. That's what crazy people did, screamed their heads off.

"Martti is right. You are trashy people. Only he himself is the worst."

Saara hung her head, pushed herself through the fragrant spring with empty hands, empty arms and an empty mind. She started running but lacked the strength, stopped and waited for mother.

"This kind of thing is not done. I'll never trust anybody ever again." She gave her innocent old mother, who had perhaps tried her best, a cunning look. "I may pretend to believe, but I really won't."

"Saara, Saara!"

"Why don't you tell me to walk properly. What would people think if they saw me running like this. Say it, why don't you?"

"Saara dear..." Mother walked beside her with short steps. She was afraid, but that was nothing new to her.

"I will come home, don't fear. That's where I'm going all the time. Yes, I'm very grateful to Doctor Nygren if he's getting me a job. I'm saying if... And if he's really going to do it, it'll be for his own profit. Or Åke's.... But nobody in the world is going to fool me any more."

"Saara, Saara. This is not the end of your life."

"Didn't I ask you to be quiet! And I don't care about life any more. I'll just... But I'll find the baby anyway, you'll see."

"Saara dear, that won't work. They made those papers. And you yourself..."

“I gave a power of attorney. That’s true. Martti is right in yet another thing. I’m stupid. Oh, oh, how stupid Saara was again! What if Saara were to wise up now.”

“Let’s just go home. Life will still show us a more beautiful face.”

“Life and life. Don’t keep repeating that all the time. I’m just saying that nobody in the world is ever going to fool me again.”

Then Saara saw nothing any more. Progress, movement had been cut, from some great depth she could see only the cut-off end of the road. A stupid, blabbering runny-nosed girl was spinning on its sandy rim. Sand was rolling down and she herself was rolling down and after that there would be nothing, nothing left.

They were already close to the lane that led to the house. How had that happened? And Saara was alive although she didn’t care to be. Mother got enough courage to ask if her breasts ached very much. She didn’t answer. Only when they had reached the yard did she say in a new indifferent voice, “Father seems to have found time to fix the gate. Everything is as usual. Let’s go in then, let’s start everything over. Who cares about one child, who cares about anything...”

Mother didn’t dare to speak at all. Saara herself didn’t say a word either to Mother or to Father. In the evening she fell into a deep tearless depression. That lasted for nearly two months until a stranger, her brother, once again took charge and took her away from home and to Helsinki.

Doctor Nygren had kept his word. He probably had some selfish reason for it, but still, it was a wonder.