Musselstranden
The Mussel Shore

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The police car was new and drove smoothly and quietly. I sat in the front seat.

"And what do you do?" asked the one in the back seat.

We had a good distance to get from the police station to Tångevik and had to talk about something meanwhile. We were riding in a regular car, not a police car. The policemen were wearing casual civilian clothes and spoke with a Bohuslän accent.

"I'm a research assistant. At the Ethnological Institute," I said.

"So what kind of research do you do?"

"I study the myth of *bergtagning*, supernatural abduction. You know – in the old days people used to send young girls out into the wilderness to herd the cows. And then they would disappear for some reason and people would say that the trolls had taken them and were keeping them captive in the mountain. Or if someone developed a psychosis and their personality changed, then people thought that that person had been spirited away and that the psychosis was a kind of spell."

I spoke quickly and eagerly. Whenever I don't know what to talk about with strangers, I start talking about my research. Most people become interested. I've talked about it to fellow passengers on trains, table partners at dinners, the children's friends. Supernatural abduction always works.

“The myth is spread over large parts of the world,” I continued. “But it looks a little different in different places. In Sweden and Norway people disappear into the mountain. In England it’s barrows or mounds. And elves instead of trolls.”

“But no one really believes in that nowadays, do they?” said the policeman who was driving.

“No, but there are people who can report that they were kidnapped by aliens and taken aboard spaceships. It’s a modern version of the same myth. The pattern is the same. They get exploited by those alien beings, are used for medical experiments and things like that. Sometimes there’s sexual involvement. They might get something in return, but something important is taken away from them. Their soul, their personality. The creatures are neither bad nor good, but they don’t have feelings -- they see human beings as objects. After the incident the victim is changed. There’s often a memory loss. By means of dreams, hypnosis or therapy they might remember what they’ve experienced. In the U.S. there are therapists who specialize in treating these victims of alien kidnappers. Critics claim that it’s the therapists who plant the memories in the victims, too.”

“Oh Lord, there are so many idiots in the world,” groaned the policeman in the backseat.

“You don’t believe them?” I asked provocatively.

The ones who aren’t fascinated by the *bergtagning* myth usually get angry. There are people who loathe irrational explanations.

“What do *you* think?” asked the one who was driving.

I answered the way I usually do:

“I don’t believe anything. I study the myth. It’s my job.”

"I wish we could do that," said the driving policeman quietly. "How about if we started doing that, Jan-Erik? When the thugs start telling their stories, we'd just sit back and study them?"

The policeman in the backseat laughed, and they continued talking to each other while I played with his idea in my thoughts. "The lie in police interrogations." What an incredible number of lies there must be in their archives. What a goldmine of imagination, invention, diverse expressions of people's creativity. How do people lie? You try to look innocent, of course, but what method do you choose? Do you belittle yourself or promote yourself? Do you fabricate small, believable details or are you on the contrary as concise and general as possible to avoid implicating yourself? Are there stories that recur, standard lies that the police recognize? Do people borrow these standard lies from each other or do they occur spontaneously?

We arrived at Tångevik and the policemen parked by the roadside. Several times during the walk to the Mussel Shore they asked, "Is this really the only way?"

"You can get there by boat too. But this is the only way by land."

As we slid down the hill into the jungle-like patch of forest in the cleft they said it again. "Is this really the right way?" And they glanced at me in the same suspicious way that the boys had, and I could read their minds: "Trolls and aliens and skeletons. Well, you meet all kinds of people in this job."

On the shore it was windier now than the last time I was here. I stood shivering a little while one of the policemen crawled in through the rocks. It was the one who had been driving. The other one stayed behind, impatiently trampling the mussel shells.

"We didn't touch anything. My son put the skull back exactly the way he found it," I said.

I had remembered that Ice Man they found in the Alps, that they treated so carefully, and had given Jonathan strict instructions not to touch anything else.

The policeman nodded silently. The younger one was already on his way back through the passage. You could hear him curse as he hit his head on the stone overhang. Then he turned up behind the nearest block of stone, crawled over it and came down to us on the shore. His nose was running a little from the exertion.

"Yes," he told his colleague. "She was right. There is something there."

Then he turned to me, pointed up to the rockslide and said:

"This one I believe in. He was *bergtagen*, definitely."

"Aren't you going to take it with you?" I asked.

The younger one shook his head.

"We'll take it next time. But then we'll come by boat."

It was Friday, August fourth, when Maja was found.

Rolf and Ulla Magnusson, along with their oldest son Reine, had gone out in their skiff with a fishing net. It was a calm and clear evening. It was just before eight when they set out from home, and maybe 8:15 when they passed the Mussel Shore for the first time. They hadn't noticed anything that time, but they had mostly been looking ahead toward the next inlet, where they were planning to lay out the net, and they had been having a lively conversation. Maybe the sunlight fell in a different way too; it changes pretty rapidly just before sundown. They set out their net in the usual place and it wasn't until they were on the way home, when they passed the Mussel Shore again, that they saw her.

Just beyond the end of the beach, where the cliff plunges almost vertically down into the water, a child was standing on a ledge. If the last rays of the sun hadn't happened to fall just here, they might not even have noticed her. With her dark skin, her black hair and the brown overalls, she almost melted into the cliff.

It was Ulla Magnusson who first spotted her. At first she thought she had imagined it.

"No one could stand there, neither a child nor an adult," was her first thought, as she recounted later.

From her vantage point in the boat, the place looked utterly impossible for a human being to reach. The cliff looked smooth as a wall and it seemed to her as if the girl's feet had no support, but were hovering just in front of the cliff. But when she had told her husband what she saw and they steered closer, they discovered that the girl was standing on a narrow cliff ledge, just wide enough for her little feet. There was no sign of anyone else nearby, whether on the beach, on top of the cliff, or in a boat.

“It was horrible to see such a small child in such a dangerous situation. A single step in the wrong direction, a single careless movement, and she would fall right into the sea. Yes, that was what we were prepared for. To jump into the sea and save her from drowning, that was what we talked about as we sat there in the boat, because we thought she would fall at any minute,” said Ulla.

But the girl didn’t fall. She stood still, absolutely still, in a way that little children very rarely do. She leaned back against the cliff wall and looked down at the family in the boat.

Rolf turned off the little outboard motor and the boat lay there bobbing near the cliff wall. The three people in the boat shouted to alert the girl’s parents to the danger, in case they were within earshot. But no one showed up and they understood that they had to save the girl themselves.

That was when they realized just how impossible the situation was. There was no way to get to the ledge where the girl was standing. The cliff plunged just as steeply both below and above her. How had she gotten there? Had she fallen over the edge of the cliff up there and by some incredible luck landed on the ledge? It seemed unlikely, the ledge was much too narrow for that.

The son, Reine, took himself ashore. He jumped from the prow, down into the shallow water by the mussel banks and then rushed across the beach, up through the juniper bushes and on up the cliff. Carefully he approached the edge, examined the steep wall that separated him from the girl below, and discovered that the ledge was just as unapproachable as it had looked from the water.

Meanwhile Rolf and Ulla had hailed a larger motor boat that was passing by, with a radio on board. The coast patrol soon arrived, but for them too it was hard to reach the girl, and when

darkness fell she was still standing on the ledge. A whole armada of small and large pleasure boats had gathered off the Mussel Shore, where they lay anchored or hovered around in small circles as they watched the drama on the cliff. The lanterns were reflected in the black water. The motors hummed and made whorls and waves in the still surface. People called to each other and to the little girl, who stood as if paralyzed, as if she were pressed against the cliff wall by the strong beams of the searchlights.

Up at the top of the cliff there was a crowd of people. The rumor that a child had been found near the Mussel Shore had spread quickly. I stood there with the Gattman family, jostling among the others in the heather patches. In the glow of the flashlights I could make out many familiar faces. They were the same people I used to see around the Midsummer pole at the dances and at the summer party at school at the end of July. The same ridiculously heterogeneous group of summer visitors and residents, united for a single night, the same feeling of fellowship and expectation and solemnity. It was absurd.

We all held our breath when they finally managed to lower a fireman to the ledge. With the girl in his arms he was pulled up to the top of the cliff. When the two of them were helped over the edge a cheer went up among the people on the cliff, on the beach and in the boats below.

Karin hugged Maja, crying and shaking, and then held her at arm's length to look at her. She looked and looked at this child, as if she couldn't believe her eyes. The miracle she had prayed for had happened. She had gotten her child back from the dead, unhurt and healthy. She caressed the little body, the dark face, the hands, the hair, as if her eyes' testimony were not enough and she had to make sure also with her fingers.

"Is it you, Maja?" she asked again and again.

And yes, it was Maja. There was no doubt about that. She was exactly the same. Maybe that was just why Karin doubted. If a child disappears on an island far out in the archipelago and is found again on an inaccessible cliff ledge on the mainland six weeks later, you expect some kind of transformation in this child. You expect it to be dirty, hungry, hurt, shocked; anything is possible – except this: that the child is completely unchanged.

In the midst of this chaos of firemen and policemen, summer visitors and residents, roaring motorboats, shouts and sweeping flashlights, stood Maja, calm and quiet. She was dressed in the same brown velour overalls that she had been wearing when she disappeared. They were absolutely clean, without a spot. Just like on Midsummer Eve, she was barefoot. Her hair was gathered into two high pigtails above her ears. The hair on the back of her head was a little ruffled where she had been leaning against the cliff wall, but her part was straight. She hadn't lost weight and didn't have any scrapes or injuries. She looked exactly the way she had when we last saw her.

And even though this was just what Karin had prayed for – "God, give me back my child, untouched and unhurt" – her brain couldn't seem to accept the fact that her prayer had been answered. She kept running her hands up and down Maja's body. She opened the zipper and pulled down her overalls to look for injuries. She rubbed her hands and looked deeply into her black eyes. She searched and searched for something that wasn't as it should be, a sign that hadn't been there before.

And finally she found something. Just above the cherry-red plastic balls of her left pigtail, there was a tiny, snow-white feather. That was all.

Kristina pushes the kayak into the water. She follows carefully, over the sloping rock with its slippery, rust-red algae. She lays the bag of down on the seat and stuffs it into a corner under the deck. Then she climbs in and pushes off with the paddle.

The cloud of birds follows her for a while. The underside of their white bodies is colored orange by a sun that can't be seen yet. The sea glitters. The world is no longer gray.

She approaches the group of larger islands and as she reaches the first one the sun rises. Some terns dive toward her with their red beaks wide open. As if she were a fish that they could swallow.

She follows the contours of the little island. By the calm inlet on the island's inner side there's a little camp of colorful tents, red, blue, orange. It is ugly. She hates these loud colors. On the shore there are boats, a charred campfire, empty beer cans and sandy beach towels.

She drifts quietly into the middle of the inlet, glides slowly across the still water as she looks at the scene.

She has often been ashore on this island. It has a fine little beach where it's easy to pull up the kayak. On the outer side of the island there are plenty of birds' nests and she has often collected down, feathers and eggshells here.

Then the flap of one of the tents moves. Someone crawls out through the opening. A dog? No, now it gets up. It's a child. A little girl with dark face, brown clothes and black, tousled pigtails. She squints against the morning light and then runs out to the shore. With sleepy, fumbling movements she pulls down the zipper ring and gets her overalls off. Then she crouches down and pees in the sand. Kristina drifts quietly on the bay and looks at her naked, hunched back.

The little one gets up, shivering. The morning is chilly, the beach is in the shade. She still hasn't noticed the kayak out there in the bay. With some difficulty she manages to fish up the inside-out overalls that she threw on the beach. She shakes the sand out of them and puts them on again. She seems to want to do everything by herself, even though she's so little. She hasn't woken up any adult in the tents to ask for help.

The waves have carried the kayak further into the bay. Kristina can see the girl better now. The brown, soft overalls are like a hairband, her black, tousled hair like a mane.

Somewhere in Kristina's body something begins to move. It is like a howling, a drawn out, longing, utterly silent howl that wells up from inside her. But it's only a feeling. She sits absolutely quiet, absolutely still, as the waves softly cluck against the sides of the kayak.

Still the girl must have heard it. She stops herself on her way toward the tent, turns around and sees Kristina. She shades her eyes with her hand. The low sun blinds her. Slowly she starts to walk back down to the shore.

Kristina feels that something is about to be pulled from her body, is stretched out by longing, like the blue mussel's orange-red insides when it is pulled from its shell. That soft, shapeless thing with the little firm core – the heart – the only thing that is strong enough to put the hook through. The child stands on the shore looking at her with a steady gaze.

"When she says something it'll stop," Kristina thinks. "When she shouts 'Hi' or when she calls her parents in the tent."

But the girl doesn't make a sound. The water in the bay is red from the glow of the newly risen sun and the waves draw a net of rocking shadows on the white side of the kayak.

The kayak rocks closer. Kristina and the girl look at each other. There's a glitter between them.

The girl rolls up the legs of her overalls and wades out a little into the water. Kristina gently moves the paddle against the water's surface and glides a little, little way in. Now they are right next to each other.

The girl is black and brown with the red balls of her pigtail holders like two bright red signal lights in the tousled hair. What does this brown, swarthy little animal have to do with those people in the loud colored tents? She doesn't even care about them, doesn't look back, doesn't call for them. No, she doesn't belong here.

Drops glide along the blade of the paddle, quiver and fall into the water. The girl strokes the canoe with her hand and looks up at her. For a moment Kristina wonders how she will pick up the little one without tipping the kayak. And where will she sit? There's only room for one in the seat.

She climbs out into the water, takes the little one in her arms, and with the girl's arms about her neck she creeps carefully back into the seat. The girl is so completely still and follows so softly along with her movements that the hard balancing act succeeds. The girl sits in Kristina's lap, turned toward her, and wraps her legs around her waist. There is only room for one, but they are only one. One great being. They sit there, breast to breast, and their hearts beat against each other.

Kristina paddles out of the bay. When she rounds the cliff that juts out she turns around and looks toward land.

The colorful tents lay there quiet and sleeping.

No one has seen them.