

Nils Karlsson-Tom-Thumb

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Waiting for Mom and Dad

Bertil stood by the window looking out. It was beginning to get dark. Outside in the streets, it looked foggy, cold and hostile.

Bertil was waiting for Mom and Dad.

He was waiting so terribly much, that they should have turned up at the streetlamp by now, just because he was waiting so hard for them. It was always at the streetlamp that he spotted them first. Mom usually arrived before Dad. But of course, neither one of them could come home before work at the factory ended for the day.

Every day, Dad and Mom went to the factory. Bertil was alone at home all day long. Mom left him something to eat, so that he had something for when he got hungry.

When Mom got home, they had dinner. Eating alone wasn't any fun. Just as it was very, very sad to be spending the whole day alone in the flat, without having anyone to talk to. Of course, he could go to the courtyard and play. But now that fall had arrived, the weather was awful and there were no children outside.

Oh, how time dragged on!

He did not know what to do with himself. His toys had long since gotten boring. Not that he had many in the first place. He had turned every page in every book in the house from beginning to end.

It was cold in the room.

In the mornings, Dad would heat up the tiled fireplace, but by the afternoon, all warmth had gone. Bertil was cold. It got dark in the corners. But he did not turn on any lights. Why would he? There was nothing for him to do anyway.

Everything was so very sad, so he decided to lie on his bed. He wanted to brood on how sad everything was.

The Mouse Hole

There had been a time when he was not alone. His older sister used to live at home. Her name is Märta. Now Märta no longer lived at home. She went off to college and Bertil did not see her very much. Tears started to run down his face, as he remembered how they used to laugh and play together every day. Now he was thinking how very alone he was.

And just at that very moment he heard it: He heard tiny pattering steps under his bed.

Is this a ghost? Bertil wondered and bent over the edge of the bed, to see what it was.

And then he saw this strange little thing.

Under the bed, there was – well, it was just like a normal little boy. Only that this boy was the size of a thumb.

“Hello”, said the little boy.

“Hello”, said Bertil, feeling a little embarrassed.

“Hello, hello”, said the little one. It got quiet for a while after that.

“What kind are you?” asked Bertil. “And what are you doing under my bed?”

“My name is Nils Karlsson-Tom-Thumb”, the little boy replied. “And this is where I live. Well, not precisely under your bed, but one floor below. You can see the entrance over there in the corner.”

He pointed towards a large mouse hole that was under Bertil’s bed.

“Since when have you lived here?”, Bertil asked the boy.

“Oh, only a couple of days”, said the small boy. “Before that, I lived under a tree root in the woods. But you know how when fall comes, you have had enough of camping and prefer to live in the city. I was very lucky and got offered to rent this room by a mouse, that wanted to move in with her sister. As you know it is really hard to find a small place to live in.”

Yes, Bertil had heard of that problem.

“I have rented this place unfurnished, of course”, the little boy explained.

“That is the best thing. At least, if you have your own furniture”, he added after a pause.

“Do you have your own?”, Bertil asked.

“No, that is the point, I don’t”, said the little one, looking distressed. He started shivering.

“Oooh, it is so cold down here”, he said. “But it’s not much different up where you are.”

“Right”, said Bertil, I am freezing!”

“I have a tiled fireplace”, said the little one. “But no wood. Wood is so expensive these days.”

He swung his arms around his body, to get warm. He then looked at Bertil with big and clear eyes.

“What do you do all day long?”, he asked.

“Nothing much”, said Bertil. “Really nothing much at all.”

“Just like me”, said the little one. “It’s pretty boring to be all alone. Don’t you think?”

“Terribly boring”, Bertil said.

“Would you like to join me down here for a bit?” asked the little one keenly. Bertil started to laugh: “Do you really think I would fit through that hole there?”

“That is the easiest thing in the world”, said the little one. “All you need to do is press on that nail next to the hole and then say “Killevipps”. Then you will be just as small as I am.”

“Are you sure?”, asked Bertil. “But will I get back to my normal size by the time Dad and Mom come home?”

“For sure”, said the little one. “You just press on the nail again and say “Killevipps” again.”

“That’s funny”, said Bertil. “So, do you get to be my size too?”

“No, I cannot”, said the little one. “Unfortunately. But it would be nice if you could come down here for a little while.”

“Let’s go”, said Bertil.

Killevipps

He climbed under the bed, pressed his index finger on the nail and said: “Killevipps”.

And lo and behold! There he stood in front of the mouse hole, just as tiny as the little boy.

“By the way, my name is Nisse”, said the little one and extended his hand towards Bertil. “Come, let’s go down to my place!”

Bertil felt something incredibly exciting and strange going on. He was inflamed by curiosity, dying to get down that dark hole.

“Be careful on the stairs”, said Nisse. “The railing is broken at one spot.” Bertil descended the little stone steps, treading carefully. Hard to believe, he had had no idea of there being a staircase here! It ended before a closed door.

“Wait, I will switch the light on”, said Nisse and he did so.

By the door there was a little sign, on which was written in neat letters “Nils Karlsson-Tom-Thumb”.

He then opened that door and switched another light on. Bertil entered. “It doesn’t look very inviting here”, Nisse said apologetically.

Bertil looked around. It was a small, bare room with a window and a blue tiled fireplace in one of the corners.

“Yes, it could be nicer”, he admitted. “Where do you sleep at night?” “On the floor”, said Nisse.

“Oh, isn’t that cold?”, said Bertil.

“You bet! It’s terribly cold. It is so cold, that I have to get up every hour and run around, so as not to freeze to death.”

Bertil felt really sorry for Nisse. At least he didn’t have to be cold at night. Suddenly, he had an idea.

“I am so stupid!”, he said. “I can get you some wood!”

Nisse grabbed him by the arm.

“Do you think you could?”, he asked keenly.

“Of course,” said Bertil. Then he looked a little distressed. “The only thing is, I am not allowed to strike matches”, he said.

“Never mind”, Nisse reassured him. “If you get the wood – I will light it.”

Bertil ran up the stairs, pressed on the nail and – had forgotten what to say.

“What was that, that I have to say?”, he shouted down to Nisse.

“Killevipps of course”, Nisse shouted back.

“Killevipps of course”, Bertil said to the nail.

Nothing happened.

“Oh, but it is only Killevipps, that you have to say!”, Nisse called from downstairs.

“Only Killevipps”, said Bertil.

Nothing happened.

“Oh, oh”, Nisse shouted, “you can say nothing but Killevipps!”

At last, Bertil understood, and he said “Killevipps”, upon which he was back to his normal size. It happened so fast that he hit the underside of the bed with his head.

He crawled back from under his bed as fast as he could and ran to the kitchen stove. There were a lot of burnt matchsticks there. He broke them into many little pieces and piled them up next to the mouse hole. Then he shrunk himself back to the small size and called Nisse: “Come and help me with all this wood!”.

For now, that he was little, he wasn’t able to carry it all by himself anymore.

Nisse came running up and together they carried the wood down the stairs and into the room right up to the tiled fireplace. Nisse was jumping up and down with joy.

“Great wood”, he exclaimed, “really great wood!”

He pressed as much as he could into the tiled fireplace. The rest he neatly piled up in the corner next to the fireplace.

“Now watch me”, he said.

He crouched in front of the fireplace and blew inside. “Crcrcr, it started to crackle and burn.

“How practical”, said Bertil. “That will save matches”.

“You bet”, said Nisse. “What a wonderful, wonderful fire”, he added. “I think I haven’t been this warm since summer.”

They sat on the floor in front of the blazing fire and held their blue frozen hands near the cozy heat.

“We have plenty of wood left”, Nisse said with content.

“Yes, and when you run out, I can get you more, as much as I like”, Bertil said.

He was also content.

“Tonight, I will not be cold, for sure”, said Nisse.

“By the way, what do you eat?”, Bertil asked after a while.

Nisse blushed. “Oh – this and that”, he said, sounding quite unsure.

“Whatever I can get my hands on...”

“What have you eaten today?”, Bertil asked.

“Today...”, said Nisse. “Oh, yes, I remember – today I have not eaten anything.”

“But then you must be terribly hungry!”, Bertil exclaimed.

“Yes”, Nisse said hesitantly, “I am terribly hungry.”

“Why didn’t you say, silly you! I will go get you something right away.”

Nisse almost gasped. “If you do that”, he said, “if you really get me something to eat, I will love you for as long as I live.”

Eating and Sleeping

Bertil was already halfway up the stairs. Quickly, very quickly, he said “Killevipps” and quickly, very quickly he ran to the pantry. There he took a tiny little piece of cheese and a tiny little piece of bread, which he spread with butter. He also got a meatball and two raisins. He piled it all up next to the mouse hole. He then shrunk himself back and shouted:” Come and help me with the food!”

But he wouldn’t have needed to shout, as Nisse was already standing there, waiting.

They carried it all down. And Nisse’s eyes were shining like stars. Bertil also got hungry.

“Let’s start with the meatball”, he said.

The meatball was nearly the size of Nisse’s head. The each started eating from one side, to see who could get to the middle first. It was Nisse. Then they ate a cheese sandwich.

The tiny little piece of bread was now the hugest slice of bread. Nisse wanted to save up his cheese.

“You know, I owe the mouse a piece of cheese every month as my rent”, he said. “Otherwise, I will be thrown out.”

“We will fix that”, said Bertil. “Eat the cheese now.”

And they did. And then they each nibbled a raisin. But Nisse said, he wanted to keep half a raisin for next day.

“I will then have something to eat, when I wake up”, he said.

“I guess I will lie down in front of the tiled fireplace. It’s bound to be warm there”, he continued.

All of a sudden Bertil shouted: “Oh, I know, I have an incredible idea!!”

And swoosh, he disappeared up the stairs.

It took quite a while and then Nisse heard Bertil call: “Come and help me with the bed!”

Nisse rushed upstairs. And there was Bertil with the most beautiful little red bed.

He had taken it from Märta’s old doll house, which was still standing around. The smallest of all dolls had lain in the bed. But now, it was of more use to Nisse.

“I brought you some cotton wool to lie on. And here, take this green flannel, which is left over from the pajama that Mom just sewed for me. You can use it as a blanket.”

“Oh”, said Nisse. “Oh”, was all he could say.

“And I also brought you the doll’s nightgown.”, said Bertil. “You don’t mind sleeping in a doll’s nightgown?”

“No, why would I?”, Nisse wondered.

“Well, you know, they are girls’ stuff”, said Bertil apologetically.

“But it is warm”, said Nisse and smoothed over the doll’s nightgown with his hand, feeling rather content. “I have never slept in a bed before”, he said. “Frankly, I would like to go to bed right away.”

“You do that”, said Bertil. “Mom and Dad could be home any minute. I must go anyway.”

Nisse quickly changed into his nightgown. Then he jumped into the bed, snuggled up into the cotton wool and covered himself with the flannel blanket.

“Oh”, he said once more. “I am totally full. And totally warm. And totally terribly tired.”

“Well, bye then”, said Bertil. “I will be back tomorrow.”

But Nisse did not hear this anymore. He was fast asleep.

Can You do Magic?

The next day Bertil could hardly wait for Mom and Dad to be gone. Why were they being so terribly tardy? Normally, Bertil would be standing in the hallway, looking very sad, when saying good-bye. But today, he didn't. As soon as the door was shut, he climbed under the bed and went down to see Nisse. Nisse was already up and had started the fire in the tiled fireplace.

"I hope that's alright?", he asked Bertil.

"Of course, you can heat up as much as you like", Bertil replied.

He then looked around the room.

"You know what? This place needs to be cleaned", he said.

"Yes, it can't hurt", Nisse said. "The floor looks like it hasn't ever been scrubbed."

Bertil was already running up the stairs. A scrubbing brush and a tub was what he needed. On the kitchen sink, there was an old toothbrush, that had seen better days. He took it and broke off the handle. Then he peeked inside the cupboard. There he found a tiny little bowl, that Mom used for jelly. He filled it with warm water and added a little crumb of soap. Then he tore off a

small corner from a cloth in the broom closet. As before, he piled it all up next to the mouse hole. And Nisse had to help him carry it all down again.

“That is some huge scrubbing brush”, said Nisse.

“Yes, it will do the job”, said Bertil.

And then they started. Bertil did the scrubbing and Nisse wiped after him with the cloth. The water in bowl was going black. But the floor started to look really good.

“You sit here by the stairs”, said Bertil. “And wait for a surprise coming your way. Cover your eyes with your hands! You can’t look!”. Nisse covered his eyes and heard Bertil making a racket with something upstairs.

“Now you can open your eyes”, said Bertil. And so, Nisse did. And believe it or not, there stood a table with chairs and a corner cupboard and two very fine little armchairs.

“I have never seen anything like this!”, Nisse exclaimed. “Can you do magic?”.

Of course, that was not the case. He had just collected it all from Märta’s doll house. He had also brought a rug. It was a striped patchwork rug, that Märta had woven on her little toy weaving loom.

First, they laid out the rug. It covered nearly all of the floor. “Oh, that looks cozy”, said Nisse.

But it got even cozier, as the corner cupboard was moved to its place, and the table and chairs were arranged, and the cozy armchairs were put in front of the fireplace.

“Just imagine living as fancy as this”, Nisse said devoutly.

Bertil agreed on it being fancy. Much fancier than upstairs in his own space.

They both sat down in an armchair and had a talk.

“Yes, well, it would now be my turn to smarten up a little”, said Nisse, “rather than being as terribly filthy as I am.”

“We could have a bath”, Bertil suggested. Soon after, the jelly bowl was filled with clean, warm water. A shred of an old torn terry towel turned out to be a wonderful bath sheet.

And even if they spilled quite a lot of water on the way down the stairs, there was still enough water to bath in. Quickly they discarded their clothes and climbed into the tub. It was delightful.

“Rub my back”, said Nisse. And Bertil rubbed. And then Nisse rubbed Bertil’s back. And then they splashed each other, and a lot of water got spilled over on the floor.

But that didn’t matter, because they had rolled the rug onto the side and water could be mopped up. Afterwards, they wrapped the towel around themselves and sat on the armchairs in front of the fireplace.

They told each other everything about everything and Bertil ran upstairs to get some sugar and a little piece of apple, which they roasted by the fire.

But suddenly Bertil remembered that Mom and Dad would be coming home soon. He hurried up and got back into his clothes. Nisse also got dressed.

“It would be fun, if you could come up with me”, said Bertil. “You could sit inside of my jacket, so that Mom and Dad wouldn’t see you.”

Nisse got all excited about this idea.

“I will be sitting very still”, he said.

A Whole Lot of Fun

“Why on earth is your hair so wet?”, asked Mom a little later, as the family was sitting at the dining table.

“I had a bath”, said Bertil.

“A bath?”, Mom said. “Where did you have a bath?”

“In that one”, Bertil giggled and pointed to the little jelly bowl on the table.

Dad and Mom thought he was only joking.

“How delightful to see Bertil in a good mood again”, said Dad.

“Yes, my poor boy”, said Mom. “It’s just such a shame that he has to be on his own all day long.”

Bertil felt a little movement inside of his jacket. Something warm, something very warm.

“No need to be sad about it, Mom”, he said. “I have a whole lot of fun, when I’m on my own.”

And then he stuck his index finger under the jacket and carefully caressed Nils Karlsson-Tom-Thumb.

