



Old Aino Pervik
Mother Kunks

11
1P36

Aino Pervik



Old Mother Kunks

TRANSLATED
FROM THE ESTONIAN
BY ELLEN SILLAMÄGI

ILLUSTRATED
BY EDGAR VALTER

TALLINN · PERIOODIKA 1986

Somewhere in the middle of the windy sea there stood a small island. Underwater reefs and sharp rocks surrounded the island and made the water splash and spume around them. The pines on the island were twisted and forky and under the trees sprouted hardy bilberry shrubs. Scattered here and there were prickly wild rosebushes.

Seabirds who had made their nests on the pebbly shore were the only living creatures on the island apart from Mother Kunks.

Mother Kunks was an old woman, tall and scraggy. She had tangled hair that looked like the nest of a magpie. Mother Kunks had lived on the island all her life. She fed on bilberries and rosehips. Occasionally, when she felt like it, she caught a fish or two, or picked a few mushrooms that grew in the pine grove.

In the middle of the island stood a big, old pine tree. Its long, twisted boughs reached out in all directions. High up in the tree was Mother Kunks's house. So as not to have her house carried away by fierce winds, she had fastened a big, heavy rock to each of its three corners. From the fourth corner hung a huge, old-fashioned anchor which bore strange engravings. In spite of it, the angry gales of autumn still lifted the house high up in the air, but the rocks and the anchor kept it steady so that it always fell back to its proper

place. Big bundles of herbs, mushrooms, and mosses that were pushed under the eaves to dry made the house look like a big, mussed-up bird's nest snuggled in the arms of the tree. Inside, however, the house was neat and cosy. Blue curtains, the colour of the sea, were hanging at the windows. A soft, white rug like the foamy waves covered the floor. The cupboards and shelves were full of interesting things that had been washed up on the shore after storms. Some of them were from wrecked ships, others came from the deep bottom of the sea.

The most comfortable spot in Mother Kunks's house was the fireside. On the wide hearth a fire of pinecones kept burning merrily all through the cold weather. Over the fire Mother Kunks brewed magic potions in her copper cauldron. You see, Mother Kunks was really a witch. With her magic potions and the use of witchcraft she was able to cure all kinds of ailments. She also knew how to bring them on. The herbs and plants she used for her brews were gathered from the forests and meadows, the marshes and bogs of the mainland. She would fly across the sea with a huge, yellow balloon which high up in the sky looked like the full moon. Mother Kunks preferred to travel on dark, moonless nights. No one would notice her then. She didn't think it was good for the witches to be too conspicuous. This had always brought about a lot of trouble.

One dark and stormy night Mother Kunks was on her way home from the mainland. Her sacks were bulging with pods and shoots and buds and roots, and the poor woman was stooping under the heavy load.

It was raining heavily when Mother Kunks reached the shore and she was soaked to the skin. The wind blew so hard



that the old woman was almost bent backwards. But this kind of weather was very much to her liking. It made her giggle and titter. Stormy weather put her in a merry mood and brought songs to her lips. Mother Kunks had a loud and shrill voice, and she was very fond of silly songs.

She began to hum along with the wind. Her humming grew louder and louder. Soon Mother Kunks was singing at the top of her voice and capering about among the rocks.

Gaily she began to blow up her balloon. The wind tried to snatch the balloon away from her and carry it off into the whirling darkness, but Mother Kunks held on to it with her teeth and fingernails until she was ready to take off.

In the meantime the wind had turned into a gale. Rain poured down from the sky and huge waves almost reached Mother Kunks. The wind tugged at the balloon so hard that Mother Kunks was having quite a time of it trying to hold on and not to be thrown into the raging sea. But this didn't dampen her high spirits. She held on tightly to the balloon and sang silly songs, enjoying the wild flight to the full.

Soon the island was within sight, but the balloon sped on and nothing seemed to be able to stop it.

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing!" she shrieked. "Will you ever see your home again?"

She started to tug and pull at the strings which helped her to steer the balloon, but the strings had got tangled in the gale and the balloon was entirely at the mercy of the storm. The wind was already carrying it away from the island toward the open sea.

As a last resort, Mother Kunks dug her nails into the balloon and began to tear it to bits. The balloon burst and Mother Kunks landed with a crash on the rocky shore. The sacks tumbled down on top of her and last came the bits of the yellow balloon.

The sharp rocks had bruised the old woman badly and it took her some time to recover.

When she was able to sit up again, she carefully examined her limbs. Luckily no bones were broken.

"It was a lucky landing, to be sure," said Mother Kunks happily to herself and started to gather her sacks together. Suddenly she screamed in alarm:

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing, you've lost your wisdom tooth!"

With her bony hands she grasped hold of her tangled hair and began to tear it in desperation. The wisdom tooth was indeed lost. It had probably come loose during the landing and dropped among the pebbles.

Mother Kunks howled with exasperation. She fell on her hands and knees and groped around in the darkness. As there were many tooth sized pebbles on the shore, Mother Kunks thought several times she had retrieved it. However, every time she tried to fit it in her mouth it always turned out to be just an ordinary pebble which was no substitute for a wisdom tooth.

Slowly it began to grow lighter. Mother Kunks could see the surroundings more clearly now. She realized she had been looking for her wisdom tooth at the spot her feet had landed. Her head had hit a square granite rock. And what luck! There, on the rock, sparkled her precious wisdom tooth. Quickly Mother Kunks replaced the tooth and looked around her, very much at peace with the world.

The storm was raging on. Huge waves splashed against the rocks. In the foaming water, among seaweeds, whirled planks of wood and parts of smashed-up ship equipment.

"A ship has run aground," Mother Kunks said to herself. "I knew there was going to be a shipwreck!"

She stepped into the raging waters and began searching among the tossing debris. From time to time strong waves thrust her against sharp rocks but Mother Kunks paid no attention to it. She had other things on her mind.

Suddenly a screeching seagull swooped down from the tattered clouds and clawed itself to Mother Kunks's shoulder.

"Why so fierce, my dear?" Mother Kunks asked tenderly and stroked its feathers. "I began to get worried about you. Where have you been?"

The gull only screeched and, flapping its wings, settled on the old woman's shoulder. Mother Kunks waded on toward the open sea. The water reached up to her chest already and waves kept splashing above her head. Her tangled hair was covered with slimy seaweed. Yet she couldn't spot the thing she was looking for.

"It should be somewhere around here," she mumbled to herself.

The water reached up to her neck now and made it difficult to wade. Mother Kunks began to swim. The gull flew into the air and circled low above her head.

"Look for it, my dear," Mother Kunks said to the bird. But the gull only screeched and kept flapping its wings, trying to keep its balance in the gusty wind.

Mother Kunks headed straight toward a group of rocks around which the waves splashed and thundered with enormous power. She tried to climb onto the highest rock but found it almost impossible. The rock was slippery and the waves thrust her back into the water a number of times. In the end she succeeded and even managed to stand up. The wind flapped her wet skirt round her legs and the spume splashed over her face. Mother Kunks shielded her eyes with the hands and looked around.

There it was. She spotted the blue coat with gold braid flashing in the waves. With lightning speed the old woman jumped back into the water and, reaching out her bony hands, grasped hold of the coat.

"Come, come, my dear!" she said, pulling hard.

The wearer of the coat was a young, tanned sailor, the very same Mother Kunks had been looking for. Grabbing hold of his hair, she began to swim back to the shore. The shore was quite a distance away and Mother Kunks was tired. The journey progressed very slowly. The seagull accompanied them, flying up and down above their heads. After a lot of struggle Mother Kunks finally reached the shore. Half dragging, half lifting him, the old woman managed to get the sailor into the house. She quickly lit the fire.

The sailor was in bad shape. He lay motionless on the rug in front of the hearth. He was severely injured and had a nasty gash in his head. He looked deathly white and must have breathed his last some time ago.

Quickly Mother Kunks picked some stalks and buds out of her bundles of herbs and threw them into the boiling cauldron. The water began to fizz and bubble. Mumbling to herself, Mother Kunks kept stirring the concoction with a ladle. After a while she tasted the mixture and, puckering up her lips, spat the mouthful into the fire. There was a loud crackle and the fire turned green. Then Mother Kunks took a mugful of the steaming drink and poured some of it into the sailor's mouth.

As soon as the magic liquid touched his tongue, the young man jumped up, almost hitting the ceiling.

"Well, I never!" he exclaimed, after landing on the floor again. Suddenly he remembered the shipwreck. He looked around him,

staring at the blazing fire and the old woman with bits of seaweed hanging from her wet, tangled hair and shoulders squatting before it. There was a green fire on the hearth and the whole room looked green-hued.

"Am I in the hell for sailors now?" he asked cautiously. "As far as I can recall, I died from drowning."

"That's exactly what happened to you," answered Mother Kunks. "But I brought you back to life. Calling my home a hell is no way of showing your appreciation."

The sailor felt very embarrassed and began to explain apologetically:

"I can't understand how the waves carried me back to the shore. I distinctly remember the ship going down in the middle of the sea. There was no land in sight. The other men managed to get into a lifeboat but I was thrown overboard by a huge wave."

"Yes, I know," said Mother Kunks. "That's why I went looking for you. I saw you out there among the rocks last Friday."

"Last Friday?" said the sailor in surprise. "We were in Amsterdam last Friday. You couldn't have seen me here."

"That's what you think," said Mother Kunks, giggling. It made the sailor feel uneasy.

"Tell me at least where I am now?" he asked, trying very hard to keep calm.

"You're on my island," answered Mother Kunks. "About half a mile away from the spot where your ship ran aground."

"This can't be possible," said the sailor. "There is no island round these parts, not even a tiny one for a seagull to make its nest on. I've studied at several nautical schools and sailed on all the seas of the world. I should know."

"The trouble with you young people is that you know everything about the distant places but very little about the places near home," said Mother Kunks. "This island was secretly known to everyone already before your great-grandfather's day. Many a man found his way here seeking medicine or a word of comfort."

Mother Kunks turned her back to the sailor and began to tidy the room.

The sailor tried to stand up but his body didn't obey him. "What's wrong with me?" he asked fearfully.

"Your ship ran aground," said Mother Kunks. "You didn't expect to escape unhurt, did you? Your bones are broken, your kidneys and liver smashed."

"My head's aching," said the sailor.

"It's hardly surprising," Mother Kunks explained. "You only have half a head left."

With great difficulty the sailor lifted his hand and touched his head. The old woman was right. Half of his head was gone.

"Then I must be dead after all! With a head injury like this, death is instantaneous!" he cried in fright.

"Hush!" said Mother Kunks. "You must lie quietly."

"At least fetch me a doctor!" the sailor begged her.

"On my island I do the doctoring," answered Mother Kunks. She put the sailor to bed and gave him some drops.

"Aren't you going to put my broken limbs in splints?" asked the sailor.

"No," said Mother Kunks. "I've always mended broken bones with drops."

The sailor looked very worried but didn't dare to say anything more. Although he tried to hide it from Mother

Kunks, he was scared of the old woman. But Mother Kunks was good at reading other people's thoughts.

"People are strange," she said to the seagull, smoothing its ruffled feathers. "If things are done differently from what they're used to, they at once think it's wrong and not good for them."

The seagull didn't say anything. After all, it was only a bird.

The next day the sailor felt already much better. Mother Kunks kept giving him drops three times a day and soon the sailor was quite well again.

He got out of bed and walked about. Stopping in front of the mirror, he caught his reflection.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, touching his head. "Half of my hair is black now!"

Mother Kunks came nearer and examined his hair.

"Well," she said at last. "Mishaps do occur sometimes, regardless how careful you are. I can dye your hair all black if you want me to."

"I'd rather have it back to fair again," said the sailor.

Mother Kunks shrugged her shoulders.

"As you wish. But to tell you the truth, black hair suits you much better."

However, the sailor wanted his fair hair back.

Mother Kunks told him to fill the cauldron with water and then brought it to the boil. Grumbling to herself, she rummaged in the cupboards until she found the white powder she needed. She sprinkled a handful of it into the boiling water. When the water had cooled a little, she told the sailor to wash his hair.

The sailor did as he was told and then hurried back to the mirror. His hair looked exactly the same as before but a new problem had arisen: there was a halo shining round his head.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed the sailor. "Will my head be sparkling like this for ever?"

Mother Kunks was beginning to lose her temper.

"Nothing satisfies you! In olden times a man would've given anything to get a halo like this round his head," she said.

"I'm not a saint and no miracle worker either," the sailor objected.

"Did you not rise from the dead? Wasn't that a miracle?"

"I look ridiculous with something like this round my head. My friends will laugh at me."

"All right," said Mother Kunks. "Go down to the beach and rub your head with fine sand. It will take the shine away."

The sailor rushed down to the beach. He took handfuls of sand and rubbed his head until it hurt. Then he ran back to the mirror. The halo was almost gone. Those who didn't know where to look wouldn't have noticed anything. The sailor smiled contentedly.

"Had it not been myself who made the recovery from those lethal wounds by only taking some drops, I would've never believed it. The doctors would've had to operate on me at least seven times and they would've done it only if I had been alive," he said.

"Some people won't even believe their own eyes," said Mother Kunks scornfully. "There wasn't much wrong with you anyway. All parts of your body were more or less there. If you had had any important part missing, we probably wouldn't have succeeded that easily."

Now the sailor was getting anxious to go home.

"Would you row me across?" he asked. "My family must be worried about me."

Mother Kunks told him she had no boat.

"How do you get across to the mainland, then?" asked the sailor in surprise. "You're cut off from the whole world. Isn't it lonely for you?"

"What a silly question," said Mother Kunks. "This is my home. I wouldn't want to live out there and be cut off from my home."

"Don't you sometimes wish to drive a car or watch colour TV?" the sailor asked.

"I don't know. Up to now it hasn't bothered me."

"Does it mean I'll have to stay here for good?" asked the sailor sadly. "Or is there a way for me to get back home?"

"We'll see. If I can manage to mend my balloon, I'll take you across," said Mother Kunks and began to thread a needle right away.

The balloon was wet and sandy and terribly torn. The ropes were tangled. Some of them had snapped, some were missing altogether.

The balloon needed a lot of patching up. Mother Kunks wasn't very patient and quite a few times, in a burst of anger, she flung the needle across the room. But the sailor kept at it stubbornly and he always managed to coax Mother Kunks back to work as well. Finally the balloon was in one piece again, looking like an Easter egg with its many-coloured patches and snatches.

All they had to do now was to wait for the night.

Mother Kunks and the sailor sat down among the briars in front of the house and began to wait. The sun was warm. The blossoms of the brier smelt sweetly.

"What ever made you save my life?" the sailor asked

Mother Kunks, stretched out comfortably on the grass in the sun.

"Death had marked you out for himself," the old woman answered. "When I got to know about it I had to snatch you away from him. I always do that if I'm in time. This way I can prove to myself I still exist. If I hadn't saved your life it would've been on my conscience for ever."

Slowly the shadows grew longer. Dusk fell, and soon it became quite dark. Mother Kunks took the sailor across to the mainland.

After returning home Mother Kunks felt thoroughly chilled. Bad bouts of coughing shook her body. She had a runny nose and her throat was sore. She felt an attack of lumbago coming on and the gripes almost doubled her up. There were stabbing pains in her chest. Her head was spinning, her knees were wobbly and her body was burning with a high fever.

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing! You've surely caught a beastly cold!" she said, shivering all over, but greatly pleased.

Mother Kunks started to make the bed. Since she planned to enjoy her cold for quite a while, she put clean sheets on the bed and brought out a new eiderdown. Beside the bed she placed a heap of handkerchiefs and a sifter full of thermometers. When Mother Kunks had a high fever she could never bring herself to shake down the thermometer. This meant she had to take a new thermometer every time she wanted to measure her temperature, and she kept measuring her temperature continually when she was sick. That she enjoyed most of all. The thermometers with the best fevers she lay aside in a separate drawer and looked at them now and again in the evenings when drinking her tea.

She decided to take no medicine as yet. Mother Kunks had



very powerful medicines, and if she had taken any there wouldn't have been even a trace of her cold left by the morning.

She then made herself a pot of rosehip tea with honey but didn't drink any lest it should stop the disease from running its course. She put the teapot on the bedtable. Everything had to be done the proper way. The truth was, Mother Kunks enjoyed being sick.

She climbed into bed and measured her temperature. It was over a hundred and four. The silver line had gone right up to the very top. Mother Kunks was shivering and sweating at the same time.

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing! You have a very high fever," she said in sweet sorrow.

Her body shook with painful bouts of coughing. She was really having a grand time.

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing!" she hacked, as the cough was almost choking her. "You surely have a nasty attack of asthma."

The cough, although a very interesting one, started to wear her out after a while. Mother Kunks was extremely sorry to part with her extraordinary cough, but in the end she had to give in and made herself some herb tea. She tried out a mixture she had thought of a long time ago but had never used before. In it she put some marshmallow leaves and a couple of hyssop shoots, a few roots of pimpernel and a stem of swordgrass, some flowers of dropwort and a pinch of thyme. The drink was so strong and bitter it brought tears to Mother Kunks's eyes but instantly wiped away the cough.

Still, the pimpernel made her sweat and threatened to bring the fever down. The swordgrass stopped the gripes. The thyme, as little as she'd used it, chased away the chest pains and the dropwort made her throat better.

Mother Kunks, in an attempt to stop the fever from falling, pushed the blankets off and opened the windows wide. Her nose was still running beautifully. The draught helped to make it even more runny and the heap of handkerchiefs beside her bed was diminishing. Since the cough didn't interfere with it any longer, every sneeze sounded clear like a trumpet.

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing!" she said excitedly. "You've caught your death of a cold!"

She sneezed and snuffled to her heart's content. However, constant wiping made her nose very sore and it became blistered. Besides, Mother Kunks suddenly realized that someone had to wash all the dirty handkerchiefs. With a deep sigh she climbed out of bed and sniffed at a handful of powdered mullein. Her nose stopped running at once and to her great dismay, it also brought relief to her lumbago.

Luckily she was still running a temperature. It was a grand high fever which gave her violent shivers and nagging aches and pains. Mother Kunks decided to become at least delirious.

"Mother Kunks, you poor old thing," she said. "You surely are far gone!"

Somehow she didn't become quite as delirious as she would've wished. Her thoughts were too clear. Mother Kunks climbed out of bed again and took some drops of ergot to drive herself into a frenzy. Whether she'd mixed up her extracts due to fever or something else went wrong she was not sure, but somehow the ergot did not have any effect on her. In fact, quite the opposite happened: her fever began to fall rapidly and the nagging pain eased.

"Well, Mother Kunks," she said crossly. "It looks you're on the mend."

Deeply disappointed, she drank the cold rosehip tea and fell asleep.

The next morning Mother Kunks was as fit as a fiddle.
“Mother Kunks, you poor old thing,” she said with a sigh.
“You’ve lost your power of resistance to diseases.”