

## Confabulation

K. A. Laity

*for Mary & Papa Bear*

“It’s what?” Eeva shook her head as if her ears had not heard right because there was something in them.

“We call the condition ‘confabulation’—it’s not voluntary.” The nurse practitioner smiled for a moment. Eeva had the impression that was all the time she had to smile that day because it lasted little more than a second.

“Confabulation,” she repeated, no closer to understanding. Her mother Hetti looked away, out the window that faced the street below as if completely unconcerned with their conversation. “I don’t think I know what you’re saying.”

“It’s a memory disturbance. Patients fabricate or distort their recollection of events.”

Eeva flushed. “You mean she’s lying.”

“I’m not lying,” her mother said at once. Her expression looked not so much annoyed as incredulous.

“She’s not lying.” The nurse practitioner shook her head. “Not deliberately. She believes completely the truth of what she’s saying.”

“But what she’s saying is mad,” Eeva said, shaking her head slowly.

“I’m right here, you don’t have to talk about me as if I weren’t.” Her mother glared at the two of them. “And I’m not five years old. I can speak for myself. Besides, she told you I’m not crazy, so you should believe her.”

“She said you weren’t lying, she didn’t say you weren’t crazy.” Eeva laid a hand on her mother’s arm to soften the words. It was all so confusing. Her mother had always been the lynch pin of the family, the one who kept things together while her somewhat dreamy father had often been away in his own world—his books, his forest, his thoughts. Eeva had taken for granted the fact that her mother would always be managing things, while she had spent her whole life waiting for her father to pay some attention to anything she did, but he never really did. “That’s nice,” he’d say whether she showed him

a drawing she made at five or the degree she received at thirty. And then he would talk about whatever was occupying his thoughts at that moment—some obscure folk song and how it made its way across Europe or a very interesting book he'd been reading about plumbing in ancient Rome. It didn't matter: it was always more interesting than what she was doing—unless he had a story to tell. He always had time to tell the old stories. Eeva grew up with a rich appreciation for the folktales of the old country.

He died two years ago, killed in the woods on their farm by a dead tree he'd gone to cut down. Hetti had gone out to find him, taken care of all the necessities for his burial and held everyone together while they mourned. She did it with the same dogged patience with which she approached washing the windows or chopping kindling. Perhaps it was to be expected that at last she would have to suffer some fallout from the grief. But she had got so weak so fast.

"You have to be sensible," Eeva told her, as if she could scold her mother out of this state of—what was it? Confabulation. Honestly, it sounded like an invented disease. She wondered for the umpteenth time whether doctors simply sat around creating new syndromes which they could then medicate and charge outrageous sums to treat. It seemed insane that health care still operated as a profit industry. "I don't know why you're being so silly."

"I might ask you the same thing," Hetti said, folding her arms. Her annoyance radiated like fire's crackle. "If you would just do as I said—"

Eeva laughed and looked to the practitioner for support, but she was looking at her watch instead.

Noticing the silence, the woman looked up and gave another quick smile. "I have rounds to complete. As long as your mother poses no risk, she can stay." The woman touched Hetti's arm lightly and twirled away to walk down the corridor with a brisk but silent step. Hospital shoes seemed to make no sound. It was a bit unnerving.

The words took a moment to sink in: ...*she can stay*. Eeva had not even contemplated the idea of having to move her mother somewhere else. A weight descended upon her with unexpected force. She turned back to her mother who was looking a bit bored now. "Mama, you have to stop saying outrageous things."

“It’s not outrageous. You always believed in *tontut*. You used to feed our *kotihaltija* at night.”

“I was five years old. I’m a bit past the believing in elves and fairies stage, mother,” Eeva said although she felt a pang of guilt. “I’m not going to believe that our house elf has come here to speak to you.”

“Of course not,” Hetti said. “That would be ridiculous.”

“I’m glad you agree, mama.”

“It was the *tonttu* for this place.”

Eeva groaned. “This place has a *tonttu*?”

“Every place has a *tonttu*,” her mother said. “Everyone knows that.”

Eeva sighed and sat back down on the uncomfortable chair next to her mother’s bed. “But what’s that got to do with anything? Mama, you have to stop sounding crazy. I can’t really afford to move you to another place. You need some help with care. And you refused to stay at home with us.”

“You live in that itty bitty, cramped place, all three of you. It’s madness.” Her mother shook her head, disbelieving.

“We’re quite comfortable. Cozy. We like it.” The last thing Eeva wanted was to talk about their tiny flat. It was the best they could afford right now, what with Mikael working in the city and the non-stop business meetings he had to be there for. He was making a name, soon they’d be better off: they both knew the drill. Eeva could do her sketches and design anywhere, scan them in and email them off. It was fine. She had to admit that after growing up on the farm and in the forest at times it felt like a cage, but what could they do with the housing market as it was? “It suits us.”

“You could take over the farm.” Hetti’s face pinched with pain.

“Mama, it’s still your home.” Eeva took her mother’s hand and squeezed it. Those were the last words she expected to hear today and it made her stomach clench. Up ‘til now her mother had spoken of returning to the house ‘when she mended’ but now—well, the truth must have sunk in.

Hetti patted her daughter’s hand. “The *tonttu* scolded me for hanging on to what I could not use. Pass it along. He said there’s a ritual to be done first, however.”

“And what’s that?” Eeva smiled. If this was her mother’s way of dealing with letting go of the farm, so be it. It was a lot better than her being crazy.

“You have to burn the tree that killed your father.”

“What?” Of all the things she might have guessed, she never expected that. Eeva thought her mother would want some small, token gesture—what? Lighting a candle or making a wish seemed the sort of thing. What did she know of ritual? The tree that killed him! There was something horrid about the idea of going back to that spot. Surely even her mother would resist such a thing. “Mama, you can’t mean that.”

“Go out there, chop it up, burn it and say goodbye to the past. We have to clear the way to the future.” Her mother sounded remarkably decisive.

“The *tonttu* told you that?” Eeva felt a ringing in her head as if a headache were coming on.

“Well, he got it from our *kotihaltija*—and don’t ask me how.” She threw her hands up as if in defeat of a huge bureaucracy. “Who knows how they pass along information? I don’t know. Magic, I guess.”

Eeva stared at her mother and then burst into laughter. “Yes, I suppose that must be it.”

Later as she drove home in the twilight, her tired old red Honda wheezing at the stop lights, Eeva wondered if insanity were not catching. Yes, there must be some sort of network for house elves. “I want to make a *tonttu-to-tonttu* call. Yes, please reverse the charges.” She only knew the phrases from old movies. Everyone had worldwide phone calling ability at their fingertips.

Eeva shook her head. Forget the nonsense, focus on what must be done. But what should she do? She sighed. *I’ll talk it over with Mikael*. When she had gone round and round in circles in her head, it always helped to talk to him and stop the merry-go-round in her brain. Eeva could count on him to go straight to the most obvious answer when she had run off on every tangent getting lost.

For once he was home when she got there, too. He was on the floor with Oskar building bizarre Lego contraptions on wheels that fell over as soon as you tried to roll them on the carpeting because they were far too tall and top-heavy. “How’s your mother?” her husband asked, rising to his feet and cursing only for a moment as he

stepped on a stray block. He leaned over to kiss her after she threw herself down on the sofa. The warmth of his lips filled her with calm happiness.

“She’s...all right. Just a bit odd. The staff doesn’t think it’s much to worry about. Probably,” she added with a frown. “But she has a little task for us.”

“A task?” Mikael threw himself down on the sofa beside her and slung his arm around her shoulders. He was a big bear of a man, not much given to chatter, but when he spoke he always said something thoughtful. Eeva liked to think he had the best qualities of both her parents: a sharp mind, but a practical outlook, a bit quiet but not because he was distracted. Mikael was always paying attention. She learned that early on in their relationship. Accustomed to hiding her problems from other people, Eeva had been unprepared when he insisted not only on knowing why she was out of sorts but also on coming up with a reasonable approach to her problems.

It took some getting used to.

“What is that thing?” She leaned forward to take a closer look at Oskar’s peculiar vehicle. The boy had quite an imagination.

“It’s for people who work in tall buildings, so they don’t have to take the stairs when they get to work.” The car immediately fell over, exposing a key design flaw, but Oskar did not seem to mind. “Maybe I should give it wings.”

“They will help balance it.” He was her stepson but she’d been the only mother he had for most of his life. Eeva hadn’t realised that Mikael had a son when she first started seeing him. And even when she figured it out, it didn’t seem like that big of a deal. She was just grateful that he seemed to like her. Eeva had never had much experience with kids. Growing up her friends had all done babysitting for pocket money. Her allowance for doing chores was generous enough to cover the books and art supplies she wanted, so she had never been interested in pursuing extra work.

Without realizing how it happened, Eeva had come to love Oskar the way she loved Mikael. For a time she had held them both at arm’s length not because she cared too little but rather because it never failed to surprise her that she cared so much. Her way had always been so solitary; her parents were happy to leave her to her own devices for long periods of time and she had mostly revelled in the freedom it offered her. Her drawing skills had been well developed long before she went off to art school. Eeva had

enjoyed the startled looks of her instructors as they examined her work and then modified assignments to ask more of her. She had found work before completing her degree due to her assured skills and flexibility at coming up with a variety of ideas for any project. After all, it was how she had always amused herself.

In the last few years, however, Eeva had become a little terrified at the horrible fragility of things. Her father's death was a terrible blow, but somehow her mother's dwindling abilities struck harder. Eeva had never really been the first line of defense for anything. She had always had other people she could rely on.

"So," Mikael said, breaking into her thoughts. "Pizza night?"

"Yay, pizza night!" Oskar's vote was cast.

Eeva laughed. "The usual order?" Clearly Mikael had figured out she wasn't ready to talk yet. She made the call and they enjoyed the usual boisterous pizza night chatter which distracted her for a good while. After they put Oskar to bed, playing one last video game on his handheld, Eeva felt a twinge of guilt. She should be teaching him the old stories as her father had done, not sending him to sleep with the jangling noise of some commercially produced game.

But she was no story teller; her skills were with images. Maybe a picture book before he got too old for it. Or comics? That was an interesting idea. She'd have to mull that over. It had potential as a commercial project, which was never a bad thing.

Her mind was turning over the comic book idea as they got into bed. So she was taken by surprise when Mikael asked about her mother. "What?"

"I take it there was something you didn't want to talk about. Maybe because Oskar was there?"

Eeva sighed. "Well, it's a bit strange. It wasn't anything medical, I mean not really. But they had a word for it, called it 'confabulation'." She shrugged. "It just seemed that she was making things up, but they said it was—oh, I don't know exactly."

Mikael nodded as if he understood. It always meant that he was willing to listen further. He took his time jumping in. He liked to be sure she'd said all she had on her mind first, as if she would be startled away like a deer. "What kind of things?"

She covered her face with her hands and groaned. "Talking to a *tonttu*."

"Hunh."

Eeva looked at Mikael. “You don’t seem too surprised.”

“Well, I suppose it depends on what the *tonttu* is telling her.”

Eeva laughed. “You’re willing to believe she believes she’s been talking to elves, though?”

“It seems harmless enough,” Mikael said. “As long as it’s not advising her to foment revolution or start fires. It’s not, is it?”

“No. Well, yes actually.”

Mikael’s eyebrows shot up. “Which one?”

“Fire. The *tonttu* said we need to burn the tree that killed my father.”

Mikael winced. “Well, I suppose there’s some poetic justice in that.”

“Ritual, that was the word she used. The *tonttu* said we’d have to chop up the tree and burn it to move on, I guess. For her to let go. That’s the other thing. She said we should take the farm. I couldn’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

Eeva stared at him, but Mikael was staring off into space or rather into the blue walls of the bedroom. She had been glad they painted the room over but sometimes the colour seemed too bright for sleep. “Why not? Well, we can’t just...move there.”

“We should think about it.” He yawned. “Do you have to be up early tomorrow?”

“Me? No. But you don’t mean it, do you? How could we manage getting back and for the to the city, or rather you doing it. Especially when winter comes. Think how much more trouble snow would be.” Eeva shook her head. It was madness.

Mikael yawned again. “So we could go out this weekend and burn the tree, I suppose.” He slipped down under the covers with a happy sigh. “I am tired tonight. It’s been a long week and it’s only Tuesday.”

“You want to go out there this weekend? I thought we were going to try to get some shopping done. Oskar’s growing out of clothes so fast.”

“We can do both.”

Eeva took a long time to fall asleep, long after Mikael was snoring peacefully. *Why not?* Could it really be so simple? No, it simply wasn’t practical. Think of being out there in the woods in the winter time. But then think too of how wonderful it would be to tramp through the woods with Oskar and show him all the wonders around the place.

They had sold off most of the farm lands when her father got too old to keep the place going even with help. Their neighbours grew the same crops so at least it looked the same as ever when Eeva was there. He wasn't that old, but the hard life of farming had taken its toll. He was ten years older than her mother—and her mother had been an unusual thirty-three when she was born. They had given up on the idea that they would have a child and then she arrived.

But the woods—her father would not countenance any talk of selling them. They snuggled around the back of the house like a protective army, cut through with the little stream that howled in the spring flood and dribbled to little more than a whisper in the height of summer. And how did the trees pay him back? By killing him. Eeva sighed. He should have asked for help, not stubbornly gone out there on his own. What had he been thinking? Probably about Cicero's last speech or some old folk magic tale, she knew. Anything but the task in front of him.

Maybe if they did this thing it would help. It would get her mother over this strange obsession with the *tonttu* and back to herself. They all would feel a lot better then. Eeva closed her eyes and cuddled up to Mikael's broad back. Maybe it would be all right. At least he didn't seem to mind.

Oskar was all excited about the trip and bounced up and down in the car with excitement. "Are we really going to burn the tree?"

"We have to chop it up first," his father told him. "We'll make a bonfire. But it will take some time to get that done."

"A lot of carrying of wood," Eeva added. "Your arms will be twice the length they are now by the end of the day."

"They will not!" Oskar laughed anyway. He did not see the task ahead as work, which was just as well. He ran into the house to touch all his favourite things the moment Eeva unlocked the door. The boy was fascinated by the old bearskin that still covered the bed in the guest room. Eeva could hear him growl at it.

Oskar poked his head in the kitchen where they were putting the food they'd brought into the old Frigidaire. Mikael shook his head in wonder every time they came, unable to believe it was still running. "Are we staying here tonight? Can I sleep in the bear room?"

“Yes and yes,” his father said.

“Hurrah!” Osakar ran off to go jump on the bear.

“We should get rid of the dusty old thing,” Eeva said, wrinkling her nose at the thought of what all might be living in the fur.

“I love the old things here. Even that.” Mikael nodded at the woodstove her mother still insisted in cooking on.

“I’ll take gas. I got tired of chopping kindling when I was ten.”

“We could always have it adapted to gas, I bet.”

Eeva looked up. “You’re seriously thinking about us moving out here?”

Mikael shrugged. “Can’t hurt to think about it.”

They headed out of the house together. The sun had decided to show its strength that day and gave a fair showing. Though it had been a wet spring the day felt warm with almost a hint of summer to it. Oskar ran for the woods, but Eeva called him back.

“We need to stop at the barn first. Saws, hatchets and wheelbarrows.”

“Do I get to use the chainsaw?”

“No!” Mikael and Eeva said together.

Loaded up with equipment, they trundled the wheelbarrows out into the woods. Eeva tried to point out as many landmarks as possible to Oskar, feeling as if she had neglected this part of his education so far. “When we had horses, I’d use that rock to get up in the saddle when I was too small. And that big stump? My dad carved my kantele out of that tree when we cut it down.”

“The one you let me play? The little five string one?”

“Yup. My dad made that.” Eeva remembered sitting for hours on the stump, strumming away at the strings as she thought about nothing at all really, just enjoying the music as it echoed through the trees.

Up over the rise they came to the grove where the broken beech lay. Moss had grown on the side of it. Untouched for two years now, she couldn’t say she was surprised, but it made Eeva feel a little stab of pain thinking of moss covering her father. He had refused to be buried, wanted his organs donated and his ashes scattered in the fields he had ploughed so long. The tree had meant his death, but it was also the only tangible connection to his death.

“Are you all right with this?” Mikael put an arm around her waist and gave her a little squeeze. “We don’t have to do it if you’d rather we didn’t.”

“No, I’m okay with it. It needs to be done.”

“We don’t want the *tonttu* to be unhappy,” Oskar said with grave seriousness.

Eeva looked up. “You know about that, eh?”

Oskar nodded. “Will I see the *tonttu*? I’ve never seen one before. They are real aren’t they. It’s not like Santa.” He had felt very grown-up when he explained to Mikael that he knew the jolly fat man was really them.

“I haven’t seen one since I was little,” Eeva said. “Maybe he will come out when he sees we are serious about work. They expect you to work hard.”

Work hard they did. Mikael fired up the chainsaw—it made Eeva too nervous to use it—and began to work through the thick trunk, while she used the big axe to chop off smaller branches. Oskar dragged the smaller branches over to the wheelbarrows and with both of them looking on nervously, very carefully chopped them into smaller pieces. They worked for a couple of hours without stopping more than a few minutes, then loaded up the wood they had and wheeled it over to the bonfire pit.

“We haven’t had a fire since Papa died,” Eeva said with a start. It had been such a ritual for midsummer and midwinter. They had sat spent months piling up rubbish. scrub wood, cleared brush and cardboard for the big fire. The ring of stones still marked the space but it looked worn and neglected.

“That will make Granddad happy,” Oskar said. He usually remembered the idea of his grandfather more than the reality, but Eeva was always surprised how strong that idea remained. Perhaps because he adored his grandmother, too. Mikael’s parents lived so far away, the boy had not had a chance to really bond with them and Eeva suspected proximity would not change that much. They weren’t the most welcoming people her own experience suggested.

When they had built the first ragged shape of the pyre, it was time to stop for sandwiches. Before they had finished eating, Mikael nudged Eeva and she saw that Oskar was falling asleep in his plate. They carried him off to the bear room, protesting sleepily that he didn’t need a nap.

“Should we take a nap, too?” Mikael asked, stretching his arms up over his head and nearly hitting the rack of pots and pans that hung from the ceiling of the kitchen.

“If I take a nap now, I will sleep the day away,” Eeva said, a hand to her back as she stretched. “I’m not used to this kind of physical labour anymore.” They headed back out, pushing the wheel barrows before them and set to work doggedly chopping at the wood.

“It’s not like we have to do all of it today,” Mikael said at one point, setting down the axe to mop his brow. “We have done an awful lot. And if we are moving out here, we’ll have plenty of time to get it all.”

Eeva had been lifting the axe for another blow but stopped to look closely at him. “Are you really thinking we could do that? I mean, what if Mama changes her mind? I mean if she starts feeling better and wants to come home?”

“We could all live here. I think she’d enjoy it now.” Mikael sat down on the chunk of wood he had started to split.

Eeva leaned on the axe. She didn’t quite know what to say. The thought of living here awoke so many different things in her heart. “But surely...it’s impractical, don’t you think? With all your meetings and late nights and whatnot?”

Mikael shrugged. “You know how Bert Jenkins is always trying to get me to take a teaching position in the business school.”

“Bert! But you always turned him down. I don’t want you to think, I mean, to feel obligated—” Eeva felt guilty like she had tricked him into something. She hadn’t meant to do so. Maybe she shouldn’t have told him about the thing with her mother.

“I never took it because I knew that I wouldn’t make as much money as I would in the firm. But you know, if we lived here,” Mikael opened his hands to the woods around them, “we would live much better on less. Instead of rent on that tiny flat, we could be investing in improvements to the house and barn. And getting WiFi so you could work.”

“What do you think Oskar would say?” Eeva’s heart suddenly seemed to be beating faster.

Mikael laughed. “He would love it, you know he would. All we’d have to say is that he gets the bear room.” They both laughed.

“Can it be that easy?” Eeva walked over to where Mikael sat and put her hands on his shoulders. “Can we just change everything like that?”

“Why not?” Mikael covered her hands with his own larger hands. “What could be easier. We just say yes.”

Eeva laughed. “I think I am very lucky to have stumbled across you.”

“Yes, you are.” He looked up and she leaned down to kiss him and they didn’t see Oskar come trotting up, still rubbing his eyes.

“You let me sleep,” he said accusingly as he took up his little hatchet.

“You needed the rest,” his father said, his voice serious.

“I saw the *tonttu*,” Oskar told him as he hacked halfway through a small branch and then struggled to get the hatchet free.

“Oh you did, did you?” Eeva chuckled. She went to pick up her axe as Mikael retrieved his.

“What did he look like?” Mikael asked.

Oskar considered the question carefully. “He had a blue shirt and a red cap, one of those funny ones that goes up.” He made the shape over his own head. “He said if we live here we have to follow the rules.”

Eeva and Mikael exchanged a glance. “Maybe he overheard us?” He shrugged.

“Are there a lot of rules?”

“I don’t know, he didn’t say. He seems kind of stern but not so bad.”

“Stern, that’s a good word,” his father said with approval. “I’m glad you know it.”

Oskar looked at him with narrowed eyes. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Not at all.”

“You don’t believe I saw the *tonttu* but I did.”

“I believe you,” Eeva said. “Did he say anything else?”

Oskar brightened. “He said the bear wants to go to the fire tonight.”

“The bear? Does he want to be in the fire?”

Oskar looked horrified. “No, he just wants to see it.”

Mikael nodded. “Okay then.” He looked around for the splitting maul which had gotten under some of the wood.

“So are we moving here?” Oskar insisted.

Mikael looked over at Eeva and smiled. “Yes, we are.”

“Can I have the bear room?”

“I told you.”

Eeva laughed. “Yes, you get the bear room. But you may have to share it with the *tonttu*.”

“Oh, he lives in the woods. He told me.” Oskar set to work very earnestly on the wood, determined to add to the fire.

“What was that word again?” Mikael asked as they stacked the next round of logs on the wheel barrows.

“What word? Oh, confabulation?” Eeva looked at him. He had wood chips in his hair, but he still looked handsome—and very happy.

Mikael held up the axe as if it were a sword. “Then I declare it. From this time forward let us remember this as Confabulation Day and every year, let us celebrate it with wood, fire and our *tonttu*.”

“And sandwiches,” Oskar added.

“Yes, and sandwiches.”

“You idiot,” Eeva said, laughing despite herself.

“We few, we happy few—”

“Grab that wheel barrow, my king. We’ve got a fire to build.”

“A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!” Mikael shouted, brandishing the axe before he buried it in the stump. They set off across the uneven ground. Oskar pretended to be a horse as he ran beside the wheel barrows and they all laughed like a bunch of crazy people, but it felt just fine.

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