

PIKKUHENKI

Toon Tellegen

Translated by David Colmer

Long ago, in a faraway country, there was a witch who was so small that she lived under a grain of sand behind a blade of grass.

Her name was Pikkuhengi.

She was so small that no one had ever seen her, not even the other witches, who flew around on broomsticks, had power over people and animals, brewed magic potions, laughed their nasty laughs and gathered in forest glades during thunderstorms.

No one knew she existed.

Sometimes she saw the other witches flying high overhead like black moths. She heard them screech and cackle about horrible things they were going to do. Pikkuhengi knew that she too was a witch. But she didn't know whether she could fly or whether she had any powers.

I'll have to find out, she thought.

One day she made a broomstick that was so small you couldn't see it, not even under the most powerful magnifying glass. She sat on the broomstick and said, "Giddy-up!"

She shot up and flew over the world.

I can fly, she thought. *No doubt about that.*

No one saw her because she was still tiny.

She flew over the vast empire she lived in, which was ruled by a cruel emperor.

She saw rivers, shining lakes and endless forests, steppe and deserts, and sparkling coasts where the sea met the land. She saw the cities with their red and light-blue palaces, and she saw lonely fortresses perched on bare rocks far out to sea or stuck in the middle of misty marshes. She saw people walk and run and shoot at each other with cannons. She saw them dance and kiss and lock each other up for a hundred years in castles surrounded by brambles. She saw them build gingerbread houses in dark forests, and let themselves get eaten up by wolves, and calmly bite into poisoned apples.

But Pikkuhengi still didn't know whether she had any power.

That would be good to know, she thought.

In the middle of the countryside she dived down on her broomstick. She flew into a farmyard. There was a dog lying there on a chain.

She flew straight down, then swerved up into the dog's nose.

The dog sneezed once. But Pikkuhenki was so small it didn't notice her flying into its thoughts.

Suddenly she didn't seem small anymore. That was because thoughts are tiny themselves, a hundred thousand times smaller than the smallest speck of dust. They have to be, otherwise you could never fit so many into one head.

On her broomstick, Pikkuhenki zoomed around the dog's thoughts.

"Break free," she said, and there was only one thing the dog's thoughts could do: make it break free.

"Growl," she said. "Yowl. Howl." And the dog growled and yowled and howled like no dog had ever growled, yowled or howled before.

People for miles around were rooted to the spot. It was as if the clouds had burst open and the sky was growling, and the earth was growling back, and the sky was yowling and howling, and the earth was yowling and howling back, and even the sun was growling and scorching the earth with yowling rays.

Far, far away, other dogs were so surprised they started to growl and yowl and howl as well. They hadn't known that a dog could growl and yowl and howl like that.

"Run," Pikkuhenki said, and the dog started to run.

"Bite," Pikkuhenki said, and the dog bit everything it could reach: legs and ears and trousers and tree trunks and noses.

I must be a real witch, thought Pikkuhenki. I have powers.

She flew out of the dog's thoughts and rose up again.

The dog stood there in the middle of the yard. It looked around for a moment, then fell over and lay on the ground, exhausted. It felt a strange pain it had never felt before and tried to whine, but only a few hoarse sounds came out of its throat.

The farmer – who had been bitten as well and would now have to make do without a nose for the rest of his life – approached carefully. He saw the dog's frightened eyes and heard it panting. As quick as lightning he chained it up with the thickest chain he could find, hit it with a stick and chased it back into its kennel, shouting, "You miserable beast!" And for three days he didn't give the dog anything to eat or drink and thrashed it three times a day.

Pikkuhenki was no angel, she was a witch.

And on she flew, over the cruel emperor's vast empire.

She came to a village.

Hundreds of people were crowded together on a square in front of a church. In the middle were a man and a bear. An old woman was taking the hat around.

The man was playing a violin – it was a pitiful little tune – and the bear was dancing. It was muzzled and had big, mournful eyes.

Pikkuhenki dived down, flew low over the ground between the people's legs, then shot up the bear's nose.

The bear stopped dancing.

“Dance!” the man hissed, trying to play faster.

But Pikkuhenki was already flying around the bear's old and mournful thoughts and stirring them up.

The bear ripped off its muzzle, growled and tore the violin away from the man.

“Dance!” it roared.

It started to play. And the man started to dance. Everything went black, but he kept dancing.

At first the music the bear played was slow and mournful, but then it grew faster and more exciting.

“Dance!” it roared again, and everyone on the square started dancing – even crooked old ladies, men with wooden legs, dogs and children sitting on shoulders.

They danced and the bear played the violin.

None of the people had ever heard music like this before – nothing this fierce and thrilling – and it felt like the bear would keep playing forever and they would keep dancing forever as well, even when they couldn't go on anymore.

But suddenly Pikkuhenki flew back out of the bear's thoughts and disappeared into the clouds.

The bear scraped the bow over the strings one last time and lowered the violin.

The people stood still. They panted, leant on each other and wiped the sweat off their faces.

The man looked at the bear and seized his violin. He grabbed a whip and lashed the bear until its back was cut and bleeding. “You scoundrel!” he shouted. “You'll be the death of me yet!”

The people turned their backs and went home without a word. The man cursed and whipped, the old woman's hat stayed empty, and the bear looked at the ground with big, mournful eyes. Everything that happened to him was terrible. That was all he knew.

You never know, thought Pikkuhenki in the meantime, flying high over the clouds, *I could be the most powerful witch of all*. She rubbed her hands.

I'll have to check that out, she thought.

She flew to the imperial capital. There she saw the red and light-blue palaces gleaming in the sun. She saw the emperor as well, pacing around the palace gardens with a frown on his face and a furious look in his eyes. And she also saw his only child, a daughter, locked up in a tower and slowly pining away, because a fortune-teller had

once predicted that the emperor's daughter would marry and rule over the empire, while the emperor himself would be covered in shame and forced to flee.

The emperor thought that if he kept her locked up in a tower she would never marry, at least not while he was alive. He ordered a smith to melt down the keys and turn them into a small, iron pig, which he wore on a chain round his neck.

For a long time Pikkuhengi flew over the city on her broomstick, looking down.

It was a cold winter's day. The river was covered with a thick layer of ice. The people had thick coats on and thick hats on their heads. They hurried along the streets, looking down at the ground because they were scared of the emperor. They feared his orders and the evil grip he had on their lives.

Pikkuhengi saw a boy standing near the river.

The boy was crying. He had walked on when his mother stopped to look in a shop window and now he couldn't find his way back. "Mummy!" he called. "Mummy!" Freezing cold and all alone, he stood there. He cried big tears that froze on his cheeks. He had never been unhappier. But no one paid any attention to him at all. They just hurried by.

For a moment Pikkuhengi hesitated. Then she plunged down on her broomstick, flew low over the ice on the river, then shot up past the embankment, past the boy's coat, past his chin and into his nose.

Without slowing down at all, she flew straight into his thoughts.

Sad thoughts surrounded her. Thoughts about being smacked and sent to bed without dinner, and thoughts about dying and never going home again and freezing solid.

"Don't be sad," she told the thoughts, and the boy, whose name was Ivan, stopped being sad.

"Ask for something yummy," she said, and Ivan shouted, "Something yummy!"

"Hot chocolate muffins," Pikkuhengi said, and Ivan shouted, "Hot chocolate muffins!"

People were struck dumb with amazement. Who was that boy? What was he shouting?

But Ivan's voice was so commanding that they ran off and came back a few minutes later with dozens of hot chocolate muffins.

Ivan took a few bites.

Then Pikkuhengi said, "For the seagulls," and Ivan shouted, "For the seagulls!"

The people grabbed the muffins and threw them out onto the frozen river. Seagulls swooped down by the hundred, screeching and fighting, and in a flash all the muffins were gone.

"Bring all the prisoners here," Pikkuhengi said, and Ivan shouted, "Bring all the prisoners here!"

Soon there were dozens of prisoners standing there, skinny and cold, still blinking and with chains around their ankles, looking at little Ivan.

“Free those who didn’t do anything,” said Pikkuhenki.

“Free those who didn’t do anything,” said Ivan.

For a moment it was quiet while the prisoners and the prison guards looked at each other. *What did the boy mean?* they wondered.

“Who didn’t do anything?” said Pikkuhenki.

“Who didn’t do anything?” asked Ivan.

“Me!” shouted the prisoners. “Me! Me! Me!”

“Free them all,” said Pikkuhenki.

“Free them all,” said Ivan, and with trembling fingers the guards undid the prisoners’ chains. All the prisoners ran away as fast as they could and disappeared down the city’s lanes and alleyways.

By this time the crowd around Ivan had become enormous.

“Bring the emperor here,” said Pikkuhenki. *We’ll see who has the most power around here*, she thought, and Ivan shouted, “Bring the emperor here!”

A shudder passed through the crowd. But Pikkuhenki’s power knew no bounds, and no one could resist the look she put in Ivan’s eyes and the voice in which she made him give his orders.

Everyone went to the palace with sticks and guns. Only Ivan stayed behind on the riverbank, with Pikkuhenki in his thoughts. Tumult sounded in the distance. Clouds of smoke rose up and shots were fired.

Not long afterwards, the crowd came back, pushing the emperor along in front of them. His velvet cloak was torn and his nose was bleeding.

“On your knees,” Pikkuhenki said, and Ivan said, “On your knees!”

The emperor dropped to his knees.

“Tell me who you are,” Pikkuhenki said, and Ivan said, “Tell me who you are.”

“The emperor,” stammered the emperor.

“My emperor?” Pikkuhenki said, and Ivan asked, “My emperor?”

“Your emperor,” stammered the emperor.

“Give a scornful laugh,” Pikkuhenki whispered, and Ivan gave a scornful laugh.

For a moment it was quiet. In between Ivan’s feverish thoughts, Pikkuhenki was thinking. *What shall I do with him?* she wondered. *It has to be something horrible, that’s for sure.*

Then she said, “Say that you are sorry,” and Ivan said, “Say that you are sorry.”

He looked at the emperor. The emperor lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m terribly sorry.”

He didn’t know what he was supposed to be sorry about and it was the first time he had ever said those words, but he was too scared to ask questions – he who had never for a single moment of his entire life been scared of anyone at all.

“Crawl,” Pikkuhenki said, and Ivan said, “Crawl!”

The emperor put his pale hands on the ground and started to crawl.

“From now on, forever, until your dying day, keep crawling,” Pikkuhenki said, and Ivan said, “From now on, forever, until your dying day, keep crawling!”

The emperor bowed his head even lower and crawled away on his hands and knees. The people shrunk back, clearing a path for him. None of them dared to say a word or even swallow or lick their lips. The emperor crawled along the riverside, down the bank, over the river ice, up the other bank, through the streets, through the fields, through the forests. Big tears rolled down his cheeks and he mumbled, “Please, oh please have mercy...” He didn’t know the meaning of the words, but he had heard them many times before when people were kissing his feet.

The emperor never stood up again and eventually – sobbing, crawling on his hands and knees, and eating nettles, dandelions and earthworms – he disappeared into the enormous desolation of his empire.

But while he was still crawling between his subjects on the bank of the river, Ivan’s mother came running up.

“Ivan... Dear Ivan... Where were you? I looked for you everywhere... Oh, my little boy...” She threw her arms around her child. She didn’t see the emperor. She only had eyes for her son.

At that moment Pikkuhenki flew out of Ivan’s nose and shot up into the dark sky.

Ivan started crying again. His mother picked him up and kissed him. *You’ll still get a hiding later*, she thought, *but for now you’re the sweetest little boy in the whole world.* Then she disappeared into the crowd.

That same evening, the princess was freed from her tower. She appeared on the palace balcony, still pale and with sunken cheeks, but otherwise back to her dazzling self. People poured in from all sides, cheering, shouting with joy and throwing their hats in the air.

“Who saved me?” cried the princess.

“A child!” the people shouted. “A little boy!”

But the princess did not believe them and called out again and again, “Who saved me? Tell me who you are! Who saved me? Who, who...” She wanted to marry him.

But no one knew who the child was, and Ivan didn’t say a word because he didn’t want to get married for ages yet, and his mother had no idea that on that cold winter’s

afternoon her son, her Ivan, had not only got lost, but had also rid the empire of a tyrant.

“Then I’ll marry the first man I bump into,” the princess said at last. What else could she do? She came down from the balcony, wrapped herself up in a shawl against the biting cold, walked through the palace gates and into the street, gave three very deep sighs and married the first man she met.

And while the old emperor moaned softly and crawled year after year through rough and arid regions on his bleeding knees, the princess and her first man ruled over the country. And everyone was happy.

Ah! Pikkuhenki can’t have been a witch then! She must have been a fairy!

Maybe.

The story goes that she went to the very next gathering of all the witches, on a Saturday in a dark forest, and there she flew through the mouldy ear of the mightiest witch right into the middle of the most hideous and horrific thoughts. An enormous struggle erupted in the head of that witch. Nasty ideas battled with cruel plans; false accusations and grim suspicions hounded each other, tore each other apart, spat at each other and set fire to each other.

Finally, in the middle of the night, after days of battle, there was an enormous explosion. All the witches were blown into countless pieces that flew up into the sky and came floating back to earth as dust.

Nobody knows exactly.

Since then no one has ever seen a witch, although sometimes people do suspect that one might have been around. That’s still quite possible.

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