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True

Riikka Pulkkinen
Lola M. Rogers, translator
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Death, at the grim hand of cancer, mines a person of the body he or she spent a lifetime in. It devours, destroys, and erodes everything. Its changes move too slowly to be seen daily, but over weeks and months, family and friends are forced to face the inescapable conclusion: the one they care for has become a lessened person, a shadow hovers where a tree once stood, a tendril of smoke coils where a flame glowed. And for the person dying, there is a realization that everything he or she does is done simultaneously, for the first time again and for the last time.

Cancer's sense of urgency drives Finnish writer Riikka Pulkkinen's novel, *True*, to depths that will have readers totally subsumed by forty years of family secrets and untold history. Following three generations at different points in time, the book begins with Elsa's realization that her life is ending. Rather than place her in hospice, Elsa's husband, daughter, and two granddaughters choose to divide the home-care required.

Everybody in the story is allowed to grieve and begins in their own way. But when Elsa gives her granddaughter Anna an old dress, a family story of an affair that had been repressed for decades demands resolution. And just as it threatened to split Elsa's marriage in the '60s, so it divides *True*'s narrative between the grieving family and Anna's imagining of the past and how it mirrors her understanding of the present.

The two story lines blend together in a way that gives what is not said as much gravity as what is. The smallest gestures amplify the past's echoes, shifting characters from reality to profound introspective journeys that end with a realization rather than a conversation. Readers will find themselves captivated by something sublime existing somewhere between apologia and apology. Or, as Pulkkinen writes, "An apology is a request to be seen as you are, in spite of what you've done. Responding to one is the deepest love a person is capable of."

Beautifully translated by Lola M. Rogers to capture the full chill of a Finnish winter and the lightness of its spring, *True* is Pulkkinen's debut English publication. Her previous novel, *Raja,* won both the Kaarle Prize and the Laila Hirvisaari Prize in 2007.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (Spring 2012)

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