



**Andrus Kivirähk**

## A brave woman

Marge was 18, and had a crush on a disc jockey. He was a tall, handsome man, with an easy tongue and an ambiguous vocabulary, which always made Marge giggle and blush. She kept a photograph of the disc jockey in her student hostel room, also a tape with the man's patter. If only she could have his autograph! Marge had tried a few times to get closer to her idol, had timidly waited after a disco at the club door, but the man had never noticed her. He always had others with him, long-legged pretty babes who climbed squealing into the disc jockey's Mercedes, leaving the shy Marge staring after them with envy.

But one evening when Marge again stood in the falling snow and waited for her prince, the disc jockey emerged from the club alone. It was immediately obvious that he was missing something. His glance roamed around expectantly, and he was frowning... Suddenly he saw Marge and a wide smile spread all over his face.

"Damn it! And I thought that all my little kittens had vanished into thin air and left their Daddy in the lurch," he said. "What are you standing here for, shivering? Climb in! Make it snappy!"

Marge took a deep breath and did as she was told.

After a few months she realized she was pregnant. She was quite taken aback at first. What now? Abortion? No, this is not what Marge wanted, she was afraid. Ask the disc jockey for help? No chance... that bastard — yes, Marge's opinion of the man had crashed from the attic to the cellar — would not be of the slightest use, he would merely grin and perhaps try to drag her into bed again. Phew, how she hated the disc jockey, and all other men into the bargain. She had, after all, only gone with him to get his autograph; had in fact nervously fumbled in her breast pocket for her pen when the man, like a melting snowman, descended on her and dragged her down to the bed, on top of the carelessly discarded T-shirts, jeans, and earphones. A videocassette under Marge's back pressed a deep red weal into her skin. The brute!

This unpleasant experience made Marge regard all men with some suspicion. You trust them, and they... She noticed her best friends peering at her legs or trying to get a look down her cleavage. Well, well! You give in to them, remain alone with them, and... You can't rely on anyone, only yourself.

She has to give birth to her child and bring it up on her own!

She had no intention of leaving the university without finishing it, education is so important nowadays, that much was clear. But she could not very well take the baby to the student hostel, that was no place for a small infant. She needed somewhere else to live, she needed her own house.

Still, that would cost a packet! Of course, if she built it herself, it would come cheaper... But the materials! Stone and timber, mortar and glass. Everything costs, and is so expensive that the mere thought of it makes you feel hollow inside.

So what was there to do? The only chance to get some money was to earn it!

Difficult days now began for Marge. In the mornings she sat at the lectures, fighting off sleep, listened to the professor, at the same time knitted covertly under her desk. One jersey and pullover followed another, a few baby's rompers, scarves and mittens in between. All these lovely items were then sold off. For that money Marge bought bricks and dragged them in her rucksack to the construction site she had bought on credit. Because of that, most of her money was spent on paying interest on the loan. Knitting was naturally not a sufficient means of income, money was still scarce and Marge looked for extra work. She sewed dresses, worked as a cleaner, piano teacher, and commercial agent. By midnight, completely exhausted, she reached her plot of land. No sleep now! She did not even think of sleep, no, it was time to start building! Marge dug the foundations, got splinters in her palm from the spade handle, the child moved in her belly... Then a few hours of sleep, and everything started all over again. There were times when Marge cried her heart out, prostrate in the foundations, her face in clay, but soon she pulled herself together, studied the building manual and struggled on. You can't give in, she thought. Be brave, Marge! Be brave!

Marge hated being pitied and did not want her course-mates to know about her miserable situation. She covered the blue and black circles under her eyes with mascara, creamed her calloused hands. Sometimes she even went dancing in a nightclub, thus celebrating the laying of a cornerstone or completing the sewerage system. Just like in work, Marge had no mercy on herself also when she was having fun — she danced in her stockinged feet, wildly, all night through, dripping with sweat. Such fleeting moments of relaxation gave her strength to carry on.

Then her child was born — a beautiful healthy baby girl. Life became even more difficult. The house was far from being ready, for how much can a weak, inexperienced, and pregnant woman — however industrious she might be — actually accomplish during a night. Now she somehow had to find time in her busy day for the child as well. Marge took the baby with her everywhere — she had nowhere to leave her anyway. Luckily the baby was of a calm and tranquil nature, and dozed off during lectures, occasionally sucking at Marge's breast. The baby in front and the sack with bricks on her back — this is how she was seen travelling on a tram. At night the baby slept in the tent while Marge was busy bricklaying by the light of a campfire. The flames cast a reddish glow on white bricks and made Marge's face blush. She was dog-tired, but never complained, swallowed her tears, and plodded on. With her last bit of energy she began studying Italian after her university lectures.

She had no intention to give up dancing either. Naturally she had to take the child with her, leaving it in the cloakroom. At a party she met a young man with swarthy skin and a hooked nose. I want a son with this man, and I'll bring him up to be just as brave as a certain woman I know, decided Marge.

She was now carrying another child. Friends scolded her — life is difficult enough for you, what do you want with another baby? Marge laughed condescendingly. She knew that hardships came and went, but a woman's

courage remains. Marge was positive she would manage. She needed a house, and would build it; she wanted a lot of children, and would have them!

Going occasionally through old photos, Marge could hardly believe that she had once been that stupid and shy girl who had meekly let herself be raped on a sofa heaped with all sorts of trivial stuff. Numerous ordeals had changed her. Now she knew exactly what she was doing. Every minute was accounted for. At the moment I am knitting, then I'll tidy the place, then run around the town selling table lamps, then study Italian. At night I'll build the roof. And tough luck to anyone who would dare to interfere — Marge had also taken up judo.

When her second child was born, a strapping healthy boy, the house was almost ready, and the university courses completed, with honours. The worst was over. She was finally able, after a very long period of time, to sleep under a roof; for her children it was the first time ever. The elder one was even a bit afraid, whimpered, and wanted to get back into the tent. Marge calmed her.

"This is our home now, stupid," she said. "Our own home, dear!"

But there was still so much to do! Marge continued studying, took up Japanese, wrote a scientific research paper, at the same time furnishing the house she had built with her own two hands. She thought of buying a car, and then did it. This, of course, meant more loans, in addition to those on the house. She needed more money! Marge began writing love stories. Her heroines were brave, hard-working women like herself. She became famous, her books vanished from shops to the bookshelves of thousands of women. Debts were paid.

"This girl can do anything!" her friends were full of praise.

When the house was completed, Marge installed a man there, and had another child. Now she had to feed a large family because the husband had no job, only drank heavily. Marge soon threw him out and took in another man, but that did not last much longer either. Marge decided in favour of cats.

The evicted husbands wandered around the house for a while, slept on the doorstep, and attempted to climb in through the window a few times, but Marge had a gun ready. The men finally gave up with a disappointed shrug and went off in search of better luck elsewhere.

"We won't have any more Daddies in the house," said Marge to her children. "We don't need them."

But she wanted more children, and got them too. There were enough men in the clubs where she still went to have a good time and dance in her stockinged feet. She brought the men home, used them, and chased them out in the morning.

"Let me sleep!" groaned her bedmates, but Marge had no time to waste. A bucketful of cold water got the men shrieking out of bed like a flash, a few additional punches, and the coast was clear. Marge had work to do.

She had decided to set up a bank. She went on special courses, studied abroad for half a year — with the whole troop of children with her — and returned as a highly qualified banking expert. Establishing the bank nevertheless did not proceed smoothly, so much work needed to be done, but Marge was no

stranger there. She was a brave woman.

The bank got going.

For her own amusement she won the Beach Girl contest and wrote twenty more books during night hours, which were all quickly sold as bestsellers. In addition, she started building a new house, a real palace, so that her children, now six in number, could each have a separate room. This time she did not bother building it herself, there simply wasn't time. She was, after all, president of the bank, a city councillor, a TV chat show hostess, member of various juries, protected animals and children, fought for peace and against war, managed to be everywhere and busy herself with everything.

It was then that she began contemplating about changing her name. Marge — this was all right, but her surname — Laulasmaa — simply wasn't any good. Laulasmaa, indeed! Since she's such a brave woman, her name must be Brava.

The whole thing required a lot of effort; she did not shrink from bribing the officials to get what she wanted — who could have resisted the will of such a brave woman? The day she got her new passport carrying the name of Brava, Marge went straight to the club after her working hours and danced there until morning. In her stockinged feet.

She was respected and admired. Men stared at her with fear and desire provoked by a beautiful but unreachable woman. Some tried to flirt with her, but to no avail. Marge liked to pick her men herself, when she had time and was in the right mood. The beautiful bank president slapped anyone in the face who dared approach her in the office with amorous purposes.

"Seven with one blow!" she announced one day to her children, meaning that she had got the cheeks of her 7 men colleagues bright red with just one slap. She embroidered this sentence with pearls on to her belt and wore it everywhere.

When she once emerged from her limousine in front of the bank, she ran into the disc jockey — the same who had treated her so badly all these years ago. The disc jockey had gone almost bald, had lost half his teeth, and stank of beer. Marge did not hesitate a moment — she grabbed the man by his collar, dragged him through the bank doors and almost carried him into her office. Once there, she pushed the man who was by now wailing with fear to the leather couch and climbed on top of him.

"Well, how's that?" she asked. "How does it feel? Better than the last time, eh?"

The disc jockey grasped for air, moved his hands about as if swimming, causing the thick layer of white forms on the couch to fall off. The sheets of papers exploded into the air like white leaves of poplars. The disc jockey kicked the bucket.

Brava was not particularly upset about her lover's death, this had happened before. The corpse was wrapped into a black plastic bag and taken to the rubbish heap as usual.

The gratifying intercourse and successful revenge had given Marge such a surge of energy that she worked for four days without once leaving her office.

The bank's annual profit doubled.

For a long time now, Brava and her family had not lived in their old house, but in the new palace that she had had built — a slender, pillared cathedral decorated with a golden-domed bell tower. The bell sounded every full hour, with a human voice.

Once when Brava had brought a young man home from her club and thrown the poor lad out in the morning, her eldest daughter, who was eighteen already, caught sight of him. The lad was handsome, with a snub nose and tousled fair hair. He noticed her too and waved, indicating that she should open the window.

"What do you want?" whispered the girl.

"I am the son of the Russian Tsar," replied the lad. "I came to steal your Mother's bell. Perhaps you could help me?"

"Oh, dear, you won't be able to do that!" said the girl. "Mother will kill you on the spot if you as much as lay a finger on the bell! And even if you manage to get down from the tower, you won't be able to escape mother, she's so brave, she'll catch you in no time!"

"Let's have a try, anyway," said the son of the Tsar. "My hawk will help me."

Immediately a huge hawk descended from the skies, and the lad climbed on to its back.

"Take me with you!" begged Brava's daughter. "I want to come with you!"

"Climb on!"

They flew up to the tower, grabbed the bell that at once rang out with a human voice, and took off. It was high time, too — they saw a rapidly approaching cloud of dust behind them.

"It's mother!" cries the girl in desperation. "We're finished! We'll be caught. She is going to gobble us up!"

"Don't panic, just drop one of my feathers, and you'll see what happens," instructed the hawk.

The Tsar's son plucked a feather from the hawk's wing as told, and threw it down. A thick forest sprang up at once. Brava began snapping the trees in two with her bare hands. But soon she was catching up with the fugitives again.

"Spit!" advised the clever bird.

The Tsar's son did as told. At once, an enormously deep and wide lake appeared below. Brava went down on all fours and started to drink up the lake in huge gulps. She drank and drank, the water diminished, but then there was a loud bang, and Brava's stomach cracked open. The water flew back into the lake. The Tsar's son, Brava's daughter, and the hawk made their escape, taking the bell with them.

Marge staggered home, disappointed. For the first time in years someone had got the better of her! But she did not sulk for long. This is not the end of the world! Misfortune, like a bitter pill, simply has to be swallowed. Deft as she was at everything, she took thread and needle and managed to get her body into its previous pretty shape.

The main thing was not to grumble! One must be strong, like iron! Then there is nothing impossible for a brave woman.

Brava went to a club and danced madly, in her stockinged feet, until cracks appeared in the floor.

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Published 2007-06-30  
Original in Estonian  
Translation by Tiina Randviir  
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