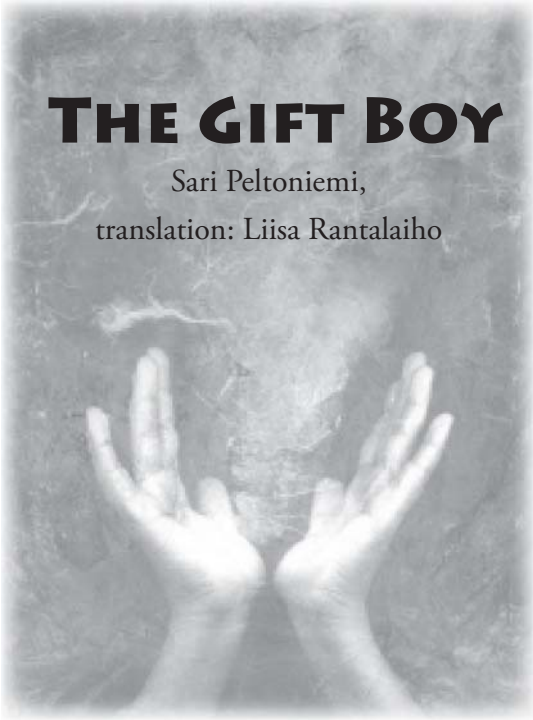


# THE GIFT BOY

Sari Peltoniemi,  
translation: Liisa Rantalaiho



That spring I turned fifty and received a helper as gift from Heron Hannusson. I made no fuss about my age and had invited nobody to celebrate, but Heron, he knew me. He knew I'd be waiting, anyway, that I would wake up early on my birthday morning and start watching for a visitor at my door. He also knew well enough that if no gifts would come, I'd sulk for a long time and take a lot of trouble to invent some malice I could cover up as innocent and unintentional.

The gift boy Heron sent was much to my liking. He had a man's build already, strong and much taller than me, but his face was a child's face. He had shorn his hair off and let Heron ornament one arm all-over with colourful tattoos. When he arrived, he kept swaggering and smoking an aromatic pipe, but his hand was trembling.

– What am I to do with you? I asked, when he had told that he'd been sent by Heron.

He smiled, embarrassed, and drew on his baggy.

– Heron has taught me to make tattoos. Look! I've made them myself.

He bared his other leg from ankle to knee, and I saw that, too, was covered with vine ornaments.

– You need not make your figures yourself, anymore, he boasted and smiled so I could not help but smile back.

– Do you wish to stay with me? I asked. I asked it in a friendly dispassionate manner. I hid my own appetites, carefully.

The boy nodded.

– Heron did not force me. I have come to learn from you and help you.

He measured me with his eyes, though he tried to do it without my notice.

– You are free to leave any time you wish, I promised gently, though I already had decided not to let this boy leave

me. He knew, too, that I was able to bind him to myself if I so wished. Still he stepped in my house mannishly and self-assured, and promised:

– I will bring much joy to you.

– What is your name?

– Peregrine, he said, blushing.

Which meant he most likely was called Jon or Kip or Mats, but I promised to call him Peregrine.

Indeed he brought me much joy that spring, but I did not get that joy for free. I kept asking myself: why would Heron give him to me – what had Heron been thinking about?

Often I secretly watched Peregrine while he was chopping wood without a shirt on, tumbling with the dog in the yard or tattooing a mark on a customer's skin. Often when I turned my eyes to him, he looked at me expectantly and then lightened our room with his smile. Sometimes, in the presence of a customer, he used a word in his speech that secretly pointed to the preceding night, and I blushed like a girl.

Heron would have laughed his ears off had he seen me like that. I did not grant him the pleasure. All that summer I never invited him to visit me even though I supposed he was expecting it.

I also knew very well that my happiness would be short lived. Peregrine was not the kind of a humble boy who serves his Mistress unselfishly and endlessly loyal.

When the eldest daughter of the manor came to seek my advice and to ask for the woman's mark on her breast, I already knew to expect trouble.

She had just turned eighteen and wished to know what I would see on her path. According to that we would choose her woman's mark and then prick it visible underneath the hollow of her throat. I saw nothing special in her, neither great passion nor sudden death. I chose the lily as her mark, and with that she was very pleased. She kept asking about love, as girls always do, and I promised her a handsome and wealthy man – which was how the merchant's sturdy son could generously be described – but gave her no exact information, of course.

She'd been eying Peregrine all the while, and neither had the boy been shy about his glances. Both showed their disappointment when I took out the bit and the mallet.

– Doesn't your apprentice do the tattoo? I'd heard he's the one doing it nowadays for you, the girl moaned.

And Peregrine:

– Why don't you let me do the mark?

The girl was opening the laces on her bosom and Peregrine hovered restlessly around behind me.

– All right then, I promised. – But you have to be very

sharp and careful so you won't smudge the girl's skin and her future.

– I know how to do it, Peregrine bragged, and I well knew it was so. Yes, he did; he was sure of hand and sharp of eye.

I realized they wished me to absent myself from the room, but I did not leave. The tattooing took a long time, Peregrine was delaying it on purpose, but I did not leave.

When finally the girl had paid and gone, Peregrine said:

– We have to please them so as to get good pay. When they speak well of us in the village, there'll be more and more coming to you. You wish, don't you, that...

– Did I ask you something?

Peregrine smiled with his little boy's face, but defiance sparkled in his eyes.

– You did your work well, I said and turned my back.

After that one, a swarm of other girls came, and then, matrons. Everyone wanted to see my Peregrine and be treated by him. Those who already had received their woman's mark asked for something else. One wanted an auspicious blue-ring, another one a sun-figure to grant male children, a third one just a decoration for her revelries. I was present to give power to the figures, but it was Peregrine who made them. I wondered constantly why I did not bind him to myself, since I could have done it easily, and even in a way he'd never notice anything but that he felt good by me.

During the years I'd gotten used to loneliness. Whenever I yet yearned for a man's embrace, I could always have gone to Heron. I had never felt a need to glance obliquely pained at the mirror and grieve over my aging. That matter had been as natural as the year's turn, and as little had I tried to meddle in that as in the autumn's rains or the snow's smelting. Now I was spreading my face with unguents every morning. When I walked around in the cottage I drew in my sagging stomach. And once again I asked: why had Heron sent that boy? Had I ever tormented him ... badly, anyway?

I chanced to hear the talk of two maidens close to my cottage. When I noticed the girls I hid myself from them and walked by their side within the cover of the forest, so I could listen closely to everything they talked about.

– You must demand that Peregrine makes the figure, said one of the girls and the other answered:

– Yes, of course. Everybody is talking about Peregrine and his soft hands.

– Yes, but that's not the only reason. Now listen to what my mother said – and my aunts agreed with it. They said there is no power any more in the figures that Thistel is making. Thistel is old and barren.

– ... and Peregrine is anything but!

For their age, the girls laughed lewdly. Then the other asked:

– Why then must we go to Thistel? Doesn't Peregrine make the figures for her anyway?

The other one shook her head.

– For sure, Thistel has given him some magic potion to drink; otherwise Peregrine would have gone away already. But believe me; Peregrine will wake up from the spell once he gets stronger.

– And what will happen then?

– You'll see!

And again they giggled so unashamedly I almost showed myself and chased them off.

Yet I allowed Peregrine to make pretty figures for both of them and let him strut around the girls so naively manly I'd have laughed if only my mouth would have twisted to a smile.

That night I wanted – once again – to deny Peregrine access to my bed.

– Sleep on the floor, I said, when he sat on my bedside and drew off his shirt. His tattoos seemed to glow in the twilight. Surely they did glow, at least those made by Heron. I'd often heard talk about how figures made by Heron nowadays were visible in darkness. It was only a matter of time before Heron would reveal me the secret ingredient producing a glow like that. But now Peregrine was sitting on the edge of my bed, his back towards me and his shoulders hunched up. Surely they had grown to a man's shoulders only shortly before his arrival to me. Their breadth and angularity made my eyes water. I drew him close to me before he even had time to ask. That's what happened every time.

If I'd had a female friend I could have asked for advice. Had there been anyone who knew me better than I myself, I could have asked why I kept behaving like this. Why did I demean myself? It was not love, neither was it pure lust. What was it, then?

What about the men, the boys – the candidates for husbands and fiancées? They, too, visited me sometimes, though most preferred to go to Heron. What would happen once they came to notice the game Peregrine kept having with their women? It seemed likely my falcon would get a proper hiding. I was waiting for it.

But even in this matter the boy had it easy. He charmed the men, too. Of course he did not surpass me I in bestowing power to his figures or in seeing the things to come. I doubted whether he had any secret powers at all. Perhaps it was just that he had something I knew that I lacked, myself: he needed other people and was comfortable with them. He had a good word to say to every person, even to me. But I was nothing more than one

among them all.

Heron had spoken to me about it, that I was indifferent to the people I tattooed, in contrast to him. Not that it would have been necessary for the work itself. Heron just did not understand why I actually bothered making figures and putting my powers into them; why did I not support myself in some other way, since I was not able to love the people I gave my mark to.

– Why don't you gather berries and mushrooms, keep a little poultry and some cows. Or if you really wish to be a shaman, be one. Come and be my apprentice, Heron used to repeat. As if I'd have need of his teaching – a man who wept in my sight whenever he'd been drinking enough beer, and didn't even know enough to be ashamed afterwards. Sometimes he was extraordinarily tiresome and simple-minded indeed.

With the same tiresome simple-mindedness Peregrine charmed the men of the village. He could prate on half a day with any farm-hand about thoroughly trifling matters.

With the young men, he whispered out of my hearing, and sometimes he made them figures that were so indecent I couldn't even look at them.

– I did not tell you to make them like that, I said. – I won't put my power into those.

– Those figures are powerful enough in themselves, he said; and the young men did not even consider themselves swindled, they just laughed and paid the same as ever. And the older ones acted nearly as stupidly.

As time went on, I came to understand that if I didn't send Peregrine away very soon, I'd lose my authority altogether. But how would I have sent away my own puppy? I had to find some other way, and I did. It would not be well done, but it was the only way possible.

I thought I understood now what Heron had intended. He had sent Peregrine to me to teach me a lesson. Heron would be disappointed, and punished, too. I would find a way to humiliate him so badly he would not quickly forget it.

I let my thoughts mature. Carefully I chose the ingredients I was going to use when the time was ripe. I let Peregrine make ever more figures and withdrew myself completely ever more often. My conscience troubled me somewhat in the evenings when Peregrine crept to my side, smiling, and in every other way tried to please me, whenever he had time off from other people. I appeased myself with the thought that it perhaps would not be necessary for me to carry out my plan at all – perhaps people would notice that there was no power in Peregrine's figures and would again turn to me.

But as I could have guessed, before that Peregrine managed to go too far. Had he actually thought I wouldn't wake up as he got up from the bed in the small hours of the night and crept outside? Even he couldn't have been naïve enough

not to realize I'd guess where he went and from whence he returned, hands and face so permeated with woman-smell that a quick wash in the spring couldn't possibly hide it.

– I prepared new colours for you, I told him, when he set himself at the breakfast table, stroking his brow.

– The old ones would have done, yet, he smiled. – You know how to make colours that do not dry or fade.

– They'd lost their former brightness, anyway. We cannot afford to make mistakes, my boy. You know that, don't you?

I unintentionally raised my voice and the boy startled. I quickly set the pot of gruel down in front of him.

– I went to the spring, he said. – I didn't want to wake you up.

– You do as you wish and go where you want, I snapped, again unintentionally, and he looked at me like a child who has stolen a piece of bread from the cupboard.

– Eat now, I said, more calmly, and touched his neck lightly. – There'll be a lot of people coming today. Your fame has grown. I suppose hardly anyone goes to Heron any longer.

The familiar proud smile appeared on his face again. He groped at me, but I withdrew.

– It's going to be a busy day. Warm up some water and wash yourself.

I kept observing him during the day, when he started using the new colours. He dipped his needle happily and without worry as always. And why should he have suspected anything.

He never learned of my plan, although I'd done everything with the utmost care, and in a way where the results would be as plain and disastrous as possible. Each tattooing colour included plenty of poison. Not lethal, but otherwise as nasty as possible: the red produced difficulty of breathing, the blue filled the whole body with many-coloured blisters, the black made nails drop off from fingers and toes, the green raised a fever.

None of the poisons had any effect. All the evening I was waiting for some word from the village, filled with horror and eagerness. I would stand up for the boy; I would not give him up to be punished. Instead I'd give an antidote to the villagers and the promise that Peregrine would never touch any one of them with his needle. But no one arrived; not that evening, neither the next one. Little by little Peregrine used up all the colours. I did not get the time to prepare new and even stronger colours, for Peregrine left me.

He left in the night, secretly, as he had done before. This time, however, he hung back a while. I thought I heard him give a sob at the door, but when I lifted up my head, the cottage was already empty.

So how long did I listen to the voice of my pride? The voice that clearly let me understand I'd be the laughingstock of the whole village if I'd run after a youngling along the village street? Not for very long. How long does it take to string up the moccasins on your feet and snatch a cape to cover yourself? I knew to direct my steps towards the manor.

I ran like a black storm cloud. My skirts billowed while I ran and my tears fell on the wayside moss.

– My gift boy, my falcon ... he was given to me and to no one else.

Only then did I stop, breathless, when I already saw the manor house shining on the hill. In the morning light the building in its whiteness looked almost like a noble palace, like a place of wise and important people and of no clumsy peasants.

I thought of the manor women and my hate actually made me stop and think. By force I would not get Peregrine to return.

Woe for me. My feet turned back to the woods by themselves. My mind spiralled towards the marsh and I started running again. Bloody saliva was collecting in my throat, and I saved and filled my mouth with it, but now my steps were lighter. I ran with increasing swiftness and force; I closed my eyes and looked at the image of the marsh.

I pushed my way far into the marsh and then I spit my blood into the bog.

– Come, I cried, but I could hear no answer.

Only now did I feel fear, but only for a passing moment. Then I cried even louder:

– Come! I, Thistel, tell you to come!

I cried a third time. Now I realized my heart was thumping so hard that my whole body kept twitching. Even so, I opened my mouth to cry once more, but then I heard quiet laughter and a mocking voice repeating:

– I, Thistel, tell you to come!

The voice went on:

– Why do you think you can tell me to do things?

– You have always obeyed me. My powers are...

– Your powers? You have asked and I have given. Why shouldn't I, when you have treated me well? But now you are telling me, little one.

Again I heard laughter and now it had a sound that made me quickly say:

– I'm asking again. Please come with me.

The laughter stopped, and there was nothing to be heard save the sounds of animals and the soft whisper of wind farther off.

I waited some time, but finally there was nothing to it but I had to get up and walk away. I had always got everything I needed from the marsh, and brought my own little gifts to it. My eyes started to water again when I thought that now I'd perhaps lost even this – the source of my powers – because of Peregrine. No, perish the thought.

I dug a little bottle from my bosom and took a sip of strengthening. It eased my mind quickly, but I knew I could no longer stop. For a moment I lifted up my arms and looked at the figures on my hands. There was a curled snake in both hands. One had been made by Heron, so long ago its colour had faded, and the other was made by Peregrine, on my birthday. That one shone brightly and seemed to guide me, but it was I who was guiding myself. It was I who was driving myself.

Since I got no help from the marsh, I got myself other means. I had to make careful preparations, and so it was evening when I once more arrived to the manor. During the day I even started to hesitate, but whenever doubt entered my mind, I only had to think of Peregrine. I only had to remember how he entered my home and looked at me the first time.

I let the snakes loose from my sack as soon as I got to the courtyard. I told them to go and do evil, and they obeyed me yet, even though I forced them to act against their nature. They were thick black adders, and they slithered across the courtyard towards the doors so that the sand seemed to be moving and darkening. They left curly patterns in the sand, as if somebody had raked the whole courtyard.

I hurried behind my snakes into the main building. I'd never been there, but knew to head towards the staircase, since there was a terrible bawling and crying to be heard from upstairs. The double doors to the hall were open. A group of women – the mistress, the daughters and some ladies I did not recognize – were rushing about the room and trying to shake off the snakes. Those were hanging from their arms, necks and hair, and not releasing their grip. Peaces of furniture were falling down, crockery flying and breaking on the floor; even a window broke with a clink when something was thrown against it. I couldn't help smiling. Then I noticed an infant crying on the floor and saw that she, too, had been bitten. With a wry mouth I shouted:

– Where is Peregrine?

No one was able to answer; hardly anyone even noticed my presence. I left the women to their pain and returned downstairs. I found my way to the servants' quarters and the kitchen, where my adders were attacking the cook and

the maids. They were not able to run away, nor did they yet scream like the ladies upstairs, they just kept staring at the snakes, mouths and eyes wide open.

– Peregrine? I asked.

– He is not here anymore, one of the maids finally managed to answer.

I told my snakes to stop.

– Where has he gone?

– He went to Heron's.

Had I been mistaken? Had all my work been in vain?

– Did he leave a message for me? I screamed. Again I felt my face twisting while I screamed so it hurt. Even my voice sounded distorted and strange.

The cook begged me to tell off the snakes, but the maid answered:

– He left no message to anybody. He just came and went, and when he left he said that if we need him, we should henceforth seek him in Heron's cottage. No longer at Thistel's.

I waved my arms and the snakes continued their work. I knew they were just as horrified as their victims, but I cared nothing about them, either. I went on my way, black and terrible, tireless.

Heron's hut was in worse shape than mine: the roof hanging over the leaning wall like the cap of a rotten mushroom. The window looked like there would never be anyone there on the alert for incomers, everybody would just be allowed to come and go as they pleased. And yet, Heron never got tired of insisting that he does his work better than I mine. That in each of his figures he leaves a seed for good to grow from. He really did not understand that people would not care for his shoots, however regularly he would seed them.

And yet I had considered Heron my only friend. Time and time again I'd let him into my cabin and even visited him myself. Sometimes I had shut him out and sometimes left him myself, when I'd got tired of his whining and babbling. But was that enough of a reason to take back one's gift?

I kicked the door open. Inside it was dark as ever and I had to blink my eyes to get used to the darkness. I opened my bag, but then I heard the voice of Peregrine:

– No use bothering the creatures. Let them go.

I did as he told. Then I went to him and put my hand on his cheek.

– Why did you leave? And why did you leave in secret?

Peregrine kissed me on the mouth and turned his back.

I was left looking at the tattooed snakes on my hands. They could be discerned though it was dark. In the darkness even the older snake was more visible than in daylight, and only now did I realize that the snakes were identical. They mirrored each other.

So, finally, I was not surprised when Peregrine again turned

towards me, and it was Heron standing in front of me.

Peregrine's smooth head was covered with Heron's long hair. The child's face had resumed a beard and a rough surface. I could just get out the words:

– You are not able to do this.

– You've always underestimated me, Thistel. For my sake you sent your adders to bring death to the manor folk. But don't you worry; I've taken care of them.

As if I'd been sorry for the manor folk.

He stroked my hair. Then I felt fatigue filling me. I realized how much of power I'd passionately wasted during the day, and I knew it was too much. I was completely empty.

– Stay with me, Thistel. Teach me and let me teach you. We are old already. We should not waste...

– Was this why you went to such great trouble?

– I did not wish to annoy you. You know I'm not evil-minded.

He helped me up when I asked and tried to take me in his arms. I dragged myself to the door, anyway, and out. He did not call after me but I did feel his eyes. I had no strength left for walking and fell down.

Heron came to me and carried me back to the cottage. He covered me with a fur softened by wear and started to mix something in the pestle.

My eyes started to close.

– I will not have your shoots, I whispered, but Peregrine came into my dreams and lay beside me.

*Copyright © Sari Peltoniemi, Translation Liisa Rantalaaho, All rights reserved.*

### About the author

Sari Peltoniemi writes for children and young adults. Her work include fantasy, sf and mainstream short stories and novels. Her fantasy novel *Hirvi* (Elk) won the Kuvastaja-prize for best Finnish fantasy novel in 2001 and was also a candidate for Junior-Finlandia, the annual prize for the best Finnish novel for children and young readers. One other example of her short stories is found in *De-dalus book for Finnish fantasy* (edited by Johanna Sinisalo.)



Photo © Anne Leinonen