

In some careers, you are always on duty, even on holidays like Christmas. One such career is a police officer's. Detective Lieutenant Kari Takamäki is preparing for Christmas Eve festivities when the phone rings. He is the main character of Jarkko Sipilä's Helsinki Homicide series. The pock-cheeked, dark-complexioned lieutenant is an experienced detective in Helsinki PD Violent Crimes Unit. Approaching fifty, he lives in Espoo. Suhonen is Takamäki's undercover officer and close friend. He lives alone in Kallio.

Helsinki Homicide: Christmas on Duty

A Short Story

By Jarkko Sipila

"From heav'n on high I come to you, I bring to you glad tidings new, I bring to you good tidings new..."

The congregation somberly dragged out the hymn, except for one older lady wearing a fur coat, whose voice rose to opera pitch. Detective Lieutenant Kari Takamäki wasn't curious about her voice, but rather how she still managed to keep on her fur coat.

Espoo's fifteenth-century old gray-stone church was packed, as usual on Christmas Eve. It was oppressively hot. Takamäki had folded his own navy blue winter coat on his knees.

"Glad tiding of great joy I bring..."

Takamäki's wife, Kaarina, sat on his left, and the two boys, stretched nearly to adult heights, on his right. Christmas mass had been a family tradition for years.

Takamäki felt his cell phone vibrating in his sport coat. Luckily, he had remembered to put it on vibrate, as his ring tone, a cruiser's siren, would have broken the mood of the service.

He dug the phone out anyway. Kaarina frowned at her husband, but kept singing. The caller was Suhonen. The undercover officer's specialty was career-criminals and repeat

offenders. He was coming for Christmas dinner at the Takamäkis. Takamäki hoped he wasn't calling to cancel.

"To you this night was born a child..."

He couldn't answer in the middle of the service. His phone flashed the time and the screen went dark. Immediately, the screen started flashing again. Suhonen again. What was wrong? Now he'd have to answer.

Takamäki squeezed out of the row, phone in hand, and headed to the back door apologetically. Luckily, there was only one couple on the other side of his boys.

The church yard was slush and mud, since the temperature had risen above freezing just after it snowed a couple of days ago. Even the sky disregarded Christmas and seemed frozen in November gray.

Two missed calls. Takamäki called Suhonen.

* * *

Suhonen sat in his light blue Citroen C3. His long hair was pulled into a ponytail hanging over his leather jacket. He was parked in the lot between Olympic Stadium and the opera house. Suhonen could see the statue of Paavo Nurmi through the front windshield. Nude and wet, the hero of Finnish long distance running appeared to be shivering.

Why did the statue have to be nude? He had read somewhere that artist Wäinö Aaltonen had designed the statue with Nurmi himself in the 1920s, although the statue in front of the stadium was not unveiled until 1952 for the Helsinki Olympics. Maybe Nurmi didn't mind, since the ancient Greek athletes were also artistically portrayed nude. But it was different to be nude in the heat of Greece than in the freezing slush of Finland.

It was approaching one in the afternoon and Christmas Eve was already quieting Helsinki.

Suhonen's phone rang, and he snatched it up from the passenger seat.

"Was it a bad time?" Suhonen asked. Caller ID had shown that it was Takamäki.

"Christmas mass. Could there be a worse time to take a call?"

"A funeral or live TV come to mind."

Takamäki laughed, "Well, what is it? You're coming tonight, aren't you?"

"I'll try, but..."

"But what?"

"Yeah. The Ekström case might get hot," Suhonen said.

"Might" Takamäki asked.

Suhonen's gaze followed the officers from a nearby police station as they escorted a disheveled drunk into the drunk tank. The client's beard looked like Santa's. "These things are never a sure thing, but based on my informant, we might have an opportunity."

Takamäki was silent for a moment. Homicide had been looking for Antti Ekström for a couple of weeks. "How hot is the tip?"

"At this point, I'm thinking as hot as Christmas sauna," Suhonen said. The traditional Christmascelebration at the Takamäki house kicked off with a men's sauna. "We put a lot of work into this one. It'd be a shame to let this opportunity go. But it could be risky solo. Should I call someone..."

"No, don't call," Takamäki said. The rest of his team had a well-deserved night off tonight. "I'll come."

"No way, I mean..."

"Don't argue. I'm coming. Where are we meeting?" Takamäki asked.

"In an hour at the station. We should know more then."

* * *

A gravestone outside the church front door told that a Mrs. Silfverberg died in 1835. Takamäki paused for a moment and thought about what Espoo would have been like 200 years ago. Maybe even back then the police officers were busy on Christmas, too.

Takamäki opened the heavy door. Inside, the sermon went on. "We need the counsel of Augustine: Seek what you seek; but remember that it is not where you seek it. On Christmas we can return to our childhood, to our true feelings. To the joy that Christmas brought us then," the pastor explained.

Takamäki smiled at the couple at the edge of his pew and scooted past his boys.

"So, what's happening?" Takamäki whispered to his wife nonchalantly.

"Well, if you look up there, the pastor is in the middle of a sermon."

The pastor continued: "We should invest ourselves into Christmas time more than ever, but with greater wisdom. Go back your childhoods. What was the most important part of Christmas then? Togetherness. That your closest loved ones were together."

Takamäki felt creeping guilt from the pastor's words. Togetherness. Loved ones together. Takamäki looked at his beloved wife. "Listen, I have to go to work," Takamäki whispered.

"Work, on Christmas Eve!?" Kaarina said harshly, without bothering to whisper. Takamäki noticed how her neck had quickly flushed.

The pastor continued from his pulpit: "Christmas is hard for those who journey alone. Many of our friends are away".

"I have to. Suhonen is on the trail of a bad man. We're not going to end up at a hot dog stand. We'll be home in time for some cold ham, at the latest."

"Why do you have to go?"

"I can't make anybody else go. This is our guy. I'll drop you all off after this and head to the station."

"Do whatever you want," his wife said without looking at him.

The lieutenant detected his wife's familiar perfume and kissed her cheek. Kaarina continued staring ahead. The pastor ended his sermon, but Takamäki did not hear a word. He was already thinking about Ekström's criminal record, and how he would get him behind bars.

* * *

Takamäki had dropped off his family at home in Espoo's Leppävaara and was approaching the station in Pasila. The reconstruction of Hakamäki Street had been going on for years, but there was no traffic tonight.

The boys were nearly fully grown, but when the car door was closing in front of their home, Joonas had asked Kaarina: "Does Dad really have to go?"

She answered: "He believes he does."

The road rose uphill near the bus depot and flashing blue lights snapped Takamäki's thoughts back to the present. First he saw a police car and ambulance, but soon he noticed a red Toyota that had crashed into a large concrete barrier.

A uniformed officer directed traffic into the other lane. Why would someone crash their car here on Christmas Eve? Why was another family's Christmas ruined?

Maybe speeches about the importance of Christmas and the pastor's sermon were not the right words. After all, they were always about returning to somewhere you'd been before. Why weren't people happy in the present? It was so easy to lose everything.

Takamäki drove past the accident scene and saw blood smears on the car window.

* * *

The tall guy was nicknamed The Evictor. Suhonen had done a lot of work to get in touch with him. The Evictor's real name was Martin Saarela, and he was as a drug dealer. He had first shown up on the police radar at age seventeen. Now, at age twenty-eight, his problem was that he wasn't just a dealer anymore— he was a user, too.

This six-foot-four guy sported a ponytail and a leather jacket. From outward appearances, and from a distance, he looked like he could be Suhonen's kid brother, but genetics had dealt him a taller DNA than Suhonen. And an emptier head.

Saarela's nickname came from his debt collection method. If his "clients" had no cash, he removed them out of their home and took everything of any value. Often, the junk couldn't even be resold, but The Evictor took it because it meant something to the client, since they had kept it in their home. Of course, their debt did not decrease.

The Evictor sat at Espoo's McDonald's near the Play Place. Suhonen was relieved that no children were there tonight. No families were having McDonald's for Christmas dinner. The Evictor wouldn't have been a good role model for any little boys running around the play place. Based his appearance, neither was Suhonen.

"Merry Christmas," Suhonen said and sat down at a red table.

The Evictor smirked, "Eat shit."

"You can eat shit in a jail cell," Suhonen retorted quickly and snatched a few fries from The Evictor's tray. "Don't you have ketchup?"

The Evictor didn't answer, instead bit into his Big Mac.

"Where's Ekström?" Suhonen asked.

"What's our deal?"

"It's Christmas, tis season of giving. I'm not interested in your drugs, just Ekström."

"Dammit, I ain't no snitch," The Evictor snorted.

Suhonen's eyes pierced into Saarela's. "It's a shitty deal, but times are tough. America's president is not doing well either, but you could be even worse off, and that's saying something. Don't overthink it, and I won't remember last week."

Suhonen had busted The Evictor with sixteen grams of heroin last week. Considering his record, that would've meant the slammer for sure. The Evictor

had begged Suhonen for mercy, because he wanted to spend Christmas with his wife and two-month-old daughter. Suhonen had kept the drugs and promised to think about it.

Around noon The Evictor had called Suhonen and promised information about Ekström. The meeting at McDonald's was just part of the act to spare Saarela his pride.

"Talk," Suhonen said.

The Evictor stared at his fries. "Ekström has a storage space in a garage over by the grocery store on Koskela Street."

"Which one?" Suhonen demanded.

"You know the one. You guys raided it on a meth case a year and a half ago."

Suhonen nodded. He knew the Käpylä building well.

"He's going there at three or four this afternoon."

"For sure?" Suhonen asked.

The Evictor nodded. "Yeah."

"Merry Christmas," Suhonen said and rose from the table.

The Evictor didn't say a word.

* * *

Suhonen and Takamäki sat in the pale blue Citroen on a side street in Käpylä. Takamäki poured police station coffee from his thermos into plastic mugs. The windows were cracked a couple of inches to keep their breath from fogging the glass.

They could see the garage door of the storage unit fifty yards away. The street was dark gray—the slush hadn't completely melted yet. The afternoon had darkened, but the street lights illuminated the surrounds. The building had been built for the Helsinki Olympic games; it had insufficient parking spaces by current standards, but in the fifties, a car had been a luxury.

Suhonen had been of the opinion that the two of them should handle this case. A week earlier, they had been after Ekström with a bigger crowd, but he had sensed their trap and escaped. Antti Ekström needed to be put behind bars today. He had done three armed bank robberies in December already. The fifty-year old had a long criminal career: his first offence had been as a fifteen-year-old reform school boy.

Takamäki had, of course, secured back-up. A small SWAT team was ready at the police station; they could get there in three minutes. The drive from Pasila was short.

The thermos coffee was still steaming and smelled good. Takamäki handed a mug to the driver. "A detective's Christmas."

"It's a good thing you came. Alone, this would be a pretty pathetic gig."

"Well, yeah," Takamäki said. It had been a while since Takamäki had been in the field with a Sig Sauer pistol.

"We'll still make it to Christmas sauna," Suhonen grinned. "And Boxing Day still counts as Christmas too."

Takamäki was quiet for a minute. Cars drove along Koskela Street and disappeared into the darkness. Takamäki noticed how Suhonen's gaze followed each of them. The coffee dwindled, and the greasy, slightly rancid odor returned to the car. A plastic bag at Takamäki's feet served as a trash bin.

"Christmas is a strange thing," Takamäki said. "Last year we were on Tenerife and there was just something strange about being at a sandy beach on Christmas. But hey, why not? The wife and kids liked it."

"I don't know," Suhonen said breaking his gaze on the cars. "Traditions are obviously important, but I've worked so many Christmases and Midsummers that I think I'm getting all sentimental about Christmas tonight."

"Guess you're not that tough after all," Takamäki said.

"No, not really. I really appreciate the invitation to your home, and we'll still make that sauna."

"Good," Takamäki laughed. "The boys even got you a gift."

“What is it?”

“You think I’d tell you...”

Suhonen didn’t say anything. He concentrated harder on the cars and their drivers, because that felt easier.

* * *

It was nearly four in the afternoon. The men started up a conversation every now and then, but every time it quickly died off. They mostly discussed work, but they touched on their personal lives a few times. The conversation at times felt somewhat laborious. Both men had weak spots that it hurt to talk about.

Takamäki was careful not to bring up his kids too often because Suhonen was now living alone again. The undercover cop regretted pulling his boss from his family to a stake-out with a more and more uncertain result. If Ekström didn’t show, Suhonen would take The Evictor to jail tonight.

Silence felt easy to both of them. Easier than small talk, anyway. Takamäki realized he was getting a little hungry.

“Did you see that?” Suhonen said suddenly.

“What?”

“Somebody went into the garage.”

Takamäki was stunned. Sure, his gaze had wavered, but he didn’t think there had been any movement at the garage.

Suhonen started the Citroen.

“Are we going in now?”

Suhonen smirked. “Would you rather sit here the rest of the night?”

Takamäki reached down for his police radio, which was so old and bulky it looked like a first generation cell phone, and he informed the back-up waiting in Pasila to be on alert. Something was likely to happen.

They radioed back, asking if they should move in. Takamäki glanced at Suhonen, who shook his head no. Takamäki answered: "Not yet, but be ready."

Suhonen pulled around to the side of the garage. "I think he had a Tiimari shopping bag."

"Was it Ekström?"

"Not sure," Suhonen said as he got out of the car. Takamäki patted his coat pocket. His gun was there, where he had put it.

Suhonen led the way. Their car was now fifteen yard behind them. On the left was the beige, stucco five-story building. Takamäki noticed nearly every window was lit. A couple of street lights shined on the asphalt lot, but no one was in sight. On the right side of the lot, cars were parked diagonally.

Suhonen approached along the wall of the building and Takamäki hurried to catch up. Suhonen made it to the garage door. Takamäki wanted to ask whether they should call for back-up already, but Suhonen studied the dark brown, wooden door. It looked like an up-and-over door, but on the left edge was a regular door.

Suhonen leaned over to that side and did something Takamäki couldn't see. After ten seconds, the undercover cop looked at the Lieutenant. Suhonen lifted his Glock in his right hand, raised three fingers on his left hand and touched the door. Takamäki understood and pulled out his pistol.

Suhonen lowered one finger, then the second finger and then the third finger. He yanked on the door, whose lock he had just picked and rushed in.

"POLICE!" Suhonen shouted. "Nobody move!"

Takamäki came in behind him. A bright light glared in the garage. At first he only saw Suhonen's back, but he moved quickly to his colleague's right side. Takamäki held his gun in both hands.

The sight was stupefying. Takamäki had expected a normal garage, with a car in the middle and maybe some tool shelves along the sides. There were no cars, and no shelves.

Instead, Ekström sat at a folding table, with black garbage bags on the right and a pile of stuff on the left.

“Put your hands behind your neck,” Suhonen ordered, and Ekström obeyed. He was stunned by the police suddenly charging in.

Suhonen took a few steps and circled behind Ekström. Takamäki stood in front of him with his pistol pointed at the man. Takamäki’s angular, fifty-year-old face looked tough, complete with his slick dark hair. Ekström sat stunned in his blue winter coat.

Suhonen pulled Ekström’s hands behind his back and slapped on handcuffs. Suhonen pulled Ekström up to a standing position and quickly patted down his pockets. He was not armed, so Suhonen pushed the bank robber back down onto the chair.

Takamäki noticed tears in the criminal’s eyes, which quickly streamed down his cheeks.

Suhonen stood behind Ekström and put his Glock in his shoulder holster. Takamäki put his pistol into his pocket.

“What’s up?” Suhonen said, but Ekström didn’t answer. “We found a bank robber.”

Takamäki looked around more closely. To the right of the table were three black garbage bags and to the left were stacks of colorful boxes. On the table was brightly colored wrapping paper, tape and gift-wrapping ribbon.

Takamäki realized that Ekström was wrapping a box of Legos.

“What’s all this?” Takamäki asked.

“Not now. Not now,” Ekström sputtered as more tears flowed down his cheeks. “Not now.”

Ekström’s shoulders slumped, and Takamäki thought he seemed a lot smaller than he had on the bank security cameras.

“Alright, Ekström,” Suhonen growled. “The lieutenant and I have Christmas sauna waiting, and we got a cell for you, so let’s just go easy now. Nobody wants anything extra on Christmas...”

“Don’t. You don’t understand,” the seated man pleaded.

The hard criminal’s reaction shocked Takamäki. “What don’t we understand?”

“This isn’t what it looks like.”

Suhonen was still behind Ekström. “Well, would you like to clarify what it is this doesn’t look like? Because you’re right. I don’t understand this at all.”

“Well, just, you’ve gotta understand,” Ekström blurted out. “I, just, really. I was just thinking about the kids.”

“What kids?” Takamäki asked.

“The ones who are alone. Like I was.”

“Keep explaining. I still don’t get it, Takamäki said. It was obvious, after all, that Ekström had been wrapping gifts. “What kids are alone?”

“Like me when I was in reform school. Kids who don’t have dads or moms or anybody who cares about them...”

The tears streamed down and Takamäki wanted to hear more

Ekström continued, “I was like that. Christmases alone in the facility. Nobody cared, but one time this guy came, like a Santa, and brought us some gifts. I got one of those Volvo police car toys. Real metal. It was so damn nice. That feeling, that somebody cared. I was just thinking,” he said and looked up at Takamäki. “That I could be like that, because that gift-bringing guy died last summer.”

Takamäki was stunned. “What guy?”

“I just knew his last name--Nurmela. He’d been in the slammer a long time. He used to bring the gifts every Christmas. It was just so nice that somebody cared.”

Takamäki looked at the stuff more closely. The piles had Legos, dolls, remote-control cars, computer games and other toys. “Where are these from?”

“They’re nobody’s. Customs warehouse surplus. A customs official got them for me, but I didn’t have any money to pay him. From the first robbery I got twelve hundred and from the second, just seven hundred. He wanted four grand.”

Takamäki looked at the piles. There were a lot of toys, so Ekström’s story was could be true.

“He said nobody would miss them, since they’d been sitting in the warehouse for a couple of years already. So then I had to do the third bank, and from that I got sixteen grand. I got a real nice Santa suit, too. The beard is real horse hair, none of that cotton stuff.”

Takamäki cracked a smile.

“Yeah, for real, it’s in the green bag over there, Ekström said and nodded toward a corner. Suhonen took a look in the bag and there really was a Santa suit inside.

Takamäki noticed Suhonen’s dejection.

“I know the robberies were wrong, but not so wrong, really.”

Takamäki’s face was tight. “Bank robberies are always damned wrong.”

Takamäki and Suhonen stared at each other. Neither of them knew how to proceed.

Ekström said: “Three orphanages. Couldn’t I... This stuff isn’t anybody’s. It’d be a lot more joy to those kids than in the warehouse waiting for some auction, where the money ends up with the government anyway.”

“Orphanages, huh?”

“Yeah. That was the point of the whole thing, I just wanted to see the kids’ faces, when they realize that somebody can do something for them. Nobody’s thinking of them, mom and dad are just boozing and have forgotten their kids there...or they’re dead. I mean, it’s Christmas.”

Takamäki looked at Suhonen, who nodded. “Okay,” Takamäki said. “You talked us into it. You can deliver the gifts, but we’re going along...”

Takamäki noticed Suhonen tapping his pointer finger on his wristwatch. Takamäki continued: “but then you’re coming in Christmas Day...”

Suhonen shook his head behind Ekström’s back.

“No, let’s say the day after Boxing Day you come in nicely to Pasila police station lobby and ask the receptionist for Detective Lieutenant Takamäki. Then I’ll meet you and we’ll settle things. Deal?”

Ekström broke into a smile. “Yeah, I’ll hold my end. I’ll come.”

“For sure?”

“For sure!”

Suhonen dug the handcuff key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs. Takamäki grabbed the police radio and announced that the stake-out was called off for tonight with no results.

Ekström still sat at the table. “You’ve been more than fair, but there’s one more thing.”

”What’s that?” Takamäki barked.

Ekström hesitated, but got out: “I’m on a tight timeframe, and there are still quite a few gifts left. I’m supposed to be in East Helsinki in about an hour, and I don’t think I have time to wrap everything...”

Takamäki and Suhonen chuckled. “How could we say no to that?” Takamäki laughed.

* * *

Takamäki’s sauna thermometer showed 180F. Suhonen and Takamäki sat on the top bench. Neither of them wanted to toss water for more steam; they just enjoyed the soft warmth in silence.

Their Christmas Eve schedule had been pushed back a few hours, but it didn’t really matter. Nobody was in a rush—not even Kaarina, when she heard the reason for their delay.

Beads of sweat streamed along Takamäki’s chest, and he wiped it out of habit. “Hey, Takamäki said.

“Pretty good Christmas.”

Suhonen didn't open his eyes. He just nodded.

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