

Critical Acclaim for the Novel

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN

‘Reminiscent of Stephen King at his best, there are some truly scary bits in the book that will haunt your dreams. Best read by sunlight’

Independent On Sunday

‘Fascinatingly, Lindqvist has reinvented the vampire novel and made it all the more chilling by setting it in the kind of sink estate we all know from the media. No mean achievement. *Let The Right One In* is an immensely readable and highly disturbing book in which grim levels of gore and violence are tempered by an unexpected tenderness’

Daily Express

‘There’s a whiff of “the new Stephen King” about the author who combines an atmospheric coming-of-age story set in Stockholm in 1981 with a shocking (and very gory) thriller. His vampire is an original, both heart-breakingly pathetic and terrifying. This was a bestseller in Sweden and could be equally big here. Don’t miss it’

The Times

‘A terrifying supernatural story yet also a moving account of friendship and salvation... Lindqvist’s dark fable would be gratuitously violent if it weren’t so intelligently written’

Guardian

‘Lindqvist’s great strength as a writer is his evocation of time and place. The cheapjack monotony of Oskar’s existence is as vividly realised as the scenes of gore splattered mayhem... it justifies its cult status in Scandinavia with its disturbing and convincing take on the banal horror of normality’

Time Out

‘Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist fills the pages of *Let The Right One In* with horrors but thanks to his skill, every one of the gallery of killers, rejects and losers invite our compassion and sympathy... Getting you to buy into a world-view so alien calls for exceptional writing but Lindqvist’s style is deceptively low-key. The plot is complex, at some points as precisely times as a farce. The pace is brisk, the narrative grabs you from the start and won’t let go. Small, briefly-observed glimpses of detail create atmosphere like flashes of light in a dark room ... the way Lindqvist manages to pull what amounts to a happy ending out of his conjurer’s hat is one of many impressive things about a genuinely remarkable book’

SFX

‘We reviewers are quick to compare and it’s too tempting and simple a thing to say that a horror author writes like Stephen King. It’s also very often not true. But in Lindqvist’s case, we can safely trot out the old statement and mean it. Sharp writing, semi-autobiographical tone, and that intimate connection with his small-town setting – those things that make King the king are present in Lindqvist’s book... a moving and shiversome tale... the book shares some of the feel of Ray Bradbury’s coming-of-age stories, and this is also no bad thing... A fantastic novel, gripping and just a little sad. It’s easy to see why this was a bestseller in Sweden. It deserves to be so here’ *Death Ray*

‘Alluring, fascinating and undeniably weird’ *Gay Times*

‘An intriguing fusion of social novel and vampire legend – and a moving tale about friendship, rejection and loyalty’
Belfast Telegraph

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John Ajvide Lindqvist

*Translated from the Swedish
by Ebba Segerberg*

Quercus

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To Mia, my Mia

THE LOCATION

BLACKEBERG

It makes you think of coconut-frosted cookies, maybe drugs. 'A respectable life.' You think subway station, suburb. Probably nothing else comes to mind. People must live there, just like they do in other places. That was why it was built, after all, so that people would have somewhere to live.

It was not a place that developed organically, of course. Here everything was carefully planned from the outset. And people moved into what had been built for them. Earth-coloured concrete buildings, scattered about in the green fields.

When this story begins, Blackeberg the suburb had been in existence for thirty years. One could imagine that it had fostered a pioneer spirit. *The Mayflower*; an unknown land. Yes. One can imagine all those empty buildings waiting for their occupants.

And here they come!

Marching over the Traneberg Bridge with sunshine and the future in their eyes. The year is 1952. Mothers are carrying their little ones in their arms or pushing them in prams, holding them by the hand. Fathers are not carrying picks and shovels but kitchen appliances and functional furniture. They are probably singing something. The Internationale, perhaps. Or 'We Come unto Jerusalem', depending on their predilection.

It is big. It is new. It is *modern*.

But that wasn't the way it was.

They came on the subway. Or in cars, moving vans. One by one. Filtered into the finished apartments with their

things. Sorted their possessions into the measured cubbies and shelves, placed the furniture in formation on the cork floor. Bought new things to fill the gaps.

When they were done they lifted their eyes and gazed out onto this land that had been given unto them. Walked out of their doors and found that all the land had been claimed. Might as well adjust oneself to how things were.

There was a town centre. There were spacious playgrounds allotted to children. Large green spaces around the corner. There were many pedestrian-only walking paths.

A good place. That's what people said to each other over the kitchen table a month or so after they had moved in.

'It's a good place we've come to.'

Only one thing was missing. A past. At school the children didn't get to do any special projects about Blackeberg's history because there wasn't one. That is to say, there was something about an old mill. A tobacco king. Some strange old buildings down by the water. But that was a long time ago and without any connection to the present.

Where the three-storeyed apartment buildings now stood there had been only forest before.

You were beyond the grasp of the mysteries of the past; there wasn't even a church. Nine thousand inhabitants and no church.

That tells you something about the modernity of the place, its rationality. It tells you something of how free they were from the ghosts of history and of terror.

It explains in part how unprepared they were.

No one saw them move in.

In December when the police finally managed to track down the driver of the moving truck he didn't have much to tell. In his records he had only noted '18 October: Norrköping-Blackeberg (Stockholm)'. He recalled that it was a father and daughter, a pretty girl.

‘Oh, and another thing. They had almost no furniture. A couch, an armchair, maybe a bed. An easy job, really. And that ... yeah, they wanted it done at night. I said it would be more expensive, you know, with the overtime surcharge and that. But it was no problem. It just had to be done at night. That seemed real important. Has anything happened?’

The driver was informed of the events, of whom he had had in his truck. His eyes widened, he looked down again at the letters on the page.

‘I’ll be damned ...’

He grimaced as if he had developed a revulsion for his own handwriting.

18 October: Norrköping-Blackeberg (Stockholm).

He was the one who had moved them in. The man and his daughter.

He wasn’t going to tell anyone about it, not for as long as he lived.

PART ONE

Lucky is he who has such a friend

*Love trouble
will burst your bubble
boys!*

SIW MALMKVIST, 'LOVE TROUBLE'

*I never wanted to kill.
I am not naturally evil.
Such things I do
Just to make myself
More attractive to you.
Have I failed?*

MORRISSEY, 'LAST OF THE FAMOUS
INTERNATIONAL PLAYBOYS'

WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER 1981

‘And what do you think this might be?’

Gunnar Holmberg, police commissioner from Vällingby, held up a little plastic bag of white powder.

Maybe heroin, but no one dared to say anything. Didn’t want to be suspected of knowing anything about stuff like that. Especially if you had a brother or a friend of your brother who did it. Shoot horse. Even the girls didn’t say anything. The policeman shook the bag.

‘Baking powder, do you think? Flour?’

Mumbled answers in the negative. They didn’t want him to think class 6B was a bunch of idiots. Even though it was impossible to determine what was really in the bag, this lesson was about drugs so you could draw certain conclusions. The policeman turned to the teacher.

‘What do you teach them in Home Economics these days?’

The teacher smiled and shrugged her shoulders. The class laughed, the cop was OK. Some of the guys had even been allowed to touch his gun before class. It wasn’t loaded, but still.

Oskar’s chest felt like it was about to burst. He knew the answer to the question. It hurt him not to say anything when he knew. He wanted the policeman to look at him. Look at him and tell him he was right. He knew it was a dumb thing to do, but he still put his hand up.

‘Yes?’

‘It’s heroin, isn’t it?’

‘In fact it is.’ The policeman looked kindly at him. ‘How did you know?’

Heads turned in his direction, curious as to what he was going to say.

‘Naw ... I mean, I’ve read a lot and stuff.’

The policeman nodded.

‘Now there’s a good thing. Reading.’ He shook the little bag. ‘You won’t have much time for it if you get into this, though. How much do you think this little bag is worth?’

Oskar didn’t feel the need to say anything else. He had been looked at and spoken to. Had even been able to tell the cop he read a lot. That was more than he had hoped for.

He let himself sink into a daydream. How the policeman came up to him after class and was interested in him, sat down next to him. Then he would tell him everything. And the policeman would understand. He would stroke his hair and tell him he was all right; would hold him and say ...

‘Fucking snitch.’

Jonny Forsberg drove a hard finger into his side. Jonny’s brother ran with the drug crowd and Jonny knew a lot of words that the other guys in the class quickly picked up. Jonny probably knew exactly how much that bag was worth, but he didn’t snitch. Didn’t talk to the cop.

It was recess and Oskar lingered by the coat rack, indecisive. Jonny wanted to hurt him – what was the best way to avoid it? By staying here in the hallway or going outside? Jonny and the rest of the class stormed out the doors into the schoolyard.

That’s right; the policeman had parked his car in the schoolyard and anyone who was interested could come take a look. Jonny wouldn’t dare beat him up when the policeman was there.

Oskar walked down to the double front doors and looked out the glass window. Just as he thought, everyone in the class had gathered around the patrol car. Oskar also wanted to be there but there was no point. Policeman or no policeman, someone would knee him, another pull his underpants up in a wedgie.

But at least he was off the hook this recess. He went out and snuck around the back of the building, to the bathrooms.

Once there, he listened, cleared his throat. The sound echoed through the stalls. He reached into his underpants and quickly pulled out the pissball, a piece of foam about the size of a clementine that he had cut out of an old mattress and put a hole in for his penis. He smelled it.

Yup, he had pissed in his pants again. He rinsed it under the tap, squeezing out as much water as possible.

Incontinence. That was what it was called. He had read about it in a pamphlet that he had sneaked from the drugstore. Mostly something old women suffered from.

And me.

There were medicines you could get, it said in the pamphlet, but he did not intend to use his allowance so he could humiliate himself at the prescription counter. And definitely did not intend to tell his mother; she would feel so sorry for him it would make him sick.

He had the pissball and it worked for now.

Footsteps outside, voices. Pissball in hand he fled into the nearest stall and locked the door at the same time as the outer door opened. He soundlessly climbed up onto the toilet seat, curling into a ball so his feet wouldn't show if anyone looked under the door. Tried not to breathe.

'Pig-gy?'

Jonny, of course.

'Hey Piggy, are you here?'

Micke was with him. The worst two of the lot. No, Tomas was worse but he was almost never in on stuff that involved physical blows and scratches. Too smart for that. Was probably sucking up to the policeman right now. If the pissball were discovered, Tomas was the one who would really be able to use it to hurt and humiliate him for a long time. Jonny and Micke on the other hand would just beat him up and that was fine with him. So in a way he was actually lucky ...

'Piggy? We know you're in here.'

They checked his stall. Shook the door. Banged on it. Oskar wrapped his arms tightly around his legs and clenched his teeth so he wouldn't scream.

Go away! Leave me alone! Why can't you leave me alone?

Now Jonny was talking in a mild voice.

'Little Pig, if you don't come out now we have to get you after school. Is that what you want?'

It was quiet for a while. Oskar exhaled carefully.

They attacked the door with kicks and blows. The whole bathroom thundered and the lock on the stall door started to bend inward. He should open it, go out to them before they got too mad but he just couldn't.

'Pig-gy?'

He had put his hand up in class, a declaration of existence, a claim that he knew something. And that was forbidden to him. They could give a number of reasons why they had to torment him: he was too fat, too ugly, too disgusting. But the real problem was simply that he existed, and every reminder of his existence was a crime.

They were probably just going to 'baptise' him. Shove his head into the toilet bowl and flush. Regardless of what they concocted it was always such a relief when it was over. So why couldn't he just pull back the lock that was in any case going to tear off at the hinges at any moment, and let them have their fun?

He stared at the bolt that was forced out of the lock with a crack, at the door that flung open and banged into the wall, at Micke Siskov's triumphantly smiling face, and then he knew.

That wasn't the way the game was played.

He couldn't have pulled back the lock, they couldn't simply have climbed over the sides of the stall in all of three seconds, because those weren't the rules of the game.

Theirs was the intoxication of the hunter, his the terror of the prey. Once they had actually captured him the fun was over and the punishment more of a duty that had to be

carried out. If he gave up too early there was a chance they would put more energy into the punishment instead of the hunt. That would be worse.

Jonny Forsberg stuck his head in.

‘You’ll have to open the lid if you’re going to shit, you know. Go on, squeal like a pig.’

And Oskar squealed like a pig. That was part of it. If he squealed, sometimes they would leave it at that. He put extra effort into it this time, afraid that, in the process of punishing him, they would uncover his disgusting secret.

He wrinkled up his nose like a pig’s and squealed, grunted and squealed. Jonny and Micke laughed.

‘Fucking pig, go on, squeal some more.’

Oskar carried on. Shut his eyes tight and kept going. Balled his hands up into fists so hard that his nails went into his palms, and kept going. Grunted and squealed until he felt a funny taste in his mouth. Then he stopped and opened his eyes.

They were gone.

He stayed put, curled up on the toilet seat, and stared down at the floor. There was a red spot on the tile below. While he was watching, another drop fell from his nose. He tore off a piece of toilet paper and held it against his nostril.

This sometimes happened when he was scared. His nose started to bleed, just like that. It had helped him a few times when they were thinking about hitting him, then decided against it since he was already bleeding.

Oskar Eriksson perched there with a wad of paper in his hand and his pissball in the other. Got nosebleeds, wet his pants, talked too much. Leaked from every orifice. Soon he would probably start to shit his pants as well. Piggy.

He got up and left the bathroom. Didn’t wipe up the drop of blood. Let someone see it, let them wonder. Let them think someone had been killed here, because someone *had* been killed here. And for the hundredth time.

*

Håkan Bengtsson, a forty-five-year-old man with an incipient beer belly, a receding hairline and an address unknown to the authorities, was sitting on the subway, staring out of the window at the place that was to be his new home.

It was a little ugly actually. Norrköping would have been nicer. But having said that, these western suburbs didn't look anything like the Stockholm ghetto-suburbs he had seen on TV; Kista and Rinkeby and Hallonbergen. This was different.

'Next station: Räcksta.'

It was a little softer and rounder than those places. Although, here was a real skyscraper.

He arched his neck to see the top floors of the Waterworks' administrative building. He couldn't recall there being any buildings this tall in Norrköping. But of course he had never been to the downtown area.

He was supposed to get off at the next station, wasn't he? He looked at the subway map over the doors. Yes, the next stop.

'Please stand back from the doors. The doors are closing.'

Was anyone looking at him?

No, there were only a few people in this car, all of them absorbed in their evening newspapers. Tomorrow there would be something about him in there.

His gaze stopped at an ad for women's underwear. A woman was posing seductively in black lace panties and a bra. It was crazy. Naked skin wherever you looked. Why was it tolerated? What effect did it have on people's heads, on love?

His hands were shaking and he rested them on his knees. He was terribly nervous.

'Is there really no other way?'

'Do you think I would expose you to this if there was another way?'

'No, but ...'

'There is no other way.'

No other way. He had to do it. And not mess up. He had

studied the map in the phone book and chosen a forested area that looked appropriate, then packed his bag and left.

He had cut away the Adidas logo with the knife that was in the bag between his feet. That was one of the things that had gone wrong in Norrköping. Someone had remembered the brand name on the bag, and then the police had found it in the rubbish skip where he had tossed it, not far from their apartment.

Today he would take the bag home with him. Maybe cut it into small pieces and flush it down the toilet. Is that what you did?

How is this supposed to work anyway?

‘This is the final station. All passengers must disembark.’

The subway car disgorged its contents and Håkan followed the stream of people, the bag in his hand. It felt heavy, although the only thing in it that weighed anything was the gas canister. He had to exercise a great deal of self-restraint to walk normally, rather than as a man on the way to his own execution. He couldn’t afford to give people any reason to notice him.

But his legs were leaden, they wanted to weld themselves to the platform. What would happen if he simply stayed here? If he stood absolutely still, without moving a muscle, and simply didn’t leave. Waited for nightfall, for someone to notice him, call for ... someone to come and get him. To take him somewhere.

He continued to walk at a normal pace. Right leg, left leg. He couldn’t falter now. Terrible things would happen if he failed. The worst imaginable.

Once he was through the gates he looked around. His sense of direction wasn’t very good. Which way was the forested area? Naturally he couldn’t ask anyone. He had to take a chance. Keep going, get this over with. Right leg, left leg.

There has to be another way.

But he couldn’t think of any other way. There were certain

conditions, certain *criteria*. This was the only way to satisfy them.

He had done it twice before, and had messed up both times. Hadn't bungled it quite as much that time in Växjö but enough that they had been forced to move. Today he would do a good job, receive praise.

Perhaps a caress.

Two times. He was already lost. What difference did a third time make? None whatsoever. Society's judgment would probably be the same. Lifetime imprisonment.

And morally? How many lashes of the tail, King Minos?

The park path he was on turned a corner further up, where the forest started. It had to be the forest he had seen on the map. The gas container and the knife rattled in the bag. He tried to carry it without jostling the contents.

A child turned onto the path in front of him. A girl, maybe eight years old, walking home from school with her schoolbag bouncing against her hip.

No, never!

That was the limit. Not a child so young. Better him, then, until he fell to the ground dead. The girl was singing something. He increased his pace to get closer to her, to hear.

*'Little ray of sunshine peeking in
Through the window of my cottage ...'*

Did kids *still* sing that one? Maybe the girl's teacher was older. How nice that the song was still around. He wanted to get even closer to hear better, so close in fact that he would be able to smell the scent of her hair.

He slowed down. Don't create a scene. The girl turned off from the park path, taking a small trail that led into the forest. Probably lived in a house on the other side. To think her parents let her walk here all alone. And so young.

He stopped, let the girl increase the distance between them, disappear into the forest.

Keep going, little one. Don't stop to play in the forest.

He waited for maybe a minute, listened to a chaffinch singing in a nearby tree. Then he went in after her.

Oskar was on his way home from school, his head heavy. He always felt worse when he managed to avoid punishment in *that* way – by playing the pig, or something else. Worse than if he had been punished. He knew this, but couldn't handle the thought of the physical punishment when it loomed. He would rather sink to any level. No pride.

Robin Hood and Spiderman had pride. If Sir John or Doctor Octopus cornered them they simply spat danger in the face, come what may.

But what did Spiderman know? He always managed to get away, even if it was impossible. He was a comic-book action figure and had to survive for the next issue. He had his spider powers, Oskar his pig squeal. Whatever it took to survive.

Oskar needed to comfort himself. He had had a shitty day and now he needed some compensation. Despite the risk of running into Jonny and Micke he walked towards downtown Blackeberg, to Sabis the local grocery store. He shuffled up along the zig-zagging ramp instead of taking the stairs, using the time to gather himself. He needed to be calm for this, not sweaty.

He had been caught shoplifting once at a Konsum, another grocery chain, about a year ago now. The guard had wanted to call his mother but she had been at work and Oskar didn't know her number, no, really he didn't. For a week Oskar had agonised every time the phone rang but then a letter arrived, addressed to his mother.

Idiotic. It was even labelled 'Police Authorities, District of Stockholm', and of course Oskar had ripped it open, read about his crime, faked his mother's signature and returned the letter to confirm that she had read it. He was a coward, maybe, but he wasn't stupid.

What was cowardly, anyway? Was this, what he was about to do, cowardly? He stuffed his down coat full of Dajm, Japp, Coco and Bounty chocolate bars. Finally he slipped a bag of chewy Swedish Cars between his stomach and pants; went to the checkout and paid for a lollipop.

On the way home he walked with his head high and a bounce to his step. He wasn't just Piggy, whom everyone could kick around, he was the Master Thief who took on dangers and survived. He could outwit them all.

Once he walked through the front gate to the courtyard of his apartment complex he was safe. None of his enemies lived in this complex, an irregular circle of buildings positioned inside the larger circle formed by his street, Ibsengatan. A double ring of protection. Here he was safe. In this courtyard nothing shitty had ever happened to him. Basically.

He had grown up here and it was here he had had friends before he started school. It was only in fifth grade that he started being picked on seriously. At the end of that year he had become a full-fledged target and even friends outside his class had sensed it. Now they seldom asked him to play.

It was during that time he started his scrapbook. He was on his way home to enjoy that scrapbook right now.

Wheeee!

He heard a whirring sound and something bumped into his feet. A dark red radio-controlled car was backing away from him. It turned and drove up the hill at high speed towards the front doors of his building. Behind the prickly bushes to the right of the front door was Tommy, a long antenna sticking out from his stomach. He was laughing softly.

'Surprised you, didn't I?'

'Goes pretty fast, that thing.'

'Yeah, I know. Do you want to buy it?'

'How much?'

'Three hundred.'

'Naw, I don't have that much.'

Tommy waved Oskar closer, turned the car on the slope and drove it down at breakneck speed, stopping it with a huge skid in front of his feet, picked it up, patted it and said in a low voice, 'Costs nine hundred in the store.'

'Yes.'

Tommy looked at the car, then scrutinised Oskar from top to bottom.

'Let's say two hundred. It's brand new.'

'Yes, it's great, but ...'

'But what?'

'Nothing.'

Tommy nodded, put the car down and steered it in between the bushes so the large bumpy wheels shook, let it come around the large drying rack and drive out on the path, going further down the slope.

'Can I try?'

Tommy looked at Oskar as if to evaluate his worthiness, then handed over the remote, pointing at his upper lip.

'You been hit? You've got blood. There.'

Oskar wiped his lip. A few brown crusts came off on his index finger.

'No, I just ...'

Don't tell. There was no point. Tommy was three years older, a tough guy. He would only say something about fighting back and Oskar would say 'sure' and the end result would be that he lost even more respect in Tommy's eyes.

Oskar played with the car for a while, then watched Tommy steer it. He wished he had the money so they could have made a deal. Have that between them. He pushed his hands into his pockets and felt the candy.

'Do you want a Dajm?'

'No, I don't like those.'

'A Japp?'

Tommy looked up from the remote. Smiled.

'You have both kinds?'

'Yeah.'

‘Swiped ’em?’

‘... yeah.’

‘OK.’

Tommy put his hand out and Oskar gave him a Japp, which Tommy slipped into the back pocket of his jeans.

‘Thanks. See you.’

‘Bye.’

Once Oskar made it into the apartment he laid out all the candy on his bed. He was going to start with the Dajm, then work his way through the double bits and end with the Bounty, his favourite. Then the fruit-flavoured gummy cars that kind of rinsed out his mouth.

He arranged the food in a long line next to the bed in the order it would be eaten. In the refrigerator he found an opened bottle of Coca-Cola that his mum had put a piece of aluminium foil over. Perfect. He liked Coke even more when it was a little flat, especially with sweets.

He removed the foil and put the bottle next to the sweets, flopped belly down on his bed and studied the contents of his bookcase. An almost complete collection of the series *Goosebumps*, here and there augmented by a *Goosebumps* anthology.

The bulk of his collection was made up of the two bags of books he had bought for two hundred kronor through an ad in the paper. He had taken the subway out to Midsommarkransen and followed the directions until he found the apartment. The man who opened the door was fat, pale and spoke in a low, hoarse voice. Luckily he had not invited Oskar to come in, just carried out the two bags, taken the two hundred, nodded, said ‘Enjoy’ and closed the door.

That was when Oskar had become nervous. He had spent months searching for older publications in the series in the used comics stores along Götgatan in south Stockholm. On the phone the man had said he had those older volumes. It had all been too easy.

As soon as Oskar was out of sight he put the bags down

and went through them. But he had not been cheated. There were forty-one books between number 2 and number 46.

You could no longer get these books anywhere. And all for a paltry two hundred!

No wonder he had been afraid of that man. What he had done was no less than rob him of a treasure.

Even so, they were nothing compared to his scrapbook.

He pulled it out from its hiding place under a stack of comics. The scrapbook itself was simply a large sketchbook he had swiped from the discount department store Åhléns in Vällingby; simply walked out with it under his arm – who said he was a coward? – but the contents ...

He unwrapped the Dajm bar, took a large bite, savouring the familiar crunch between his teeth, and opened the cover. The first clipping was from the *Home Journal*: a story about a murderess in the US in the forties. She had managed to poison fourteen old people with arsenic before she was caught, tried and sentenced to death by electric chair. Understandably she had requested to be executed by lethal injection instead, but the state she was in used the chair, and the chair it was.

That was one of Oskar's dreams: to see someone executed in the electric chair. He had read that the blood started to boil, the body contorted itself in impossible angles. He also imagined that the person's hair caught on fire but he had no official source for this belief.

Still, pretty amazing.

He turned the page. The next entry was from the newspaper *Aftonbladet* and concerned a Swedish murderer who had mutilated his victims' bodies. Lame passport photo. Looked like any old person. But he had murdered two male prostitutes in his home sauna, butchered them with an electric chainsaw and buried them out back, behind the sauna. Oskar ate the last piece of Dajm and studied the man's face closely. Could have been anybody.

Could be me in twenty years.

Håkan had found a good place to stand watch, a place with a clear view of the path in both directions. Further in among the trees he had found a protected hollow with a tree in the middle where he had left his bag. He had slipped the little halothane gas canister into a holster under his coat.

Now all he had to do was wait.

*‘Once I also wanted to grow up
To know as much as Father and Mother ...’*

He hadn’t heard anyone sing that song since he was in school. Was it Alice Tegnér? Think of all the wonderful songs that had disappeared, that no one sang any more. Think of all the wonderful things that had disappeared, for that matter.

No respect for beauty – that was characteristic of today’s society. The works of the great masters were at most employed as ironic references, or used in advertising. Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*, where you see a pair of jeans in place of the spark. The whole point of the picture, at least as he saw it, was that these two monumental bodies each came to an end in two index fingers that *almost, but not quite*, touched. There was a space between them a millimetre or so wide. And in this space – life. The sculptural size and richness of detail of this picture was simply a frame, a backdrop, to emphasise the crucial void in its centre. The point of emptiness that contained everything.

And in its place a person had superimposed a pair of jeans.

Someone was coming up the path. He crouched down with the sound of his heart beating in his ears. No. An older man with a dog. Two wrongs from the outset. First a dog he would have to silence, then poor quality.

A lot of screams for so little wool, said the man who sheared the pig.

He looked at his watch. In two hours it would be dark. If no one suitable came along in the next hour he would have to settle for whatever was available. Had to be back home before it got dark.

The man said something. Had he seen him? No, he was talking to the dog.

‘Does that feel better, sweetpea? You really had to go, didn’t you. When we get home Daddy will give you some liverwurst. A nice thick slice of liverwurst for Daddy’s good little girl.’

The halothane container pressed against Håkan’s chest as he leaned his head into his hands and sighed. Poor bastard. All these pathetic lonely people in a world without beauty.

He shivered. The wind had grown cold over the afternoon and he wondered if he should go and get the rain jacket he had stowed away in his bag. No. It would restrict his movement and make him clumsy where he needed to be quick. And it could heighten people’s suspicions.

Two young women in their twenties walked by. No, he couldn’t handle two. He caught fragments of their conversation.

‘... she’s going to *keep* it now ...’

‘... is a total ape. He has to realise that he ...’

‘... her fault because ... not taking the pill ...’

‘But he, like, has to ...’

‘... you imagine? ... him as a dad ...’

A girlfriend who was pregnant. A young man who wasn’t going to take responsibility. That’s how it was. Happened all the time. No one thought of anything but themselves. My happiness, *my* future was the only thing you heard. Real love is to offer your life at the feet of another, and that’s what people today are incapable of.

The cold was eating its way into his limbs. He was going to be clumsy now, raincoat or no raincoat. He put his hand inside his coat and pushed the trigger on the canister. A hissing noise. It was working.

He jumped in place and slapped his arms to get warm. Please let someone come. Someone who was alone. He looked at his watch. Half an hour to go. Let someone come. For life's sake, for love.

*'But a child at heart I want to be
For children belong to the Kingdom of God.'*

By the time Oskar had read through the whole scrapbook and finished all the sweets it was starting to get dark. As usual after eating so much junk, he felt dazed and slightly guilty.

Mum would be home in two hours. They would eat dinner, then he would do his English and maths homework. After that he would read a book or watch TV with her. But there wasn't anything good on TV tonight. They would have cocoa and sweet cinnamon rolls and chat. Then he would go to bed, but have trouble falling asleep since he would be worried about tomorrow.

If only he had someone he could call. He could of course call Johan, in the hope that he wasn't doing anything else.

Johan was in his class and they had a good time when they hung out, but if Johan had a choice, he never chose Oskar. Johan was the one who called when he had nothing better to do, not Oskar.

The apartment was quiet. Nothing happened. The concrete walls sealed themselves around him. He sat on his bed with his hands on his knees, his stomach heavy with sweets.

As if something was about to happen. Now.

He held his breath, listening. A sticky fear crept over him. Something was approaching. A colourless gas seeping out of the walls, threatening to take form, to swallow him up. He sat stiffly, holding his breath, and listened. Waited.

The moment passed. Oskar breathed again.

He went out into the kitchen, drank a glass of water and grabbed the biggest kitchen knife from the magnetic strip. Tested the blade against his thumbnail, just like his dad had taught him. Dull. He pulled the knife through the sharpener a couple of times, then tried it again. It cut a microscopic slice out of his nail.

Good.

He folded a newspaper around the knife as a stand-in holster, taped it up and pushed the packet down between his pants and left hip. Only the handle stuck up. He tried to walk. The blade was in the way of his left leg and so he angled it down along his groin. Uncomfortable, but it worked.

He put his jacket on in the hall. Then he remembered all the wrappers that lay strewn around his room. He gathered them all up and stuffed them into his pocket, in case Mum came home before he did. He could hide them under a rock in the forest. Checked one more time to make sure he hadn't left any evidence behind.

The game had already begun. He was a dreaded mass murderer. He had already slain fourteen people with his sharp knife without leaving a single clue behind. No hair, no sweet wrapper. The police feared him.

Now he was going out into the forest to select his next victim.

Strangely enough he already knew the name of his victim, and what he looked like. Jonny Forsberg with his long hair and large, mean eyes. He would make him plead and beg for his life, squeal like a pig, but in vain. The knife would have the last word and the earth would drink his blood.

Oskar had read those words in a book and liked them.

The earth shall drink his blood.

While he locked the front door to the apartment and walked out of the building with his hand resting on the knife handle he repeated these words like a mantra.

'The earth shall drink his blood. The earth shall drink his blood.'

The entrance he had used on his way in lay at the right end of his building, but he walked to the left, past two other buildings, and out through the entrance where the cars could enter. Left the inner fortification. Crossed Ibsengatan and continued down the hill. Left the outer fortification. Continued on towards the forest.

The earth shall drink his blood.

For the second time this day Oskar felt almost happy.

There were only ten minutes left of Håkan's self-imposed time limit when a lone boy came walking down the path. Thirteen or fourteen, as far as he could judge. Perfect. He had been planning to sneak down to the other end of the path and then come walking towards his intended victim.

But now his legs had really gotten stuck. The boy was walking nonchalantly along the path and Håkan was going to have to hurry. Every second that passed reduced the chance of success. Even so his legs simply refused to budge. He stood paralysed and stared at the chosen one, the perfect one, who was moving closer, who was about to pull up next to where he was standing, right in front of him. Soon it would be too late.

Have to. Have to. Have to.

If he didn't do it, he would have to kill himself. Couldn't go home empty-handed. That's how it was. It was him or the boy. Go ahead and choose.

He finally got moving, too late. Now he made his approach by stumbling through the forest, straight at the boy instead of simply meeting him calmly on the path. Idiot. Clumsy oaf. Now the boy would be on his guard, suspicious.

'Hello there!' he called out to the boy. 'Excuse me!'

The boy stopped. He didn't run away, he could be grateful for that. He had to say something, ask something. He walked up to the boy who was standing on the path, alert, uncertain.

'Excuse me ... Could you tell me what the time is?'

The boy's gaze went to Håkan's watch.

'Yes, well, mine has stopped, you see.'

The boy's body was tense as he checked his watch. He couldn't do anything about that. Håkan put his hand inside his coat and rested his index finger on the trigger while he waited for the boy's answer.

Oskar walked down the hill past the printing company, then turned onto the path into the forest. The weight in his belly was gone, replaced with an intoxicating sense of anticipation. On his way to the forest the fantasy had gripped him and now it felt like reality.

He saw the world through the eyes of a murderer, or so much of a murderer's eyes as his thirteen-year-old's imagination could muster. A beautiful world. A world he controlled, a world that trembled in the face of his actions.

He walked along the forest path looking for Jonny Forsberg.

The earth shall drink his blood.

It was starting to get dark and the trees closed around him like a silent crowd, following his smallest movements with trepidation, fearful that one of them was the intended target. But the killer moved through them, past them; he had already caught sight of his prey.

Jonny Forsberg was standing at the top of a hill some fifty metres from the trail. Hands on his hips, a grin pasted on his face. Thought it was going to be business as usual. That he would force Oskar to the ground, hold his nose and force pine needles and moss into his mouth, or some such thing.

But this time he was mistaken. It wasn't Oskar who was walking towards him, it was the Murderer, and the Murderer's hand closed hard around the handle of the knife, preparing himself.

The Murderer walked with slow dignified steps over to Jonny Forsberg, looked him in the eyes and said, 'Hi Jonny.'

‘Hello Piggy. Are you allowed out this late?’
The Murderer pulled out his knife. And lunged.

‘Uh, it’s ... a quarter past five.’

‘OK, thanks.’

The boy didn’t leave. Just stood there staring at Håkan, who took the opportunity to step closer. The boy stood still, following him with his gaze. This was going to hell. Of course the boy sensed something was wrong. First a man came storming out of the woods to ask him what the time was and now he had struck a Napoleon pose with his hand inside his coat.

‘What do you have there?’

The boy gestured at Håkan’s heart region. Håkan’s head was empty, he didn’t know what to do. He took out the gas container and showed it to the boy.

‘What the hell is that?’

‘Halothane gas.’

‘What are you carrying it around for?’

‘Because ...’ He felt the foam-covered mouthpiece and tried to think of something to say. He couldn’t lie. That was his curse. ‘Because ... it’s part of my job.’

‘What kind of job?’

The boy had relaxed somewhat. He was holding a sport bag similar to the one Håkan had stowed in the hollow up in the woods. Håkan gestured to the bag with the hand that was holding the gas canister.

‘Are you on your way to work out or something?’

When the boy glanced down at his bag he had his chance.

Both arms shot out, the free hand grabbing the boy by the back of the head, the other pressing the mouthpiece of the canister against his lips. Håkan released the trigger. It let out a hissing sound like a large snake and the boy tried to pull his head away but it was locked between Håkan’s hands in a desperate vice.

The boy threw himself back and Håkan followed. The hissing of the snake drowned out all other sounds as they fell onto the wood shavings on the trail. Håkan's hands were still clenched around the boy's head and he held the mouthpiece in place as they rolled around on the ground.

After a couple of deep breaths the boy started to relax in his grip. Håkan still made sure the mouthpiece was in place, then looked around.

No witnesses.

The hissing sound of the canister filled his head like a bad migraine. He locked the trigger in place and teased his free hand out from underneath the boy, loosened the rubber band and then drew it back over the boy's head. The mouthpiece was secured.

He got up with aching arms and regarded his prey.

The boy lay there with his arms thrown out from his body, the mouthpiece over nose and mouth, and the halothane canister on his chest. Håkan looked around once more, retrieved the boy's bag and placed it on his stomach. Then he picked him up and carried him to the hollow.

The boy was heavier than he had expected; a lot of muscle. Unconscious weight. He was panting from carrying the boy over the soggy ground while the hissing of the gas cut through his head like a chainsaw. He deliberately panted more loudly so as not to hear the sound.

With numb arms and sweat pouring down his back he reached his destination. There, he laid the boy down in the deepest part of the hollow and then stretched out beside him. It grew quiet. The boy's chest rose and fell. He would wake up in approximately eight minutes, at most. But he wouldn't.

Håkan lay beside the boy, studied his face, caressed it with a finger. He pulled himself closer to the boy, took the floppy body in his arms and pressed it to him. He kissed the boy tenderly on the cheek, whispered 'Forgive me' and got up.

Tears threatened to come as he looked at the defenceless body on the ground. He could still refrain.

Parallel worlds. A comforting thought.

There was a parallel world where he didn't do what he was about to do. A world where he walked away, leaving the boy to wake up and wonder what had happened.

But not in this one. In this world he now walked over to his bag and opened it. He was in a hurry. He quickly pulled on his raincoat and got out his tools. A knife, a rope, a large funnel and a five litre plastic jug.

He put everything on the ground next to the boy, looking at the young body one last time. Then he picked up the rope and got to work.

He thrust and thrust and thrust. After the first blow Jonny had realised this wasn't going to be like those other times. With blood gushing from a deep cut on his cheek he tried to escape, but the Murderer was faster. With a couple of quick moves he sliced away the tendons at the back of the knees and Jonny fell down, lay writhing in the moss, begging for mercy.

But the Murderer wasn't going to relent. Jonny was screaming ... like a pig when the Murderer threw himself over him and let the earth drink his blood.

One stab for what you did to me in the bathroom today. One for when you tricked me into playing knuckle poker. And I'm cutting your lips out for everything nasty you've ever said to me.

Jonny was bleeding from every orifice and could no longer say or do anything mean. He was long since dead. Oskar finished by puncturing his staring eyeballs, *whack whack*, then got up and regarded his work.

Large boughs of the rotting, fallen trees that had represented Jonny's body had been hacked away and a tree trunk was full of perforations. A number of woodchips were scattered under the healthy tree that had been Jonny when he was still standing.

His right hand, the knife hand, was bleeding. There was a small cut right next to his wrist; the blade must have slipped while he was stabbing. Not the ideal knife for this purpose. He licked his hand, cleaning the wound with his tongue. It was Jonny's blood he was tasting.

He wiped the last of the blood on the newspaper holster, put the knife back and started walking home.

The forest that a few years back had felt threatening, the haunt of enemies, now felt like a home and a refuge. The trees drew back respectfully as he passed. He didn't feel an ounce of fear though it was starting to get really dark. No anxiety for the next day, whatever it would bring. He would sleep well tonight.

When he was back in the yard, he sat down on the edge of the sandpit for a while to calm himself before he went back home. Tomorrow he would get himself a better knife, a knife with a parry guard, or whatever it was called ... so he didn't cut himself. Because this was something he was going to do again.

It was a good game.



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