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Opening Extract from...

Spring Tide

Written by Cilla & Rolf Börjlind

Published by Hesperus Press Ltd

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Published by Hesperus Nova
Hesperus Press Limited
28 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7RD
www.hesperuspress.com

This edition first published by Hesperus Press Limited, 2014

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First published by Norstedts, Sweden

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English language translation © Rod Bradbury, 2014

Designed and typeset by Fraser Muggeridge studio

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

ISBN: 978-1-84391-515-7

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Spring Tide

Cilla and Rolf Börjlind

Translated by Rod Bradbury



Late summer, 1987

In Hasslevikarna, the coves on the island of Nordkoster on the west coast of Sweden, up near the border with Norway, the difference between high tide and low tide is usually between five and ten centimetres, except when there is a spring tide. That phenomenon that occurs when the Sun and the Moon are in line with the Earth. Then the difference is almost fifty centimetres. A human head is twenty-five centimetres in height, give or take.

Tonight there would be a spring tide.

For the time being the tide was out.

The full moon had sucked the reluctant sea back many hours before, and exposed an expanse of damp sand. Small, shiny crabs scuttled back and forth across the sand glowing in the steely-blue light. The limpets clung on particularly hard to the rocks, biding their time. All the life exposed on the shore knew that the tide would wash over them once again.

Three figures on the beach knew too. They even knew exactly when it would happen – in a quarter of an hour. Then the first gentle waves would roll in and wet those parts that had dried out, and soon the pressure from the dark rumble out there would push up wave upon wave until the flood of the tide had reached its maximum.

A spring tide; meaning that the beach would be covered with fifty centimetres of water.

But they still had a little time. The hole they were digging was almost finished. It went straight down, almost one hundred and fifty centimetres, with a diameter of about sixty centimetres. A body would fit perfectly. Only the head would reach over the top.

The head of a fourth figure.

The head belonging to the woman who was standing some way away, quite still, with her hands tied.

Her long dark hair fluttered gently in the intermittent breeze, her naked body shone, her face muted without any make-up. Her eyes revealed a strange lack of presence. She looked at the digging further down the shore. The man with the spade pulled the curved blade out of the hole, tipped the last of the sand onto the pile next to him and turned around.

He was finished.

Seen from a distance, from the rocks where the boy had hidden, there was a weird stillness about the moonlit beach. Dark figures on the sand far away on the other side of the beach, what were they doing? He didn't know, but he heard the approaching roar of the sea and saw the naked woman led out across the wet sand, seemingly without offering any resistance, and saw her lowered into a hole.

He bit his lower lip.

One of the men shovelled sand into the hole. The dripping sludge settled around the woman's body like wet cement. The hole was soon filled. When the first scattered waves rolled in towards land, only the woman's head stuck out. Her long hair became wet, slowly; and a little crab became caught in a dark strand. She herself was staring at the moon, without uttering a sound.

The figures moved back a little, up amidst the dunes. Two of them were nervous, uncertain, the third was calm. They all watched the solitary moonlit head out on the sand.

And waited.

When the spring tide came at last, it came in rather fast. The height of the waves increased with every surge and washed over the woman's head, into her mouth and up her nose. Her throat was filled with water. Whenever she turned her head away, a new wave hit her face.

One of the figures went back out to her and crouched down. Their eyes met.

From his vantage point, the boy could see how the level of the water was rising. The head sticking out vanished and then reappeared and vanished again. Two of the figures had now disappeared, the third was on its way up the beach again. Suddenly he heard a horrific scream. It was the woman in the hole who had screamed, hysterically. The scream echoed around the shallow cove and bounced against the boy's rock, before the next wave washed over the head and the scream was silenced.

Then the boy started running.

The sea rose and became still, dark and shiny. Under the surface the woman shut her eyes. The last thing she felt was another kick, little and gentle, against the inside of her belly. Then her waters broke.

Summer 2011, Stockholm

One-eyed Vera actually had two healthy eyes and a gaze that might halt a hunting falcon in mid-air. Her vision was excellent. But she argued her point with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Started with her own opinion and then battered away so that any counterarguments were flung out in every direction.

One-eyed.

But loved.

Now she was standing with her back to the setting sun, with the last rays sliding across Värta bay, bouncing off Lidingö Bridge and reaching the park at Hjorthagen with enough strength still to create an elegant backlit halo around Vera.

'It's my *world*, that's what this is about!'

The passionate way she said this would have impressed any parliamentary gathering, although her husky voice would have seemed out of place in a chamber. And maybe her clothes too – a couple of soiled, different-coloured T-shirts on top, and on the bottom a tulle skirt that had seen better days. And barefoot. But now she wasn't standing in a parliamentary chamber, she was instead in a little out-of-the-way park near the Värta docks and her audience consisted of four homeless people in varying states, spread out on some benches among the oaks and ash trees and bushes. One of them was Jelle, silent and tall, he sat by himself as if in his own world. Benseman sat on another bench and next to him, Muriel, a young druggie from Bagarmossen. She had a plastic bag from the co-op next to her.

Arvo Pärt was snoozing on the bench opposite them.

At the edge of the park, hidden behind some thick bushes, two young men were crouched down. Wearing dark clothes, their gaze fixed on the benches.

'It's my world, not theirs! Right?'

One-eyed Vera gestured towards a distant spot.

‘They just come and bang their fists on the caravan and I’ve hardly got my teeth in and there they are standing outside the door! Three of them! And how they stared! “What the hell is this about?” I said.

‘“We’re from the council. Your caravan needs to be moved.”

‘“Why?”

‘“We’re going to develop the land.”

‘“For what?”

‘“An illuminated track.”

‘“A what?”

‘“A running track, it’s going to go right through here.”

‘“What the hell d’you mean? I can’t move this! I haven’t got a car!”

‘“Regrettably, that isn’t our problem. The caravan must be gone before next Monday.”’

One-eyed Vera stopped to catch her breath and Jelle took the opportunity to yawn, discreetly. Vera didn’t like you yawning when she was ranting.

‘Don’t you get it? There’s three blokes standing there looking like they were grown in a filing cabinet in the Fifties, and telling me that I should go to hell! So that some overfed idiots can run off their flab right over my home? Of course that really pissed me off, right?’

‘Yeah.’

Muriel was the one who hissed an answer. Her voice was rather lacerated, thin and grating, and she would never draw attention to herself unless she’d had a hit.

Vera brushed aside her thinning reddish hair and started up again.

‘But this ain’t about some fucking running track, it’s about all them folks out walking their furry little rats who don’t like someone like me being there, in their posh surroundings, I don’t fit in with their neat and tidy world. That’s what it’s about! They don’t give a fuck about us!’

Benseman leaned forward a little.

'But you know, Vera, it could be that they…'

'Right, let's be off, Jelle! Come on!'

Vera took two big steps and prodded Jelle on the arm. She couldn't care less what Benseman thought. Jelle got up, shrugged his shoulders slightly and followed her. He didn't really know where to though.

Benseman gave a bit of a grimace. He knew his Vera. With slightly shaking hands he lit a crumpled cigarette butt and opened a can of beer. A sound that caused Arvo Pärt to come to life.

'Now is fun.'

Pärt was a second-generation Estonian, his parents having come to Sweden as refugees during the war. He had his own special way of speaking. Muriel watched as Vera left, and then turned to Benseman.

'Well, it's right, a lot of what she said, as soon as you don't fit in, then they want you out of the way… ain't it like that?'

'Yes, I suppose so…'

Benseman was from the north of Sweden, best known for his unnecessarily firm handshake and for the way the yellows of his eyes seemed to have been marinated in vodka. He was a big man, with a distinct northern dialect and rancid breath which oozed out through the gaps in his teeth. In a previous life, he had been a librarian up in Boden, with a large appetite for books and an equally large appetite for alcoholic beverages. The whole nine yards, from cloudberry liqueur to some of the extremely potent products from an illicit distillery. Ten years of alcohol abuse had completely wrecked his social life and ended with him driving down to Stockholm in a stolen van. Down in the capital he just scraped by as a beggar and shoplifter, like flotsam that had been washed ashore.

But he had read a lot.

'…we are dependent on charity,' said Benseman.

Pärt nodded in agreement and reached out for the beer. Muriel pulled out a little pouch and a spoon. Benseman reacted immediately.

'You were going to lay off that crap, weren't you?'

'I know, I will.'

'When?'

'I will!'

And she did, immediately. Not because she didn't want her fix, but because she suddenly caught sight of two youths who were sauntering towards them through the trees. One had on a black hooded jacket, and his mate a green one. Both of them were wearing grey tracksuit bottoms, heavy boots and gloves.

They were out hunting.

The homeless trio reacted fairly quickly. Muriel grabbed her plastic bag and ran off. Benseman and Pärt stumbled after her. Benseman suddenly remembered the second can of beer he had hidden behind the bin. That could mean the difference between getting some sleep or being awake the coming night. He turned back and accidentally tripped up in front of one of the benches.

His balance wasn't at its best.

Nor was his reaction time. When he tried get back on his feet he got a hard kick right in his face and fell onto his back. The youth in the black jacket stood right next to him. His mate had pulled out a mobile and switched the camera on.

That was the start of an exceptionally brutal assault, filmed in a park from which nothing could be heard on the outside and where there were only two terrified witnesses hidden in some bushes quite a way away.

Muriel and Pärt.

But even from that distance they could see the blood running from Benseman's mouth and an ear, and hear his muffled groans after each kick to his midriff and face.

Time after time.

After time.

What they didn't get to see was how some of Benseman's few remaining teeth were kicked into the flesh of his cheeks, poking out the other side. What they did see was how the big northerner tried to shield his eyes.

The eyes he used for reading.

Muriel cried, silently, and pressed the crook of her arm – full of scars – across her mouth. Every part of her emaciated body shook. In the end, Pärt took the young girl by the hand and pulled her away from the disgusting scene. There was nothing they could do. Or rather, they could call the police, they could do that, Pärt thought, and dragged Muriel with him as quickly as he could down towards Lidingövägen.

It was a while before the first car approached. Pärt and Muriel started to shout and wave their arms when it was about fifty metres away which resulted in the car swerving away into the middle of the road and then accelerating past them.

'Fucking bastards!' Muriel shouted after them.

The next driver had his wife in the passenger seat, a well-groomed lady in a pretty cerise dress. She pointed through the windscreen.

'Now don't run over those drug addicts, remember you've been drinking.'

So the grey Jaguar, too, whooshed past.

By the time one of Benseman's hands had been stamped on till it was a bloody mess, the last of the sunlight had sunk into Värta bay. The youth with the mobile turned the camera off and his mate picked up Benseman's hidden can of beer.

Then they ran off.

They left behind them the dusk and the big northerner on the ground. His smashed hand was clawing feebly at the gravel, his eyelids were closed. *A Clockwork Orange*, the book

title was the last thought winding through Benseman's brain. But who the hell wrote it? Then the hand stopped moving.

1

The covers had slipped off and exposed her naked thighs. The rough warm tongue licked its way a bit along the skin. She moved in her sleep and felt it tickle. When the tongue turned into a little nip on her thigh, she sat up and pushed the cat away.

'No!'

It wasn't really aimed at the cat, more at the alarm clock. She had overslept. Well and truly. And to make it worse, her chewing gum had fallen off the bedstead and firmly attached itself to her long black hair. Semi-crisis.

She leapt out of bed.

She was an hour late and that put pressure on all of her morning timetable. Her multitasking capacity was going to be tested. Especially in the kitchen: the milk for her coffee was about to boil over at the same time as the toast started to burn and her bare right foot trod on a patch of transparent cat vomit just at the same time as she got a call from an insufferably intimate telephone salesman who started with her first name and guaranteed that it wasn't about selling something, only an invitation to a course about financial consulting.

Almost a total crisis now.

Olivia Rönning was still stressed when she rushed out of the door on Skånegatan. No make-up, with her long hair quickly put up in something reminiscent of a bun. Her light suede jacket was unbuttoned, a yellow T-shirt showed under it, somewhat frayed at the bottom, her washed-out jeans ended in a pair of well-worn sandals.

It was sunny today too.

She stopped for a moment to decide which way she'd go. Which was quickest? Off to the right. She started to half run while glancing at the billboards outside the supermarket:

ANOTHER ROUGH SLEEPER BADLY BEATEN.

Olivia carried on running.

She was on her way to her parked car. She had to go to Sörentorp out in Ulriksdal. To the Police College. She was twenty-three and this was her third term. In six months she would be able to apply to be taken on as a police trainee at a station in the Stockholm district.

After a further six months she would be a police officer.

A little out of breath, she reached her white Mustang and pulled out her car keys. She had inherited the car from her Dad, Arne, who had died of cancer four years earlier. It was a convertible, a 1988 model, red leather upholstery, automatic, and a straight-four which roared like a V8. The apple of her dad's eye for many years. Now it was hers. Not in mint condition, the rear window had to be secured with gaffer tape now and then, and the paintwork had the odd blemish. But it nearly always sailed through its MOT.

She loved the car.

With a few simple moves she lowered the roof and sat down behind the wheel. She nearly always noticed the same thing, a smell, for a second or two. It wasn't from the upholstery, but from her dad: the inside of the car smelt of Arne. Only for a couple of seconds, then it was gone.

She attached her headphones to her mobile, selected Bon Iver, turned the key in the ignition, put the car in drive and drove off.

The summer holidays were on their way.

* * *

A new issue of *Situation Sthlm*, the magazine for the homeless, was now ready for sale, Issue 166. With Princess Victoria on the cover, and interviews with Sahara Hotnights and Jens Lapidus. The editorial office on Krukmakargatan 34 was filled

with homeless sellers who were buying their copies of the new issue. They could buy them for twenty kronor each, half the retail price on the street, and keep the difference when they sold them.

A simple deal.

And it made all the difference for many of them. The money they got from selling magazines kept them afloat. Some of them spent it on their addictions, others to pay back money they owed. Most of them quite simply used the money to buy food for that day.

And to have some self-esteem.

It was, after all, a job they were doing, and they got paid for it. They weren't nicking things, or shoplifting, or mugging pensioners. They only did that if everything got fucked up. Some of them. But the majority were actually proud of the way they performed their sales job.

And it was quite hard work.

Some days, you could stand at your pitch for ten or twelve hours and hardly manage to flog a single copy. In rotten weather and icy cold winds. Then it wasn't much fun creeping into an outhouse somewhere with no food in your stomach and trying to get to sleep before the nightmares seized you.

But today there was a new issue coming out. That was usually a cause for celebration for all those in the room. With a bit of luck they'd manage to flog a whole bundle on the first day. But there was no sign of merriment in the office.

On the contrary.

A crisis meeting was taking place.

Yet another of their mates had been badly beaten up the previous evening. Benseman, the northerner, the guy who had read a hell of a lot of books. He had broken bones all over his body. His spleen had ruptured and the doctors had struggled all night to stop the internal bleeding. The guy in charge of reception had been to the hospital earlier in the morning.

'He's going to survive… but we won't be seeing him here for quite a while.'

People nodded a little. In sympathy. Tense. This wasn't the first attack of recent times, in fact it was the fourth, and the victims had all been homeless people. Rough sleepers, as they had been called in the papers. And it had been the same each time. Some youths had sought out one of them at a well-known meeting place, and beaten them up. A really nasty beating. And they also filmed the whole bloody thing and then posted it on the Net.

That was almost the worst part of it.

So fucking humiliating. As if they were nothing more than punchbags in a 'reality' documentary about violence as entertainment.

And almost as hard to deal with was the fact that all four had been sellers of *Situation Sthlm*. Was that just a coincidence? There were about 5,000 homeless people in Stockholm, and only a tiny proportion of them were sellers.

'Are they just picking on us?'

'Why the fuck would they do that!'

Of course there was no answer to that. Yet. But it was unpleasant enough anyway to frighten the group in the room – and they were already shaken.

'I've got hold of some teargas spray.'

That came from Bo Fast. They all looked at him. Everybody knew Bo, his name sounds pretty stupid and when pronounced as one word it meant something completely different, *bofast* means 'permanent resident'. They had given up teasing him about that years ago. Now Bo held up his powerful spray for all to see.

'You know it's illegal,' said Jelle.

'How d'you mean?'

'A spray like that.'

'So what? How legal is it to beat people up?'

Jelle didn't have a good answer to that. He was standing by a wall with Arvo Pärt next to him. Vera stood a bit to one side. For once, she had kept her mouth shut. She had taken it really badly when Pärt phoned and told her what had happened to Benseman just a few minutes after she and Jelle had left the park. She had been convinced that she could have prevented the assault if only she had stayed behind. But Jelle didn't think so.

'What the hell would you've done?'

'Fought them! You know how I floored those guys who tried to grab our mobiles out in Midsommarkransen!'

'But they were pissed out of their minds, and one of them was almost a midget.'

'Well, in that case you'd have had to give me a hand, wouldn't you?'

Now Vera didn't say a word. She bought a bundle of magazines; Pärt bought his bundle, while Jelle could only afford five copies.

They went out onto the street together and suddenly Pärt started to cry. He leaned against the rough façade and put a dirty hand up to his face. Jelle and Vera looked at him. They understood. He had been there and had seen it all and not been able to lift a finger.

Now it was all coming flooding back.

Vera gently put her arm around Pärt's shoulders and bent his head down towards her shoulder. She knew how frail he was.

His real name was Silon Karp and he was from Eskilstuna, the son of two Estonian refugees. But during a nocturnal heroin trip in an attic office on Brunnsgatan, he had caught sight of an old newspaper with a picture of the shy composer and been struck by the amazing likeness. Between Karp and Pärt. He saw his double, quite simply. And during the next fix he had slipped into his double, and two became one. He was Arvo Pärt. Since then, he had called himself Pärt too. And seeing as the company

he kept couldn't care less what people were really called, he became Pärt.

Arvo Pärt.

He had worked as a postman for many years and had delivered letters in Stockholm's southern suburbs, but weak nerves and a craving for opiates had dragged him down into what was now his rootless existence. As a homeless magazine seller for *Situation Sthlm*.

Now he stood here crying against One-eyed Vera's shoulder, inconsolable, he cried because of what had happened to Benseman, because of how bloody awful everything was, all the violence. But most of all he cried because life was the way it was.

Vera stroked his matted hair and looked up at Jelle, and Jelle looked down at his bundle of newspapers.

Then he left.

* * *

Olivia turned in through the college gates at Sörentorp and parked her car immediately to the right. It stuck out a bit, among the dark grey saloon cars of various types. She had nothing against that. She glanced up at the sky and wondered whether she ought to put the roof up, but decided against it.

'What if it starts raining?'

Olivia turned around. Ulf Molin. A guy the same age as her, and in her class too. A guy who had a remarkable talent for always turning up in Olivia's vicinity without her actually noticing. Now he had appeared behind her car. I wonder if he'll follow me, she thought.

'Well then I'd have to put the roof up.'

'In the middle of a lesson?'

This sort of totally meaningless conversation got on her nerves. She took her bag and started to walk off. Ulf followed her.