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The Invisible Man from Salem

Written by Christoffer Carlsson

Translated by Michael Gallagher

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THE INVISIBLE MAN FROM SALEM

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Translated by Michael Gallagher



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II

When I wake up it's dark, and I just know that something has happened. Out of the corner of my eye I see something flashing. Across the road, the wall of the building opposite is struck by a bright-blue flashing light. I get out of bed and go to the kitchenette, drink a glass of water, and pop a Serax pill on my tongue. I've been dreaming about Viktor and Sam.

With the empty glass in my hand I go over to the balcony and open the door. The wind, warm but damp, makes me shudder, and I can see the world that's waiting down there. An ambulance and two police cars are grouped outside the entrance. Someone is pulling blue-and-white incident tape between two streetlamps. I hear muted voices, the crackling of a police radio, and see the silent flashing of the police cars' blue lights. And beyond that is the hum of a million people, the sound of a big city in temporary slumber.

I go back in and pull on a pair of jeans, button a shirt, and run my fingers through my hair. In the entrance hall I hear a fan spinning somewhere behind a wall, the muted rustle of clothes, a quiet, mumbling voice. Someone pushes the button to call the old lift down, and it starts its descent with a mechanical crunch, making the whole shaft vibrate.

'Can't we shut that bloody lift off?' someone hisses.

The lift masks the sound of my footsteps as I make my way down the staircase that winds itself around the lift-shaft. I stop at the second floor and wait. Below me, on the first floor, something has happened. Not for the first time.

A few years back, the large apartment was bought by a charity with the help of a donation from someone who had more money than he needed. The group remodelled the apartment into a hostel for down-and-outs, and named it Chapmansgården. It is visited at least once a week, usually by jaded bureaucrats sent by Social Services, but quite often by the police. The hostel is run by a former social worker, Matilda or Martina — I can't remember her name. She's old, but commands more respect than most police officers.

As I look over the bannister I see that the heavy wooden door of the hostel is open. The lights are on in there. An irritated male voice is being soothed by a softer one, a woman's. The lift passes me on its way to the first floor, hiding me from view as I follow it down. The two police officers standing there freeze when they catch sight of me. They're young — much younger than me. The lift stops on the ground floor, and suddenly it all goes very quiet.

'Watch your step,' says the woman.

'Put the tape up,' he says, and holds out the roll of incident tape, to which she responds with a stare.

'You put it up, and I'll take care of him.'

She has taken her cap off and is holding it in her hand; her hair is up, in a tight ponytail that makes her face look stretched. The man has a square jaw and kind eyes, but I think both officers are quite shaken because they're constantly looking at their watches. On the shoulders of their uniforms are single gold crowns, with no stripes. Constables.

He walks towards the staircase with the roll of tape in his hand. I try to smile. 'Listen, something has happened here,' says the woman. 'I'd like you to stay in the building.'

'I'm not going out.'

'What are you doing down here, then?'

I look at the stairwell window, which is large and looks out at the house over the road that is still soaked in blue light.

'I woke up.'

'You were woken by the flashing lights?'

I nod, unsure what she's thinking. She looks surprised. I detect a sour smell, and only now do I notice how pale she is, that her eyes are bloodshot. She's just been sick.

She tilts her head ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly, and furrows her brow.

'Have we met before?'

'I don't think so.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm a policeman,' I venture, 'but … no, I don't think we've met.'

She looks at me for a long time before pulling out her notepad from her breast pocket and flipping through it, then clicking her pen and jotting something down. Behind me, her colleague wrestles clumsily with the tape in a way that gets on my nerves. I look at the door behind the woman. It shows no sign of having been forced.

'I had no information about any police officers living here. What's your name?'

'Leo,' I say. 'Leo Junker. What's happened here?'

'What department are you with, Leo?' she continues, in a tone that reveals she's far from convinced I'm telling the truth.

'IA.'

'IA?'

'Internal Aff—'

'I know what it stands for. May I see your ID?'

'It's in my coat, up there in my flat,' I say, and her gaze moves over my shoulder, as though she is trying to make eye contact with her colleague. 'Do you know who she is?' I chance. 'The body.'

'I …' she starts. 'So, you know what's happened?'

I'm not really that observant, but it's pretty rare for men to use the hostel. They have other places to go to. Women, on the other hand, don't have that many hostels to choose from, since most places turn away anyone using drugs or involved in prostitution. Women are generally allowed to do one or the other, but not both. The problem

is, of course, that most of the women *do* do both. Chapmansgården is an exception, which means that lots of women come here. This place has just one rule when it comes to being allowed in: you mustn't be carrying a weapon. It's a generous attitude.

So the chances are it's a woman, and, judging by the commotion, she's no longer alive.

'May I …?' I say, and take a step towards her.

'We're waiting for Forensics.' I hear her colleague's voice behind me.

'Is Martina there?'

'Who?' says the woman, confused, and looks at her notepad.

'The one who runs the shelter,' I answer. 'We're friends.'

'You mean Matilda?'

'Yes. Exactly.'

I step out of my shoes, pick them up, and walk past her into the hostel.

'Excuse me!' she says sharply, grabbing my arm. 'You stay here.'

'I just want to know how my friend is,' I say.

'You don't even know her name.'

'I know how to move around a crime scene. I just want to know that Matilda is okay.'

'That's irrelevant. You're not coming in.'

'Two minutes.'

The policewoman stares at me for some time before she lets go of my arm and looks at her watch again. Someone is knocking on the door downstairs, forcefully and sharply. She looks for her colleague, who's moved up the stairs and is now out of sight.

'Wait here,' she says, and I nod and smile, doing my best to look sincere.

THE WORLD SEEMS hauntingly quiet inside Chapmansgården. The roof hangs low above my head; the floor is an ugly, rutted parquet. The hostel comprises a large hall, a breakfast room with a kitchen,

a toilet and shower, an office, and what I assume is the dormitory, furthest from the entrance. The smell brings to mind what you'd expect to find in an old man's wardrobe. Just inside the door there's a big basket, and beside it a hand-written sign: WARM CLOTHES. A pair of gloves are sticking out from underneath a hooded top; I pull them out.

A little way down on the right, off the large hall, there's a neat, tidy kitchen with a square, wooden table and a couple of chairs. At the table, Matilda, the old bird, with her pointy features and fuzzy silver curls, is sitting opposite a man in police uniform. She seems to be answering questions in a quiet, composed voice. They look up as I go past, and I nod to Matilda.

'You from Violent Crime?' he asks.

'Sure.'

He looks at the gloves in my hand and I look down, and I notice the pronounced shoe-prints that are visible on the floor. It's not a boot, more like a trainer of some sort. I put my own shoe alongside the print, noticing that I have the same-size feet as whoever's just been here.

'Where are the other women?'

'She was the only one here,' says Matilda.

'Do you recognise her?'

'She's been here several times this summer. I think her name's Rebecka.'

'Rebecka with a "ck"?'

'I don't know, but I think it's a "cc".'

'And her surname?'

She shakes her head.

'As I said, I don't even know how she spells her first name.'

I carry on down the hall and into the dorm. The walls are sickly yellow, covered in pictures. A window is ajar, allowing the August night to seep in and making the room unusually cool. There are eight beds, arranged along both sides of the room. The bedclothes

don't match: some are floral like the walls of a Seventies apartment; others are in bright colours — blue, orange, and green; still others have ugly, insipid patterns. Each bed is marked with a number, clumsily carved into the wood. In bed 7, second from the far wall, lies a body with its back to me, clothed in bleached jeans and a knitted jumper. Unkempt, dark hair is just visible. I leave my shoes on one of the beds and put the gloves on.

People shoot, stab, hit, kick, chop, drown, and strangle each other, attack each other with acid, and run each other over. The results vary from being as discreet and effective as a surgical intervention to being as messy as a mediaeval execution. This time, life has ended suddenly and neatly, almost unremarkably.

If it wasn't for the little maroon flower adorning her temple, she could be asleep. She's young, between twenty and twenty-five — maybe five years older than that — but a hard life leaves its mark on a person's face. I lean over her to get a better look at the entry wound. It's slightly bigger than the head of a drawing-pin, and the traces of blood and black dust from the weapon speckle her forehead. Someone has stood behind her with a small-calibre pistol.

I look at her pockets. They appear to be empty. Her clothes seem undisturbed; a glimpse of her vest is visible under the knitted jumper, but nothing suggests that her body has been searched, that someone was looking for something. I carefully place my hands on the body and feel along her side, shoulders, and back, hoping to find something that shouldn't be there. As I roll up the knitted sleeve, I notice the results of intravenous drug use, but they look neater than usual — she'd almost turned meticulous shooting-up into a competitive sport.

I hear Matilda's footsteps behind me. She stops in the doorway, as though scared to come in.

'The window,' I ask. 'Is it always open?'

'No, we usually keep it closed. It wasn't open when I arrived.'

'Was she dealing?'

'I think so. She got here about an hour ago and said she needed somewhere to stay. Most of the women usually come a bit later.'

'Did she have anything with her? Clothes, bag?'

'Nothing apart from what she's wearing.'

'Are those her own clothes?'

'I think so.' She sniffs. 'She didn't get them from us, anyway.'

'Did she have any shoes?'

'By the bed.'

They're black Converse sneakers, with white laces way too thick for them. She must have bought those later and replaced the original ones. They're lumpy and split — she's been hiding pills inside them. I hold up one of the shoes and inspect the sole, nondescript and grey, before carefully putting it back. I get my phone out and point it towards her face, take a picture, and for a split second the phone's tiny flash makes her skin painfully white.

'How did she seem when she got here this evening?'

'High and tired, like everyone else who comes here. She said she'd had a bad evening and just wanted to sleep.'

'Where were you when it happened?' I ask.

'I was washing up, with my back to the door, so I didn't see or hear anything. I always do it about this time; it's the only chance I get.'

'How did you discover she was dead?'

'I went in to see if she'd fallen asleep. When I went over to close the window I saw that she …'

She doesn't finish the sentence.

I walk in a wide arc around the body, over to the window. It's quite high up — it would take a serious jump to reach Chapmansgatan, down on the pavement below. I look again at the body, and in the light from the streetlamp something is glittering in her hand, like a small chain.

'She's got something in her hand,' I say to Matilda, who looks puzzled.

From the hall I hear a voice I recognise. I take a last look at the body before I pick up my shoes and follow Matilda back into the hall, where I meet Gabriel Birck. I haven't seen him in a long time, but he looks the same, with his suntanned face and his dark, close-cropped hair. Birck has the kind of hair that makes you want to change your shampoo, and he's wearing an understated black suit, like he's just been yanked away from a party.

'Leo,' he says, surprised. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'I … woke up.'

'Aren't you suspended?'

'On leave.'

'Badge, Leo,' he says, tightening his lips to an ashen line. 'If you don't have your badge, you need to get out of here.'

'It's in my wallet, which is in my flat.'

'Go and get it.'

'I was just leaving,' I say, holding up my shoes.

Birck observes me silently with a grey stare, and I put the gloves back and go towards the door and out into the stairwell again. The policewoman looks startled as I walk past her.

'How the hell did he get in here?' is the last thing I hear from inside the hostel.

Instead of going back to my place, I head down the stairs and around the lift on the ground floor, out into the dark, empty courtyard. Only when I feel the cold ground on the soles of my feet do I realise that I've still got my shoes in my hand. I put them on and light a cigarette. Above me, the high walls of the building form a frame around the night sky, and I stand there a while, alternating between smoking and chewing my thumbnail. I walk across the courtyard and unlock a door that takes me back inside, but into a different part of the building. The stairwell here is smaller and older, warmer. I go towards the entrance and out onto Pontonjärgatan.

We live in a time when people feel insecure among strangers. Somewhere close by, there's the sound of heavy, throbbing dance

music. Pontonjär's Park is in front of me, silent and full of shadows; some distance away, the noise of screeching brakes is followed by the sound of an engine cutting out. At the crossing, a man and woman stand arguing, and the last thing I see before I head off is how one raises a hand to the other. I think about how they are hurting each other, about the dead woman in bed 7 and the little object that glittered in her hand, about the words I saw on the tunnel wall earlier today — Sweden must die' — and I think that whoever believes that and wrote it might be right.

I TURN ONTO Chapmansgatan again and light another cigarette; I need to keep my hands busy. The mute blue lights drift across the wall and disappear, again and again. More uniformed police are moving around outside the building now, busy cordoning off parts of the road, diverting traffic and pedestrians. The police wave people on forcefully and irritably. Bright white light from large searchlights illuminates the tarmac. A big tent is unloaded from a van, as a precaution in case it starts raining.

Chapmansgården's open window is swinging and bumping gently in the wind. Inside I can see heads sweeping past — Gabriel Birck, a forensic technician, and Matilda. Under the window the pavement is waiting to be inspected; I want to study it more closely, but the commotion in front of the house hides it from my view.

I look at my phone instead. A new day started half an hour ago. I hear the humming noise of a nearby bar, and music coming through its open windows. I put the cigarette out, turning my back on Chapmansgatan.

A LITTLE STRIP of pale tarmac links two of the larger streets on Kungsholmen. I don't know what it's called, but it's short enough that you could kick a ball from one end of the street to the other. In one of the buildings jammed along it there is a wine-red door. Written on it, in faded yellow paint, is a single word: BAR. I open

it and see a head of blonde, tousled hair resting on the bar. As the door slams behind me, the head lifts slowly and the wavy hair falls down into a centre parting. Anna looks up, her eyes half-closed.

'Finally,' she mumbles, as she runs her hand through her hair. 'A customer.'

'Are you drunk?'

'Bored.'

'A bit of advertising on the door would get more people in.'

'Peter doesn't want advertising. He just wants to get rid of the place.'

BAR is owned by an uninterested thirty-something entrepreneur, whose father bought the premises in the early Eighties, turned it into a bar, and owned the place until he died. BAR was left to Peter, who, in accordance with his father's wishes, was not allowed to sell it for five years. That was four-and-a-half years ago; so, barring Armageddon, Anna has six months left behind the taps.

BAR is the sort of place you would only find if you were looking for it. Everything in here is made of wood: the counter, the floor, the ceiling, the empty tables, and the chairs that are strewn about the place. The lighting is warm with a yellow hue, making Anna's skin seem browner that it really is. She carefully dog-ears a page in her thick book and then closes it, pulls out a bottle of absinthe from a cupboard, grabs a glass, and pours what I guess is supposed to be a 20-ml measure but is in fact significantly more. It's illegal to sell the stuff, but a lot of what goes on in bars tends to be illegal.

'It's quiet in here.'

'Do you want me to put the music on? I turned it off — it was annoying me.'

I don't know what I want. Instead I sit on one of the bar stools and drink from the glass. Absinthe is the only spirit I can cope with. I only drink occasionally; but when I do, that's what I choose. I found this place early this summer; I'd been on my way home, high, and I stopped to light a cigarette. I needed to lean against the wall

to keep still enough. Everything in my vision tugged leftwards the whole time, making it impossible to focus. When I finally did, and saw the word BAR on the wine-red door across the road, I was pretty sure it was a hallucination, but I stumbled over the road anyway and started banging on the door. After a while, Anna opened the door, baseball bat in hand.

I don't know how old she is. She could be twenty. Her parents own a mansion in Uppland, just north of Norrtälje. Fifteen years ago, Anna's father had started an internet business at exactly the right time, and then sold it just before the bubble burst. He invested the money in new companies, which he allowed to expand. It's this sort of manoeuvre that makes people rich nowadays. Anna fluctuates between needy self-interest and enormous contempt in her dealings with him. She's studying psychology, and works part-time at BAR, but I never see her reading textbooks. All she reads is great thick books with ambiguous covers. That's all I know about her. It's almost enough to pass as friendship.

I catch my reflection in the mirror hanging behind the bar. I look like I'm wearing borrowed clothes. I've lost weight. I'm pale for the time of year, which is a tell-tale sign that someone's been keeping a low profile. Anna puts her elbows on the bar and rests her head in her hands, looking at me with a cool gaze.

'You look awful,' she says.

'You're very perceptive.'

'Am I, hell! It's completely bloody obvious.'

I drink some absinthe.

'A woman was shot in my apartment block,' I say, putting the glass down. 'There's something about it that … bothers me.'

'In your block?'

'In a homeless shelter on the first floor. She died.'

'So somebody killed her?'

'If anyone's likely to die an untimely death in this city, it's the addicts and the whores.' I stare at the glass in front of me. 'But more

often than not it's an overdose or suicide. The few who do get killed by someone else are nearly always men. This was a woman. It's unusual.' I rub my cheek and hear the scratchy sound. I could do with a shave. 'It looked so … simple. Discreet and clean. That's even more unusual, and that's what bothers me most of all.'

In the courtyard of my building there are a few kids — all one family, I think — who are always racing each other across the yard, from one side to the other, noisily, laughing, so that the sound echoes between the walls. I don't know why I'm thinking about that now, but there's something about that image, the way they look and the way they sound, that means something to me — an image of something that has been lost.

'That's not your department, is it?' Anna says. 'Investigating homicide?'

I shake my head.

'What is your department then?'

'Have I never told you?'

She laughs. Anna's mouth is symmetrical.

'You don't say much when you're here. But,' she adds, 'that's fine with me.'

'I work on internal investigations.'

I drink from the glass, realising I want another smoke.

'You investigate other police?'

'Yes.'

'I thought only sixty-year-old gents got the honour of doing that. What are you, thirty?'

'Thirty-three.'

She looks at the bar, dark and clean, then frowns and grabs a cloth, and sets about making it even cleaner.

'It is unusual,' I say. 'To get thirty-three-year-olds in IA. But it happens.'

'You must be a good cop,' she says. She puts the cloth back, and then leans against the bar.

Anna is wearing a black shirt with the arms rolled up, unbuttoned over her chest. A black piece of jewellery hangs round her neck on a thin chain. I look from the necklace to the glass, and the lighting flickers. There are no windows.

'Not exactly. I have certain faults.'

'Who doesn't?' she says. 'Are you really thirty-three?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you were younger.'

'You're lying.'

She smiles.

'Yeah. Take it as a compliment.'

I glimpse myself in the mirror again, and for a second my reflection dissolves, becomes transparent. I've been out of the game for too long. I'm not really here.

'Why did you become a cop?'

'Why did you become a barmaid?'

She seems to be considering her answer. I'm thinking about the little chain I saw in the dead woman's hand. I wonder what it was. An amulet she needed so she could get to sleep? Perhaps, but unlikely. It looked as though it had been placed there. I get my phone out, open the picture of the woman's face, and stare at it, as if her eyes might open at any moment.

'I suppose everyone has to find something to keep themselves busy until they work out what it is they actually want to do,' she eventually replies.

'Exactly.' I drink from my glass, look at the picture on the phone, show it to Anna. 'You don't recognise her?'

Anna studies the image.

'No. I don't recognise her.'

'Her name might be Rebecca.'

'With a "ck" or a "cc"?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Just wondered.'

'Not sure, but right now I think it's double-c.'

She shakes her head.

'I don't recognise her.'

'It was worth a try.'

I LEAVE ANNA as she puts the first of the chairs up on a table. According to the ticking wall-clock, it's now a few minutes to three; but, bearing in mind the state of everything else in BAR, there's no reason to think that the clock is right.

'You can ring me, you know,' she says, as I stand with my hand on the door and turn around.

'I haven't got your number.'

'You'll work it out.' She lifts up a second chair, and the wood-on-wood makes a loud clunking noise. 'Otherwise, I'm sure I'll see you soon.'

The lights pulse again, and I push down on the door handle, leaving BAR. My head is rocking gently, not unpleasantly.

The Stockholm night is raw, in a way that it wasn't earlier. If the clock behind Anna is right, it's going to be dark for hours yet. Suddenly, a shadow flickers in the corner of my eye, making me freeze and turn around. Someone is following me, I'm sure of it, but when I survey the street there's no one there — just a traffic light changing from red to green, a car turning a couple of junctions away, and the hum of a big city expanding in the darkness and devouring lonely souls.

When I get back to Chapmansgatan there are several cars lined up along the incident tape: another police car; cars from the main news agency, from state television, one of the tabloid newspapers; and a shiny silver van, with tinted windows and AUDACIA LTD written in black on the silver paintwork. The street is cordoned off, and people are standing by the barriers, silhouetted by the light from the police car's headlamps. The odd camera flash goes off. Someone hangs up a drape alongside the van, and the flashes accelerate to

an intense, dazzling rattle. I catch a glimpse of a stretcher, a hand grasping its handle, but nothing more.

The blue lights are no longer operating. The signals of death have been turned off, and only the photographers' flashes continue; a sigh escapes from those lining the cordon, possibly one of disquiet, but more likely a sigh of disappointment. The drape being held up by two uniformed officers is obscuring everything they've come to see. The two men carrying the body get into the silver van and steer it carefully through the barrier.

I go back into Chapmansgatan 6 via the rear entrance. As I pass the first floor the door is open, and I can hear Gabriel Birck's voice coming from inside. The incident tape is still up; it will be there for days, maybe longer. I'm detached from it, from everything, and I go up to my apartment and get back into bed as if it's been just minutes since I woke up.

STRANGE, how a shudder goes through the room just before morning arrives.