Lovereading.co.uk

Handling the Undead

John Ajvide Lindqvist

Translated from the Swedish by Ebba Segerberg

Published by Quercus

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by Quercus
This paperback edition published in 2009 by

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

Copyright © 2005 by John Ajvide Lindqvist
Translation copyright © 2009 by Ebba Segerberg

Published by agreement with Ordfronts Föelag, Stockholm,
and Loenhardt & Høier Literary Agency aps, Copenhagen.

The moral right of John Ajvide Lindqvist to be
identified as the author of this work has been
asserted in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopy, recording, or any
information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

Every effort has been made to trace the original source material
contained in this book. Where the attempt has been unsuccessful,
the publisher would be pleased to rectify any omission.

First published in Sweden as *Hanteringen av odöda* by Ordfront 2005

Page 366 constitutes an extension of the copyright page.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84724 990 6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
businesses, organizations, places and events are
either the product of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or
locales is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc.

Solidarity is always directed at
'one of us' and 'us' cannot refer
to everyone…For 'we' assumes
someone who can be excluded,
someone who belongs to the others,
and these others cannot be animals
or machines, but people.

Sven-Eric Liedman,
To See Oneself in Others

All that we hope is, when we go
Our skin and our blood and our bones
Don't get in your way, making you ill
The way they did when we lived

Morrissey
There's a place in hell for me and my friends

Prologue

When the current reverses its course

Sveavägen 13 August 22.49

'Salud, comandante.'

Henning held up the box of Gato Negro and toasted the metal plaque in the sidewalk. A single withered rose lay on the spot where Prime Minister Olof Palme had been gunned down sixteen years earlier. Henning crouched down and ran his finger over the raised inscription.

'Damn it,' he said. 'It's all going to hell, Olof. Down, down and further down.'

His head was killing him, and it wasn't the wine. The people walking by on Sveavägen were staring into the ground too; some had their hands pressed against their temples.

Earlier in the evening it had simply felt like an approaching thunderstorm, but the electric tension in the air had gradually, imperceptibly, become more intense until it was now all but unbearable. Not a cloud in the night sky, though; no distant rumble, no hope of release. The invisible field of electricity could not be touched, but it was there; everyone could feel it.

It was like a blackout in reverse. Since around nine o'clock, no lamps could be switched off, no electrical appliances powered down. If you tried to pull out the plug there was an alarming crackling

sound and sparks flew between the outlet and the plug, preventing the circuit from being broken.

And the field was still increasing in strength.

Henning felt as though there was an electric fence around his head, torturing him, pulsing with shocks of pure pain.

An ambulance went by with sirens blaring, either because it was on a dispatch or simply because no one could turn them off. A couple of parked cars were idling on the spot.

Salud, comandante.

Henning raised the wine cask to face level, tilted his head back and opened the tap. A stream of wine hit his chin and spilled down over his throat before he managed to divert it into his mouth. He closed his eyes, drinking deeply while the spilled wine trickled down over his chest, mingled with his sweat, and continued on.

The heat. God almighty, the heat.

For several weeks all the weather charts had shown enormous happy suns plastered across the entire country. The pavement and buildings steamed with heat accumulated during the day and even now, at almost eleven o'clock, the temperature was stuck around thirty degrees.

Henning nodded goodbye to the Prime Minister and traced his assassin's steps toward Tunnelgatan. The handle of the wine cask had broken when he lifted it out through an open car window and he had to carry it under his arm. His head felt larger than usual, swollen. He massaged his forehead with his fingers.

His head probably still appeared normal from the outside but his fingers, they'd definitely swelled up from the heat and the wine.

This damned weather. It's not natural.

Henning steadied himself against the railing, walking slowly up the steps cut into the steep footpath. Every unsteady step rang through his throbbing skull. The windows on both sides were open, brightly lit, music streaming from some. Henning longed for darkness: darkness and silence. He wanted to

keep drinking until he managed to shut down.

At the top of the stairs he rested for a couple of seconds. The situation was deteriorating. Impossible to say if he was the one getting worse or if the field was growing stronger. It wasn't pulsating now; now it was a constant burning pain, squeezing him relentlessly.

And it wasn't just him.

Not far from him there was a car parked at an angle to the sidewalk. The engine idling, the driver's side door open and the stereo playing 'Living Doll' at full blast. Next to the car, the driver was crouched in the middle of the street, his hands pressed against his head.

Henning screwed his eyes shut and opened them again. Was he imagining things or was the light from the apartments around him getting brighter?

Something. Is about to. Happen.

Carefully, one step at a time, he made his way across Döbelnsgatan; reached the shadow of the chestnut trees in the Johannes cemetery, but there he collapsed. Couldn't go on. Everything was buzzing now; it sounded like a swarm of bees in the crown of the tree above his head. The field was stronger, his head was compressed as if far under water and through the open windows he could hear people scream.

This is it. I'm dying.

The pain in his head was beyond reason. Hard to believe such a little cavity could pack so much pain. Any second now his head was going to cave in. The light from the windows was stronger, the shadows of the leaves cast a psychedelic pattern over his body. Henning turned his face to the sky, opened his eyes wide and waited for the bang, the explosion.

Ping.

It was gone.

Like throwing a switch. Gone.

The headache vanished; the bee swarm stopped abruptly.

Everything went back to normal. Henning tried to open his mouth to let out a sound, an expression of gratitude perhaps, but his jaws were locked, cramped shut. His muscles ached from having been tensed for so long.

Silence. Darkness. And something fell from the sky. Henning saw it the moment before it landed next to his head, something small, an insect. Henning breathed in and out through his nose, savouring the dry smell of earth. The back of his head was resting on something hard and cool. He turned his head in order to cool his cheek as well.

He was lying on a block of marble. He felt something irregular under his cheek. Letters. He lifted his head and read what was written there.

CARL
4 December 1918 – 18 July 1987
GRETA
16 September 1925 – 16 June 2002

There were more names further up. A family grave. Greta had been married to Carl, but she'd been widowed these past fifteen years. Well, well. Henning imagined her as a small grey-haired woman, wrestling her walking frame through the door of a grand apartment. Pictured the inheritance wrangle that would have broken out a few weeks ago.

Something was moving on the face of the marble and Henning squinted at it. A caterpillar. A spotless white grub, about as big as a cigarette filter. It looked troubled, writhing on the black marble and Henning felt sorry for it, poked it with his finger to flick it onto the grass. But the caterpillar didn't budge.

What the hell…

Henning brought his face up close next to the caterpillar, poked it again. It might as well have been cemented to the stone. Henning extracted a lighter from his pocket, and flicked it on for a better look.

The caterpillar was shrinking. Henning moved so close that his nose almost brushed the caterpillar; the lighter singed a few hairs. No. The caterpillar was not shrinking. It was just that less and less of it was visible, because it was drilling down into the stone.

Naaah…

Henning rapped his knuckles against the stone. It was definitely stone all right. Smooth, expensive marble. He laughed and spoke out loud, 'No, come on. Come on, caterpillar…'

It was almost completely gone now. Only one last little white knob. It waved at Henning, sank down into the stone as he watched and was gone. Henning felt with his finger where it had been. There was no hole, no loose fragments where the caterpillar had dug through. It had sunk down and now it was gone.

Henning patted the stone with the flat of his hand, said, 'Well done, little feller. Good work.' Then he took his wine and moved up toward the chapel in order to sit on the steps and drink.

He was the only one who saw it.

13 August

What have I done to deserve this?

Svarvargatan 16.03

Death…

David lifted his eyes from the desk, looking at the framed photograph of Duane Hanson's plastic sculpture 'Supermarket Lady'.

A woman, obese, in a pink top and turquoise skirt, pushing a loaded shopping trolley. She has curlers in her hair, a fag dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her shoes are worn down, barely covering the swollen, aching feet. Her gaze is empty. On the bare skin of her upper arms you can just make out a violet mark, bruising. Perhaps her husband beats her.

But the trolley is full. Filled to bursting.

Cans, cartons, bags. Food. Microwave meals. Her body is a lump of flesh forced inside her skin, which in turn has been crammed into the tight skirt, the tight top. The gaze is empty, the lips hard around the cigarette, a glimpse of teeth. The hands grip the trolley handle.

And the trolley is full. Filled to bursting.

David drew in air through his nostrils, could almost smell the mixture of cheap perfume and supermarket sweat.

Death…

Every time his ideas dried up, when he felt hesitant, he looked at this picture. It was Death; the thing you struggle against. All

the tendencies in society that point towards this picture are evil, everything that points away from it is…better.

The door to Magnus' room opened and Magnus emerged with a Pokémon card in his hand. From inside the room you could hear the agitated voice of the cartoon frog, Grodan Boll, 'Noooo, come ooooon!'

Magnus held out the card.

'Daddy, is Dark Golduck an eye or a kind of water?'

'Water. Sweetheart, we'll have to talk about this later…'

'But he has eye attack.'

'Yes, but…Magnus. Not now. I'll come when I'm ready. OK?'

Magnus caught sight of the newspaper in front of David.

'What are they *doing*?'

'Please, Magnus. I'm working. I'll come in a minute.'

'Ab…so…lut filth. What does that mean?'

David closed the newspaper and took hold of Magnus' shoulders. Magnus struggled, trying to open the paper.

'Magnus! I'm serious. If you don't let me work now I won't have any time for you later. Go into your room, close the door. I'll be there soon.'

'Why do you have to work *all* the *time*!'

David sighed. 'If you only knew how little I work compared to other parents. But please, leave me alone for a little while.'

'Yes, yes, *yes*.'

Magnus wriggled out of his grasp and went back to his room. The door slammed shut. David walked once around the room, wiped his underarms with a towel and sat back down at the desk. The window to the Kungsholmen shoreline was wide open but there was almost no breeze, and David was sweating even though his upper body was bare.

He opened the newspaper again. Something funny had to come of this.

Absolut filth!

A giveaway promotion featuring adult magazines and liquor; two women from the Swedish Centre Party pouring vodka over an issue of *Hustler* as a protest. *Distressed*, read the caption. David studied their faces. Mostly, they looked belligerent, as if they wanted to pulverise the photographer with their eyes. The spirits ran down over the naked woman on the cover.

It was so grotesque it was hard to make something funny out of it. David's gaze scoured the image, tried to find a point of entry.

Photograph: Putte Merkert

There it was.

The photographer. David leaned back in the chair, looked up at the ceiling and started to formulate something. After several minutes he had the bare outline of a script written in longhand. He looked at the women again. Now their accusing gazes were directed at him.

'So; planning to make fun of us and our beliefs are you?' they said. 'What about you?'

'Yes, OK,' David said out loud to the newspaper. 'But at least I know I'm a clown, unlike the two of you.'

He kept writing, with a buzzing headache that he put down to a nagging conscience. After twenty minutes he had a passable routine that might even be amusing if he milked it for all it was worth. He glanced up at Supermarket Lady but received no guidance. Possibly he was walking in her footsteps, sitting in her basket.

It was half past four. Four and a half hours until he was due on stage, and there were already butterflies in his stomach.

He made a cup of coffee, smoked a cigarette and went in to see Magnus, spent half an hour talking about Pokémon, helped Magnus to sort the cards and interpret what they said.

'Dad,' Magnus asked, 'what exactly is your job?'

'You already know that. You were there at Norra Brunn once. I tell stories and people laugh and…Then I get paid for it.'

'Why do they laugh?'

David looked into Magnus' serious eight-year-old's eyes and burst into laughter himself. He stroked Magnus' head and answered, 'I don't know. I really don't know. Now I'm going to have some coffee.'

'Oh, you're *always* drinking coffee.'

David got up from the floor where the cards lay spread out. When he reached the door, he turned around to look at his son, whose lips moved as he read one of his cards.

'I think,' David said, 'that people laugh because they want to laugh. They have paid to come and laugh, and so they laugh.'

Magnus shook his head. 'I don't get it.'

'No,' David said, 'I don't either.'

Eva came back from work at half past five and David greeted her in the hall.

'Hi sweetheart,' she said. 'What's up?'

'Death, death, death,' David replied, holding his hands over his stomach. He kissed her. Her upper lip was salt with sweat. 'And you?'

'Fine. A little bit of a headache. Otherwise I'm fine. Have you been able to write?'

'No, it…' David gestured vaguely at the desk. 'Yes, but it isn't that good.'

Eva nodded. 'No, I know. Will I get to hear it later?'

'If you like.'

Eva left to find Magnus, and David went to the bathroom, let some of the nervousness drain out of him. He remained on the toilet seat for a while, studying the pattern of white fishes on the shower curtain. He wanted to read his script to Eva; in fact, he needed to read it to her. It was funny, but he was ashamed of it and was afraid that Eva would say something about…the ideas behind it. Of which there were none. He flushed, then rinsed his face with cold water.

I'm an entertainer. Plain and simple.

Yes. Of course.

He made a light dinner—a mushroom omelette—while Magnus and Eva laid out the Monopoly board in the living room. David's underarms ran with sweat as he stood at the stove sautéing the mushrooms.

This weather. It isn't natural.

An image suddenly loomed in his mind: the greenhouse effect. Yes. The Earth as a gigantic greenhouse. With us planted here millions of years ago by aliens. Soon they'll be back for the harvest.

He scooped the omelette onto plates and called out that dinner was served. Good image, but was it funny? No. But if you added someone fairly well known, like…a newspaper columnist, say—Staffan Heimersson—and said he was the leader of the aliens in disguise. So therefore Staffan Heimersson's solely responsible for the greenhouse effect…

'What are you thinking about?'

'Oh, nothing. That it's Staffan Heimersson's fault it's so warm.'

'OK…'

Eva waited. David shrugged. 'No, that was it. Basically.'

'Mum?' Magnus was done picking the tomato slices out of his salad. 'Robin said that if the Earth gets warmer the dinosaurs will come back, is that true?'

His headache got worse during the game of Monopoly, and everyone became unnecessarily grumpy when they lost money. After half an hour they took a break for *Bolibompa*, the children's program, and Eva went to the kitchen and made some espresso. David sat in the sofa and yawned. As always when he was nervous he became drowsy, just wanted to sleep.

Magnus curled up next to him and they watched a documentary about the circus. When the coffee was ready, David got up despite Magnus' protests. Eva was at the stove, fiddling with one of the knobs.

'Strange,' she remarked, 'I can't turn it off.'

The power light wouldn't go off. David turned some knobs at random, but nothing happened. The burner on which the coffee pot sat gurgling was red-hot. They couldn't be bothered doing anything to it for the moment, so David read his piece out while they drank the heavily sugared espresso and smoked. Eva thought it was funny.

'Can I do it?'

'Absolutely.'

'You don't think that it's…'

'What?'

'Well, going too far. They're right, of course.'

'Well? What does that have to do with it?'

'No, of course. Thanks.'

Ten years they had been married, and hardly a day went by that David did not look at Eva and think, 'How bloody lucky I am.' Naturally there were black days. Weeks, even, without joy or the possibility of it, but even then, at the bottom of all the murk, he knew there was a placard that read *bloody good luck*. Maybe he couldn't see it at that moment, but it always resurfaced.

She worked as an editor and illustrator of non-fiction books for children at a small publishing company called Hippogriff, and she had written and illustrated two books herself featuring Bruno, a philosophically inclined beaver who liked to build things. No huge successes, but as Eva once said with a grimace, 'The upper middle classes seem to like them. Architects. Whether their children do is less certain.' David thought the books were significantly funnier than his monologues.

'Mum! Dad! I can't turn it off!'

Magnus was standing in front of the television, waving the remote control. David hit the off button on the set but the screen did not go black. It was the same as the stove, but here at least the plug was easy to get at, so he pulled on it just as the newscaster announced the start of the evening current affairs show. For a moment it felt like

pulling a piece of metal off a magnet, the wall socket sucking at the plug. There was a crackling sound and a tickle in his fingers, then the newscaster disappeared into the dark.

David held out the plug. 'Did you see that? It was some kind of…short circuit. Now all the fuses have gone.' He flicked the light switch. The ceiling lamp went on, but he could not switch it off again.

Magnus jumped up in his seat.

'Come on! Let's keep playing.'

They let Magnus win Monopoly, and while he was counting his money. David packed his stage shoes and shirt, along with the newspaper. When he came out into the kitchen, Eva was pulling the stove out from the wall.

'No,' David said. 'Don't do that.'

Eva pinched a finger and swore. 'Damn…we can't leave it like this. I'm going over to my dad's. Fuck…' Eva tugged on the stove but it had become wedged between the cabinets.

'Eva,' David said. 'How many times have we forgotten to turn it off and gone to bed without anything happening?'

'Yeah, I know, but to leave the apartment…' She kicked the oven door. 'We haven't cleaned back there for years. Bloody thing. Damn, my head hurts.'

'Is that what you want to do right now? Clean behind the stove?'

She let her hands fall, shook her head and chuckled.

'No. I got it in my head. It'll have to wait.'

She made a final desperate lunge at the stove and threw up her hands, defeated. Magnus came out into the kitchen with his money.

'Ninety-seven thousand four hundred.' He scrunched up his eyes. 'My head hurts a whole lot. It's stupid.'

They each took an aspirin and a glass of water, said cheers and

swallowed. A farewell toast.

Magnus was going to spend the night at David's mother's place, Eva was going to visit her father in Järfälla, but come back in the middle of the night. They picked up Magnus between them, and all three kissed.

'Not too much Cartoon Network at Grandma's,' David said.

'Nah,' Magnus said. 'I don't watch that anymore.'

'That's good,' Eva said. 'It'll be…'

'I watch the Disney channel. It's much better.'

David and Eva kissed again, their eyes telegraphing something about how it would be later that night when they were alone. Then Eva took Magnus' hand and they walked off, waving one last time. David remained on the sidewalk, watching them.

What if I never saw them again…

The usual fear gripped him. God had been too good to him, there'd been a mistake, he had got more than he deserved. Now it would all be taken away. Eva and Magnus disappeared around the corner and an impulse told him to run after them, stop them. Say, 'Come on. Let's go home. We'll watch *Shrek*, we'll play Monopoly, we…can't let ourselves be separated.'

The usual fears, but worse than usual. He got a grip on himself, turned and walked toward St Eriksgatan while he quietly recited his new routine in order to fix it in his mind:

How does this kind of picture come to be? The two women are upset, so what do they do? They go to the store and buy a case of vodka and then a stack of porn magazines. When they've been standing there, pouring and pouring for two hours, Putte Merkert, photographer at Aftonbladet, *just* happens *to catch sight of them.*

'Hi there!' Putte Merkert says. 'What are you doing?'

'We're pouring alcohol on porn magazines,' the women answer.

'Aha,' the photographer thinks. A chance for a scoop.

No, not 'the photographer'. Putte Merkert. All the way through.

Aha, thinks Putte Merkert. A chance for a scoop…

Halfway across the bridge, David caught sight of something strange and stopped.

Recently he had read in the newspaper that there were millions of rats in Stockholm. He had never seen a single one, but here there were three, right in the middle of St Erik's bridge. A big one and two smaller ones. They were running in circles on the footpath, chasing each other.

The rats hissed, showing their teeth, and one of the smaller ones bit the bigger one on the back. David backed up a step, looked up. An elderly gentleman was standing a few steps away on the other side of the rats, watching their battle open-mouthed.

The small ones were as big as kittens, the bigger one about the size of a dwarf rabbit. The bare tails whisked over the asphalt and the big rat shrieked as the second small one grabbed hold of its back and a damp, black stain of blood appeared on its fur.

Are they…its children, its little ones?

David held a hand up to his mouth, suddenly nauseated. The big rat threw itself from side to side spasmodically, trying to shake off the smaller ones. David had never heard rats shriek, had not known they could. But the sound that issued from the big one was horrible, as if from a dying bird.

A couple of people had stopped on the other side. Everyone was following the rat fight and for a moment David had a vision of people gathered to watch some kind of organised event. Rat fighting. He wanted to walk away, but couldn't. In part because the traffic across the bridge was steady, in part because he could not tear his gaze from the rats. He felt compelled to stay and watch, and see what happened.

Suddenly the big one stiffened, its tail pointing straight out from its body. The small ones writhed, scrabbling their claws over its belly and their heads moved jerkily back and forth as they tore at the skin. The big one shuffled forward until it reached the edge of the bridge,

crept under the railing with its burden and toppled over.

David had time to peer over the railing in time to see it land. The noise from the traffic masked the splash when the rats landed in the dark water and a plume of drops glittered for an instant in the street lamps. Then it was over.

People continued on their way, talking about it.

'Never seen anything like it…it's this heat…my dad once told me that he…headache…'

David massaged his temples and kept walking across the bridge. People from the other direction met his gaze and everyone smiled bashfully, as if they had all taken part in something illicit. When the older gentleman who had been standing there from the beginning walked past, David asked, 'Excuse me, but…have you got a headache too?'

'Yes,' the man answered, and pressed his fist against his head. 'It's terrible.'

'I was just wondering.'

The man pointed at the dirty grey asphalt spotted with rat blood and said, 'Maybe they had one too. Maybe that was why…' He interrupted himself and looked at David. 'You've been on television, haven't you?'

He continued on his way. A muted panic hovered in the air. Dogs were barking and pedestrians walked more quickly than usual, as if trying to escape whatever was approaching. He hurried down Odengatan, took out his cell phone and dialled Eva's number. When he was level with the subway station, she answered.

'Hi,' David said. 'Where are you?'

'I've just got in the car. David? It was the same thing at your mum's place. She was going to turn the television off when we arrived, but she couldn't.'

'That'll make Magnus happy. Eva? I…I don't know, but…do you have to go see your father?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Well…do you still have a headache?'

'Yes, but not so I can't drive. Don't worry.'

'No. It's just that I have a feeling that…it's something horrible. Don't you feel it too?'

'No. Not like that.'

A man was standing inside the phone booth at the intersection of Odengatan and Sveavägen, jiggling the hook. David was about to tell Eva about the rats when the line went dead.

'Hello? Hello?'

He stopped and redialled the number, but couldn't get through. Just the crackle of static. The man in the phone booth hung up, cursed and walked out of the booth. David turned off the cell phone in order to try again but the phone refused to turn off. A drop of sweat fell from his brow onto the keypad. The phone felt unusually warm, as if the battery was heating up. He pressed the off button, but nothing happened. The display continued to glow and the battery indicator actually increased by one bar. The time was 21.05, and he half-ran down to Norra Brunn.

Even from outside the club, he could hear that the show had started. Benny Lundin's voice was thundering out onto the street, he was doing his thing about the difference between guys' and girls' bathroom habits and David pulled a face. Was pleased not to hear any laughter at the punchline. Then there was silence for a moment just as David reached the entrance, and Benny started on his next thread: about condom dispensers that stop working when you need them the most. David paused in the entrance, blinked.

The whole room was fully lit. The house lights, normally turned off to isolate the spotlight on stage, were up full bore. The people seated at the tables and at the bar looked pained, staring down at the floor and the tablecloths.

'Do you take American Express?'

That was the punchline. People usually laughed until they cried at Benny's story about how he had tried to buy black-market condoms

from the Yugoslavian mafia. Not this time. Everyone just suffered.

'Shut your face, asshole!' a drunk man at the bar yelled, grabbing at his head. David sympathised. The microphone volume was on way too high and was distorting. With the ubiquitous headache, it amounted to mass torture.

Benny grinned nervously, said, 'They let you out of the asylum for this?'

When no one laughed at that either, Benny put the microphone back in the stand, said, 'Thanks everyone. You've been a fantastic audience,' and walked offstage toward the kitchen. There was a general moment of paralysis since everything had been cut off so abruptly. Then the microphone started feeding back and an atrocious ear-splitting squeal cut through the dense air.

Everyone in the room put their hands over their ears and some started to scream along with the feedback. David clenched his teeth, ran up to the mike and tried to disconnect the cord. The weak current shot trails of ants through his skin, but the plug stayed put. After a couple of seconds, the feedback was a butcher's saw hacking through the flesh of his brain and he was forced to give up, press his hands to his ears.

He turned in order to make his way to the kitchen, but was obstructed from doing so by people who had stood up from their tables to throng towards the exit. A woman without much respect for the club's property pushed him aside, wound the microphone cord once around her wrist and yanked. She only managed to knock the stand over. The feedback continued.

David looked up at the mixing booth, where Leo was pushing every button in sight, to no effect. David was about to shout at him to cut the power when he felt a shove and fell on the low stage. He lay there, hands still clapped over his ears, and watched as the woman swung the microphone over her head and dashed it into the concrete floor.

There was silence. The audience stopped, looked around. A

collective sigh of relief went through the room. David clawed himself up to standing and saw Leo waving his hands, pulling his index finger across his throat. David nodded, cleared his throat and said loudly, 'Hello!'

Faces turned toward him.

'Unfortunately we have to interrupt tonight's show due to… technical difficulties.'

A few laughs in the audience. Jeering.

'We would like to thank our major sponsor, the Vattenfall Power Company, and…welcome you back another time.'

Boos from around the room. David held out his hands in a gesture that was supposed to mean, *So fucking sorry for something that's not remotely my fault*, but people had already lost interest in him. Everyone was moving toward the exit. The place was empty in a matter of minutes.

When David reached the kitchen, Leo looked grumpy.

'What was that thing about Vattenfall?'

'A joke.'

'I see. Funny.'

David was about to say something about captains and sinking ships since Leo was the boss of the place—and OK, next time he *would* make sure he had a routine prepared for a reverse power cut—but he held back. In part because he couldn't afford to get Leo's back up, and in part because he had other things to think about.

He went into the office and dialled Eva's cell phone number from the landline. This time he got through, but only to her voicemail. He left a message asking her to call him at the club as soon as possible.

Someone brought some beers in and the comedians drank them in the kitchen, amid the roar of the kitchen fans. The chefs had turned them on to mitigate the heat from the cooking ranges that couldn't be turned off, and now they had the same problem with the fans. They could barely talk but at least it was cooler.

Most of them left, but David decided to stay put in case Eva

called. On the ten o'clock radio news they heard that the electrical phenomenon appeared to be confined to the Stockholm region, that the current in some areas could be compared to an incipient lightning strike. David felt the hairs on his arms stand up. Maybe a shiver, maybe static electricity.

When he felt a vibration against his hip he thought at first it was to do with the electrical charge in the air as well, but then realised it was coming from his cell phone. He didn't recognise the number that came up.

'Hello, this is David.'

'Am I speaking with David Zetterberg?'

'Yes?'

Something in the man's voice generated a clump of anxiety in David's stomach and set it wobbling. He stood up from the table and took a couple of steps into the hall toward the dressing room in order to hear better.

'My name is Göran Dahlman and I am a physician at Danderyd Hospital…'

As the man said what he had to say, David's body was swept into a cold fog and his legs disappeared. He slithered down the wall to the concrete floor. He stared at the phone in his hand; threw it away from him like a venomous snake. It slid along the floor and struck Leo's foot. Leo looked up.

'David! What's wrong?'

Afterwards David would have no real memory of the half hour that followed. The world had congealed, all sense and meaning sucked out of it. Leo made his way with difficulty through the traffic; it was following the most rudimentary road rules now that all the electronics had been knocked out. David sat curled up in the passenger seat and looked with unseeing eyes at the yellow-flashing traffic lights.

It was only in the entrance of Danderyd Hospital that he was able to pull himself together and refuse Leo's offer to come up with

him. He couldn't remember what Leo said, or how he found the right ward. Suddenly he was just there, and time started making its slow rounds again.

Actually, there was one thing he remembered. As he walked through the corridors to Eva's room, all the lamps above the doors were blinking and an alarm sounded continuously. This felt entirely appropriate: catastrophe eclipses everything.

She had collided with an elk and died during the time it took David to reach the hospital. The doctor on the phone had said that there was no hope for her, but that her heart was still beating. Not anymore. It had stopped at 22.36. At twenty-four minutes to eleven her heart had stopped pumping the blood around her body.

One single muscle in a single person's body. A speck of dust in time. And the world was dead. David stood next to her bed with his arms by his sides, the headache burning behind his forehead.

Here lay his whole future, everything good that he could even imagine would come from life. Here lay the last twelve years of his past. Everything gone; and time shrank to a single unbearable now.

He fell to his knees by her side, took her hand.

'Eva,' he whispered, 'this won't work. It can't be like this. I love you. Don't you understand? I can't live without you. Come on, you have to wake up now. It doesn't make sense without you, none of it. I love you so much and it just can't be like this.'

He talked and talked, a monologue of repeated sentences which, the more times he repeated them, felt more and more true and right until a conviction took root in him that they would start to take effect. Yes. The more times he said it was impossible, the more absurd it all seemed. He had just managed to convince himself of the feeling that if he simply kept babbling the miracle would happen, when the door opened.

A woman's voice said, 'How's it going?'

'Fine. Fine,' David said. 'Please go away.'

He pressed Eva's cooling hand against his brow, heard the rustling of cloth as the nurse crouched down. He felt a hand at his back.

'Can I do anything?'

David slowly turned his head to the nurse and drew back, Eva's hand still held in his own. The nurse looked like Death in human form. Prominent cheekbones, protruding eyes, pained expression.

'Who are you?' he whispered.

'I'm Marianne,' she said, almost without moving her lips.

They stared at each other wide-eyed. David took a firmer hold of Eva's hand; he had to protect her from this person who was coming to get her. But the nurse made no move towards him. Instead she sobbed, said, 'Forgive me…' and shut her eyes, pressing her hands against her head.

David understood. The pain in his head, the ragged pulsating heartbeat was not only his. The nurse slowly straightened up, momentarily lost her balance, then walked out of the room. For a moment, the outside world penetrated his consciousness and David heard a cacophony of signals, alarms and sirens both inside and outside the hospital. Everything was in turmoil.

'Come back,' he whispered. 'Magnus. How am I supposed to tell Magnus? He's turning nine next week, you know. He wants pancake cake. How do you make pancake cake, Eva? You were the one who was going to make it, you bought the raspberries and everything. They're already at home in the freezer, how am I supposed to go home and open the freezer and there are the raspberries that you bought to make pancake cake and how am I supposed to…'

David screamed. One long sound until all the air was gone from his lungs. He pressed his lips against her knuckles, mumbled, 'Everything's over. You don't exist any more. I don't exist. Nothing exists.'

The pain in his head reached an intensity that he was forced to

acknowledge. A bolt of hope shot through him: he was dying. Yes. He was going to die too. There was crackling, something breaking in his brain as the pain swelled and swelled and he had just managed to think, with complete certainty—I'm dying. I am dying now. Thank you—when it stopped. Everything stopped. Alarms and sirens stopped. The lighting in the room dimmed. He could hear his own rapid breathing. Eva's hand was moist with his own sweat, it slid across his forehead. The headache was gone. Absently, he rubbed her hand up and down across his skin, drawing her wedding band across it, wanting the pain back. Now that it was gone, the ache in his chest welled up in its place.

He stared down at the floor. He did not see the white caterpillar that came in through the ceiling, fell, and landed on the yellow institutional blanket draped over Eva, digging its way in.

'My darling,' he whispered and squeezed her hand. 'Nothing was going to come between us, don't you remember?'

Her hand jerked, squeezed back.

David did not scream, did not make a move. He simply stared at her hand, pressed it. Her hand pressed back. His chin fell, his tongue moved to lick his lips. Joy was not the word for what he felt, it was more like the disorientation in the seconds after you wake from a nightmare, and at first his legs did not want to obey him when he pulled himself up so he could look at her.

They had cleaned and prepped her as best they could, but half of her face was a gaping wound. The elk, he supposed. It must have had time to turn its head, or make a final desperate attempt to attack the car. Its head, its antlers had been the first thing through the windshield and one of the points had struck her face before she was crushed under the weight of the beast.

'Eva! Can you hear me?'

No reaction. David pulled his hands across his face, his heart was beating wildly.

It was a spasm…She can't be alive. Look at her.

A large bandage covered the right half of her face, but it was clear that it was…too small. That bones, skin and flesh were missing underneath. They had said that she was in bad shape, but only now did he realise the extent of it.

'Eva? It's me.'

This time there was no spasm. Her arm jerked, hitting against his legs. She sat up without warning. David instinctively backed up. The blanket slid off her, there was a quiet clinking and…no, he had not realised the full extent of it at all.

Her upper body was naked, the clothes had been cut away. The right side of her chest was a gaping hole bordered by ragged skin and clotted blood. From it came a metallic clanking. For a moment, David could not see Eva, he only saw a monster and wanted to run away. But his legs would not carry him and after several seconds he came to his senses. He stepped up next to the bed again.

Now he saw what was making the sound. Clamps. A number of metal clamps suspended from broken veins inside her chest cavity. They swayed and hit against each other as she moved. He swallowed dryly. 'Eva?'

She turned her head toward the sound of his voice and opened her one eye.

Then he screamed.