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The Darkest Room

Written by Johan Theorin

Translated from the Swedish by Marlaine Delargy

Published by Black Swan,
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THE DARKEST ROOM

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BLACK SWAN

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

THE DARKEST ROOM
A BLACK SWAN BOOK: 9780552774611

First published in Great Britain
in 2009 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Black Swan edition published 2010

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Typeset in 11/12.75pt Giovanni Book by
Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed in the UK by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

The dead gather every winter to celebrate Christmas. But on one occasion they were disturbed by an old spinster. Her clock had stopped, so she got up too early and went to church in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve. There was the murmur of voices as if there were a service going on, and the church was full of people. Suddenly the old woman caught sight of her fiancé from the days of her youth. He had drowned many years ago, but there he was, sitting in a pew among the others.

Swedish folk tale from the nineteenth century

Johan Theorin's Öland



WINTER 1846

This is where my book begins, Katrine, the year when the manor house at Eel Point was built. For me the manor was more than a house where my mother and I lived, it was the place where I became an adult.

Ragnar Davidsson, the eel fisherman, once told me that large parts of the manor were built with salvaged cargo from a German vessel carrying timber. I believe him. On the wall at the far end of the hayloft inside the barn the words IN MEMORY OF CHRISTIAN LUDWIG are carved into one of the planks.

I have heard the dead whispering in the walls. They have so much to tell.

Valter Brommesson is sitting in a little stone house at Eel Point, praying to God with his hands clasped together. He prays that the wind and the waves sweeping in from the sea this night will not destroy his two lighthouses.

He has experienced bad weather before, but never a storm like this. A white wall of snow and ice which has come howling in from the north-east, stopping all building work.

The towers, O Lord, let us get the towers finished . . .

Brommesson is a builder of lighthouses, but this is the first time he has built a lighthouse with a prism lens in the Baltic. He came to Öland in March the previous year and set to work at once: taking on workmen, ordering clay and limestone and hiring strong draught horses.

The fresh spring, the warm summer and the sunny autumn were glorious on the coast. The work was going well, and the two lighthouses were slowly growing towards the sky.

Then the sun disappeared, winter arrived, and when the temperature dropped people began to talk of blizzards. And in the end it came, the blizzard. Late one night it hurled itself at the coast like a wild animal.

As dawn approaches the wind finally begins to subside.

Then all of a sudden cries are heard from the sea. They come out of the darkness off Eel Point – drawn-out, heart-rending cries for help in a foreign language.

The cries wake Brommesson, and he in his turn wakes the exhausted builders.

‘It’s a shipwreck,’ he says. ‘We have to go out.’

The men are sleepy and reluctant, but he gets them on their feet and out into the snow.

They plod down to the shore, their backs bent in the ice-cold headwind. Brommesson turns his head and sees that the half-finished stone towers are actually still standing, down by the water.

In the other direction, to the west, he can see nothing. The flat landscape of the island has become a billowing desert of snow.

The men stop on the shore and gaze out to sea.

They can see nothing in the dark-grey shadows out on the sand bar, but they can still hear faint cries mingled with the roaring of the waves – and the creaking sound of splintering wood and nails being torn free.

A big ship has run aground on the bar, and it is sinking.

In the end the only thing the builders can do is to stand there listening to the sounds and the cries for help from the ship. Three times they try to get one of their boats out to sea, but every attempt fails. The visibility is too poor and the breakers too high, and besides, the water is full of heavy wooden beams.

The grounded vessel must have been carrying a huge load of timber up on deck. When she began to go down the wood was wrenched free by the waves and tumbled overboard. The beams are as long as battering rams and are washed ashore in great shoals. They have begun to fill up the inlets around the point, scraping and banging against each other.

When the sun rises behind the misty grey cloud cover, the first body is discovered. It is a young man, floating in the waves a dozen or so yards from land with his arms outstretched, as if he had still been trying to grab hold of one of the beams around him right up to the very last moment.

Two of the lighthouse-builders wade out into the shallow water, take a firm grip of the rough woollen shirt the body is wearing, and tow the dead man ashore across the sandbank.

At the water's edge each man grabs hold of one ice-cold wrist and pulls hard. The dead man comes up out of the water, but he is tall and broad-shouldered and difficult to carry. He has to be

dragged up the snow-covered grassy shore, with the water pouring from his clothes.

The builders gather around the body in silence, without touching it.

In the end Brommesson bends down and turns the body on to its back.

The drowned man is a sailor with thick black hair and a wide mouth which is half-open, as if he had given up in the middle of a breath. His eyes are staring up at the grey sky.

The foreman guesses that the sailor is in his twenties. He hopes he is a bachelor, but he may have a family to provide for. He has died off a foreign shore; he probably didn't even know the name of the island where his ship went down.

'We must fetch the pastor in a little while,' says Brommesson, closing the dead man's eyes so that he will no longer have to meet that empty gaze.

Three hours later the bodies of five sailors have drifted ashore around Eel Point. A broken nameplate has also washed up: CHRISTIAN LUDWIG – HAMBURG.

And timber, lots and lots of timber.

The flotsam is a gift. It belongs to the Swedish Crown now, the same Crown that is paying for the lighthouses on Eel Point. Suddenly the builders have access to top-quality pine worth many hundreds of riksdaler.

'We must all help to bring it ashore,' says Brommesson. 'We'll stack it up out of reach of the waves.'

He nods to himself and looks up towards the snow-covered plain. There is very little in the way of forests on the island, and instead of the small stone house they were planning for the lighthouse-keepers

and their families on Eel Point, he can now build a much bigger house made of wood.

Brommesson has a vision of an impressive, enclosed manor with the house itself full of large, airy rooms. A secure home for those who will be looking after his lighthouses here at the end of the world.

But it will be a house built on the spoils of a shipwreck, and that can bring bad luck. Some kind of sacrificial offering will be necessary in order to counteract this bad luck. Perhaps even a prayer room. A memorial room for those who died at Eel Point, for all those poor souls who have not been buried in consecrated ground.

The thought of this bigger house remains in Brommesson's mind. Later that same day he begins to measure out the ground with long strides.

But when the storm has abated and the frozen lighthouse-builders start heaving the timber out of the water and stacking it up on the grass, many of them can still hear the echo of those cries from the drowning men.

I am certain those lighthouse-builders never forgot the cries of the drowning sailors. And I am equally certain that the most superstitious among them questioned Brommesson's decision to build a large house using timber from a shipwreck.

A house built with timber that dying sailors had clung to in despair before the sea took them – should my mother and I have known better than to move in there at the end of the 1950s? Should you and your family really have moved there thirty-five years later, Katrine?

Mirja Rambe

CHANGE YOUR LIFE – MOVE TO THE COUNTRY!

Property: Eel Point estate, north-eastern Öland

Description: Magnificent lighthouse-keeper's manor house from the middle of the 19th century in an isolated and private location with fine views over the Baltic, less than three hundred yards from the shore and with the sky as its nearest neighbour.

Large garden above the shore with flat lawned areas – perfect for children to play – surrounded by sparse deciduous forest to the north, a bird sanctuary to the west (Offermossen), with meadows and fields running down to the sea in the south.

Buildings: Attractive manor house on two floors (no cellar) comprising in total some 280 square yards, in need of renovation and modernization. Wooden frame, joists and facade. Tiled roof. Glass veranda facing east. Five tiled stoves in working order. Pine flooring in all rooms. Communal water supply, separate waste.

Annexe (limestone outhouse) on one floor, ca 80 square yards, water and electricity, ideal rental property after some renovation work.

Outbuilding (barn made of limestone/wood), ca 450 square yards, more basic and in relatively poor condition.

Status: SOLD

OCTOBER

1

A high voice called through the dark rooms.

‘Mum-mee?’

The cry made him jump. Sleep was like a cave filled with strange echoes, warm and dark, and waking up quickly was painful. For a second his consciousness could not come up with a name or a place; just confused memories and thoughts. *Ethel? No, not Ethel, but . . . Katrine, Katrine.* And a pair of eyes blinking in bewilderment, seeking light in the blackness.

A second later his own name suddenly floated up from his memory: Joakim Westin. And he was lying in the double bed in Eel Point manor house on northern Öland.

Joakim was at home. He had been living here for one day. His wife Katrine and their two children had been living on the estate for two months, while he himself had only just arrived.

01:23. The red digits on the clock radio provided the only light in the dark room.

The sounds that had woken Joakim could no longer be heard, but he knew they were real. He had heard muffled complaints or whimpers from someone sleeping uneasily in another part of the house.

A motionless body lay beside him in the double bed.

It was Katrine; she was sleeping deeply and had crept towards the edge of the bed, taking her coverlet with her. She was lying with her back to him, but he could see the gentle contours of her body and he could feel her warmth. She had been sleeping alone in here for almost two months – Joakim had been living and working in Stockholm, coming to visit every other weekend. Neither of them had found it easy.

He stretched a hand out towards Katrine's back, but then he heard the cry once again.

'Mum-mee?'

This time he recognized Livia's high voice. It made him throw aside the cover and get out of bed.

The tiled stove in one corner of the bedroom was still radiating heat, but the wooden floor was freezing as he put his feet on it. They needed to change things around and insulate the bedroom floor as they had done in the kitchen and the children's rooms, but that would have to be a project for the new year. They could get more rugs to see them through the winter. And wood. They needed to find a supply of cheap wood for the stoves, because there was no forest on the estate where they could go and cut their own.

He and Katrine needed to buy a whole lot of things for the house before the really cold weather set in – tomorrow they would have to start making lists.

Joakim held his breath and listened. Not a sound now.

His dressing gown was hanging over a chair, and he put it on quietly over his pyjama trousers, stepped between two boxes they hadn't unpacked yet, and crept out.

He immediately went the wrong way in the darkness. In their house in Stockholm he always turned right to go to the children's rooms, but here they were to the left.

Joakim and Katrine's bedroom was small, part of the manor house's enormous cave system. Outside was a corridor with several cardboard boxes stacked up against one wall, and it ended in a large hall with several windows. They faced on to the paved inner courtyard, which was flanked by the two wings of the house.

The manor house at Eel Point was closed off to the land, but open towards the sea. Joakim went over to the windows in the hall and looked out towards the coast beyond the fence.

A red light was flashing down there, coming from one of the twin lighthouses on their little islands out at sea. The beam of the southern lighthouse swept over piles of seaweed at the water's edge and far out into the Baltic, while the northern tower was completely dark. Katrine had told him that the northern lighthouse was never lit.

He heard the wind howling around the house and saw restless shadows rising down by the lighthouses. Waves. They always made him think of Ethel, despite the fact that it wasn't the waves but the cold that had killed her.

It was only ten months ago.

The muted sounds in the darkness behind Joakim came again, but they were no longer whimpers. It sounded as if Livia were talking quietly to herself.

Joakim went back towards the corridor. He stepped carefully over a wide wooden threshold and into Livia's bedroom, which had only one window and was pitch dark. A green roller blind with five pink pigs dancing happily in a circle covered the window.

'Away . . .' said a girl's voice in the darkness. 'Away.'

Joakim trod on a small cuddly toy on the floor next to the bed. He picked it up.

'Mummy?'

'No,' said Joakim. 'Just Daddy.'

He heard the faint sound of breathing in the darkness and detected sleepy movements from the small body beneath the flowery coverlet. He leaned over the bed. 'Are you asleep?'

Livia raised her head. 'What?'

Joakim tucked the cuddly toy in the bed, right beside her. 'Foreman had fallen on the floor.'

'Did he hurt himself?'

'Oh no . . . I don't think he even woke up.'

She placed her arm around her favourite toy, a two-legged animal made of fabric that she had bought when they were on Gotland the previous summer. Half sheep, half man. Joakim had named the strange creature Foreman, after the boxer who had made his comeback at the age of forty-five a couple of years earlier.

He reached out and gently stroked Livia's forehead. The skin was cool. She relaxed, her head fell back on to the pillow, then she looked up at him. 'Have you been here long, Daddy?'

'No,' said Joakim.

'There was somebody here,' she said.

'You were just dreaming.'

Livia nodded and closed her eyes. She was already on her way back to sleep.

Joakim straightened up, turned his head and saw the faint glow of the southern lighthouse again, flashing through the blind. He took a step over to the window and lifted the blind an inch or two. The window faced west and the lighthouses weren't visible from here, but the red glow swept over the empty field behind the house.

Livia was breathing evenly again, she was fast asleep. Next morning she wouldn't remember that he'd been there.