

# THE MERMAN

# THE MERMAN

*Carl-Johan  
Vallgren*



TRANSLATED  
FROM THE SWEDISH  
BY  
ELLEN FLYNN



Published by Hesperus Nova  
Hesperus Press Limited  
28 Mortimer Street,  
London, W1W 7RD

[www.hesperuspress.com](http://www.hesperuspress.com)

First published by Hesperus Press Limited, 2013  
This edition published, 2014  
© Carl-Johan Vallgren 2012

Carl-Johan Vallgren asserts his moral right to be identified  
as the author of this work under the Copyright,  
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*Havmannen* first published in Swedish by Albert Bonniers

English translation © Ellen Flynn, 2013  
The translator's moral rights have been asserted.

Text designed and typeset by Madeline Meckiffe

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

ISBN: 978-1-84391-526-3

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition  
that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated  
without the express prior consent of the publisher




There is no beginning and no ending. I know that now. For others, perhaps, there are stories that lead somewhere, but not for me. It's like they go round in circles, and sometimes not even that: they just stand still in one place. And I wonder: what are you supposed to do with a story that repeats itself?

In another world, in the stories I told my little brother, there was always a beginning to everything and an ending, and the ending was the most important thing. I used to tell my brother that the beginning might not always be very nice, but the main thing is that it leads up to a point where things get better.


‘Once upon a time there was a boy called Robert. He grew up in Skogstorp, a little place outside Falkenberg, in a street that was named after a flower, just like all the other streets in Skogstorp. Together with his mum and dad and his big sister Nella, he lived in a maisonette that was actually an apartment with a garage and a patch of garden. No one had ever bothered to plant anything or sow grass seed in that garden. His mum wasn't the type to take an interest in that sort of thing, and neither was his dad. Robert and Nella's parents were not like other parents. They didn't work, they didn't have a car, they didn't go on holiday with their children in the summer, although there might have been one time they did, but it was so long ago that nobody could remember any more. But that's how things were: their parents were there in the beginning, but they would not be there at the end...’







So I could tell him the story, and he would listen, wide-eyed, as he scratched at the rash between his fingers and waited for the story to take him to a place where everything was far better. But that was difficult. He had to get past some obstacles first. It's not easy to get from the darkness into the light. That's the point of stories.

'Robert wasn't like the other children in the neighbourhood where they lived. He was shy and clumsy and not that bright in school. He had poor eyesight, and probably had done ever since he was born, because he was forever injuring himself when he was little, walking into walls and sharp corners, stumbling on rocks and kerbs, or on the stone jetty down by the sea in the summertime. But because his mum and dad were the way they were, they never took him to the optician's. It wasn't until he was in Year Two that the school nurse began to suspect something and made an appointment for him with the optician. Then he got glasses that just kept getting stronger every year. The glasses were a whole story in and of themselves. They were almost always held together with tape because the lads at school would snatch them from Robert and break them, and because he was still so clumsy and would walk into things or trip over so they would break, and because his parents didn't care the slightest bit about it, just as they didn't care what their children were up to, what time they came home, how they were doing at school, if they were hungry or thirsty, what they looked like, if their clothes were dirty or torn, if they were happy or sad, healthy or ill. It was Nella who had to look after all that. She was the one who cleaned and tidied the house where they lived. She was the one who did the shopping if there was any money. She was the one who helped Robert with his homework, although it wasn't particularly hard because he was in the remedial group and had









only basic maths and basic English. Nella was the one who looked after him because nobody else did, and because in a way he didn't care what kind of person he was, as if his life were something that had been thrust upon him in passing, with a set of instructions written in a foreign language that he didn't really know how to follow. She was the one who made breakfast and made sure they went off to school. She was the one who washed their clothes. Nella was the one who cooked their meals, although she didn't know how to make that many things, but Robert never complained, he said her food was the best he'd ever eaten, that her boiled sausages were the tastiest, her black pudding was the most delicious, her fish fingers were the best, but he had nothing to compare them with: all he knew was the food from the school dining room.



'Nella was the one who forged the signatures for the sicknotes on the days Robert couldn't make it in to school; she was the one who concerned herself with all the little things that make life bearable, at least for a while. And she was the one who mended his glasses with ordinary tape, and she put a bit of a plaster on one of the lenses because her friend the Professor had told her it could fix his squint. Nella wanted to do more for him, but there wasn't enough time, or resources, or attention. There just wasn't enough of some things, no matter how they rationed them out.'



That's about how I might tell him the story – a story he could recognise himself in, even though it was not pleasant at all. And without his noticing, with little, little words, I continued: 'Nella's name was actually Petronella. She had given herself that nickname because that was what the kids in Skogstorp called a stinging nettle, and she thought it was a fitting name for someone like her. When she was little, she actually believed that her skin could sting like a jellyfish or



a nettle, and that was why people avoided her. She was two years older than Robert and in Year Nine. Besides her classmate Tommy and a guy she called the Professor, she had only her little brother. Maybe, if she thought about it, she really only had him. If she really searched deep in her heart, she would actually choose him ahead of the others. It was as if she'd been born for that reason, she used to think, born to protect him from the ones who called him retarded or idiot. To protect him from the ones who called him a freak. To protect him from the ones who picked on him more and more with every passing year. Because of his glasses, because of his squint, because he was poor at reading and writing but was really as clever as anybody else, because of the eczema on his hands, and because he couldn't hold in his pee when they ganged up on him. Because of all these things. But everything just got worse. More and more joined in, more and more persecuted him. And Nella didn't always manage to come to his defence. There are always places in a school that are out of sight. And she couldn't do anything from her classroom, not when they had a free period at different times, not when they dragged him off into the woods behind the gym.

There is a beginning and there is an ending. And everything has to get worse before it gets better. That's how it always is in stories. It's as if they invite it, as if nature itself invites the pain to intensify before it can ebb away. But one day the pain would disappear. One day, something would happen to change history, to transform it into a new, better story. Something would whisk them away from that time and that place; namely, autumn 1983 in Skogstorp, a small community outside Falkenberg in Sweden; something would put a stop to the story, bring it to a conclusion, and transport them away from there so a new story could begin.'

‘Who?’ asked my little brother. ‘Who’s going to come and save us?’

And I didn’t know what I was supposed to say. *Someone*, I said.

‘Did you really mean what you said about me being just as smart as anybody else?’

‘Sure. If only they had discovered your vision problems sooner, you wouldn’t have fallen behind.’

‘When I was little, I thought I was stupid when I didn’t get what the teacher was talking about. But it was just that I couldn’t see the letters... Who do you think is going to come and save us?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Maybe a policeman? Somebody who’s really strong. A real hero. Or maybe a big animal. Nella, imagine we had a tame lion. Then nobody would dare do anything to us, would they? Imagine we had one, and we went to school every morning with a lion or a monster, or else it could be a wolf, you know, like the Phantom has, and then we’d tie its lead to the bike racks. Do you think they’d dare do anything then?’

And I could hardly bring myself to look at him out of shame.

‘Robert, I promise, one day they’ll stop, one day everything will be different, we’ll get through it! There’s always a beginning, and there’s always an ending.’

‘Or is it Dad who’ll come and save us? When he comes home, I mean. Maybe he’s changed. He said he would, he said he’d change everything.’

I shook my head. It was so childish of him to place his hope in Dad.

‘No, we can’t count on Dad. He’s never going to change. But something else will happen that changes everything – I just know it.’



That was what I kept telling him. And he believed me, for a little while at least, because I was the only person in the world he trusted, because I was his big sister and two years older, and there was nothing else that could help him.

# FALKENBERG, OCTOBER 1983







It's strange, the things you manage to notice even when you're running for all you're worth: the reddish-brown berries that had rotted on a bush next to the climbing frame; the shadow in front of me; my own shadow, which was dashing ahead like a leviathan with its underside in a shallow inlet. Puddles in the long-jump pit with autumn leaves floating in them. A red cap somebody had lost on the running track – the same colour as the gravel, just a shade deeper, not dissimilar to blood. Gerard was standing in the smoking area, trying to light a fag. He was fifty metres away. I still knew it was him, though: I could see his hands cupped round the lighter. He had gloves on, leather gloves. At any rate, he wasn't with the others down in the woods.

I managed to think that: at any rate, Gerard wasn't with the others down in the woods. The boy had something seriously wrong in his mind. It was as if the parts of his brain were connected up the wrong way. And all of this was connected with Gerard: the reason I was running like a madman was down to him and what had happened eight months before.

It had been in February, behind the newsagent's kiosk by the main E6 road, maybe around eight in the evening. I was there to buy some fags for Mum. Gerard and his gang were standing a little way off, over by the crazy golf course that was boarded up for the winter.

'My fingers are bloody freezing in this cold,' he said. 'We can warm ourselves up on the damned cat.'



And then he laughed that Gerard laugh that sounds almost kind-hearted, even though you know it's exactly the opposite.

I couldn't understand anything. Warm yourself on a cat? The others laughed as well, Peder and Ola, and a few younger lads that people usually call the trailers, because they follow Gerard around wherever he goes and carry out his orders without batting an eyelid: clearing up after him in the school dining room, carrying his stuff around, running errands, nicking fags and sweets, stealing booze from their parents' drinks cabinets, getting petrol for his scooter – anything their leader might require.

It was a kitten. He had it in a plastic carrier bag hanging from the handlebar of his scooter. As I stood in the queue at the kiosk I watched him pick it up and cuddle it, stroking it against his cheek like a living cuddly toy and scratching it behind the ears as he gave meaningful glances to the others. It was no bigger than a small rabbit, black with a white patch on its chest. I heard him say that it was purring like an engine, and it did not protest when he held it up by the scruff of the neck. Maybe it belonged to one of the trailer lads, or maybe one of their younger siblings. It wouldn't surprise me: Gerard could very well have asked one of them to bring it along from home. Or perhaps it had just been unlucky enough to turn up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'I'm freezing,' said Gerard. 'Is there somebody who can give us a bit of juice?'

The lads in the scooter gang would often siphon off petrol for him when he ran out. Peder, Gerard's right-hand man, took out a length of plastic hose, stuck one end into the tank on his Dakota and started siphoning petrol into an empty soft drink bottle.

‘Can you hold the bag?’ said Gerard, handing over the carrier bag the kitten was in. ‘Open it,’ he said.

Peder opened it.

‘And now the petrol, please.’

Gerard was handed the bottle, took a sniff, wrinkled up his nose and then poured its contents into the carrier bag. The kitten let out a little shriek inside. ‘Now give it a bloody good shake, Peder. I want that damn cat to be completely fucking marinated in petrol. Otherwise it’ll go out in five seconds.’

Peder gave a little giggle, uncertain of what was going to happen.

‘You’re not going to do it, are you?’ he asked. ‘Gerard, for fuck’s sake, you can’t set fire to a kitten in a carrier bag. There’ll be an explosion.’

Gerard giggled back. The trailers giggled. That was what they were expected to do.

‘Of course I’m going to fucking do it. I said I was freezing, didn’t I?’

‘Okay, then let’s move,’ said Ola to the others. ‘Move further away, lads. A definite risk of explosion here...’

There was not a person in sight. The woman in the kiosk couldn’t see anything from her angle. It was a Saturday night in February, and a couple of inches of snow had fallen that afternoon. Then the rain had come and transformed everything into slush. People were staying indoors, watching light entertainment programmes or the feature film on TV. Robert was with Mum. Dad had recently disappeared again and would be away for nearly a year.

I went over to the cycle rack to fetch my bike. I did not want to become a witness to something I would be sorry for. I saw Gerard tie up the carrier bag and I remember thinking, he’s not going to do it. Not even Gerard is that sick.

He placed the bag down on the asphalt, took the soft drink bottle that was still a quarter full of petrol, and carefully poured out a thin fuse line over towards the fence. The trailers were worried now; you could see it in their movements, as if they were itching.

‘So you’re gonna do it?’ asked Peder. He had pulled up his top lip to expose his teeth in a wolf’s grin. He was enjoying this almost as much as Gerard, but he would never dare to do it himself.

‘I fucking said so already. I’m freezing, innit.’

The kitten was stirring around in the bag. Perhaps it was starting to get low on air, perhaps it was starting to panic. A slender paw was sticking out of the plastic. She was trying to claw her way out.

‘And just what the hell are you staring at, you fucking bitch?’ asked Ola.

It took a few seconds before I realised he was referring to me. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the bag on the ground, the way it was writhing and pulsating, like something being born from a soft egg.

‘Nothing,’ I said as I inserted my key into the lock and started to walk towards the road.

‘That fucking slimy cunt,’ I heard Peder continue. ‘Her and her fucking retard brother in the class for mongs. You can’t even tell whether she’s a boy or a girl. No tits, not even any hair on her cunt. And she bloody stinks. I don’t think they’ve got a washing machine at home. Maybe not even a shower.’

‘Will you shut up?’ said Gerard. ‘Give me the lighter.’

He didn’t care about me. As far as he was concerned, I could have been made out of thin air. He had hardly ever seen me, even though we had been in the same class together since primary school.

I carried on towards the pedestrian crossing. The smell of petrol stung my nose. They were going to kill it, I thought, and there was nothing I could do.

*They're going to kill him and there's nothing I can do. They're going to kill him and there's nothing I can do.* That was a new earworm now, going round and round as if a radio had got stuck in my head. My lungs were about to explode. The shouting from the woods rose and fell, sometimes louder, sometimes softer. I didn't see any teachers. Not even the caretaker, who went round with his rake and wheelbarrow with a grouchy expression. Where were all the adults? L.G., the playground supervisor, the security guy? Then I remembered: it was a teacher's birthday. They were having cake in the staff room.

Faces looked up at me in surprise as I ran like a madman, as if I was fleeing from a murderer or a wild animal that had escaped from a circus. Pupils on their way back to their classrooms, mostly Year Sevens and Year Eights in their jackets and down-filled bodywarmers. Had they come from the woods, had they seen what they did to him, and sneaked off because they didn't want to be witnesses?

I could taste blood in my mouth now. Someone was laughing at me: a girl from Morup, who was also called Ironing Board, just like me. Everywhere fallen leaves on the asphalt. The colours were almost soaking up into my eyes. A week ago there had been a storm and the trees had dropped the remains of their autumn apparel. Red leaves. Yellow. Like blood and tattered entrails. More faces ran past like water, some from my brother's year, the ones who usually were nasty to him, calling him a mong and a retard, or 'pissypants' because he could not control his bladder out of pure fear, but now doing something else, on their way up to the common rooms to hang up their coats and head off



to the next lesson. Further away, by the car park, a teacher stood talking to a parent. But I didn't even have time to call over to them, and anyway the distance was too great, they wouldn't have heard.

Past the gym and the plants. Two Year Nines came along, each with a lolly in their mouth, avoiding eye contact with me. I could hear my brother's voice now, very clearly, he was really screaming, like an animal being slaughtered. I had never heard him so terrified before. I wondered where Tommy was keeping himself. Why wasn't he running up to me? Then I remembered: he hadn't been at school since last Wednesday. Presumably he was ill or maybe he was helping his brothers with their boat. I had rung him every day, but no one answered...

*They were going to kill it, and there was nothing I could do.* I don't know why the cat was on my mind again. It had been last winter, shortly after Dad had disappeared again. Yes, I did know why. I didn't want to deceive myself; didn't want to be like Mum and just stick my head in the sand. I knew why I was running. I knew why they had singled out my brother. Gerard had figured out that I had blabbed. That morning there was a note in my locker. It said that L.G. had found out what had happened last winter, that Gerard had to go up to the headmaster's office, that it must have been me who had blabbed and that they would take it out on Robert.

I remember how I had walked away from the kiosk with my bike, very leisurely so as not to get Peder and Gerard het up. They're like animals, I had thought; if I started to run it could trigger their hunting instinct.

'Oi, Ironing Board, come here a minute.' It was clear who Gerard was talking to. For some reason he had decided to notice my presence. 'Or whatever the hell your name is. I said stop.'

I halted mid-step. He might be serious, I thought: after nine years in the same class together, after thousands of hours of lessons in the same classroom, despite having posed in all those class photos together, maybe he never had learnt my name. It was entirely possible, and would explain an awful lot.

‘I want you to pay attention to this,’ he said. ‘And if I want anyone to have it confirmed, like somebody who isn’t here, who might be doubtful, who claims I would never do it, then I’ll tell them they can ask you. You get me? Ask Ironing Board, I’ll say. She was there. Like a witness, you get me?’

He smiled at me, all friendly, as if this was any run-of-the-mill matter of confidence.

‘I can’t rely on Peder and Ola. They just say what I tell them to say. Everybody knows that. So that’s why I want you to watch. Stand over here.’

I put down the kickstand on my bike and went over towards him.

‘That’s enough,’ Gerard said matter-of-factly. ‘Don’t come any closer, you really do reek, just like everybody says.’

I was maybe five metres from them. There was another paw sticking out of the carrier bag, scratching at the ground. The mewling was a bit quieter now.

‘Are you really gonna do it?’ asked Peder again. ‘You’re fucking nuts.’

‘What do you think, faggot? That I’m some kind of animal torturer? No way.’

Gerard suddenly no longer seemed to care about the cat. He took a few steps to the side, took a piss out into the evening darkness, tapped out a cigarette from a packet of Prince, put it in the corner of his mouth and started flicking his lighter. Only a few feeble sparks came out, like those from a damp sparkler.

‘You thought I’d do it, didn’t you?’ he asked.

Peder laughed. ‘Well, yeah, what the hell was I supposed to think? You poured petrol over it.’

‘Honestly, do I look like a guy who tortures defenceless animals? Do I? Ola, what have you got to say?’

Gerard looked almost concerned. You could sense uncertainty spreading among the trailers.

‘Dunno, really.’

‘*Dunno*? So you have no opinion?’

‘Same opinion as you.’


‘And what opinion do I have, exactly?’

‘Like I said: dunno.’

Gerard shook his head, disappointed.

‘Shit, I’m freezing,’ he said quietly. And then he turned to me as he managed to produce a flame with his lighter: ‘What are you looking at, you fucking bitch? Did I say you could look at me, huh? Who the hell gave you permission to do that?’

I was down in the woods now, the cat memory had vanished. I followed the path among the birch trees, stumbled over fallen branches, over a root that was sticking up, carried on past the mound of stones where Robert would play on his own when he was in his upper years of primary school and I couldn’t protect him because I had started Year Seven and was in a different part of the school complex. I remembered how I used to search for him there in the afternoons. He was only ten and was always on his own. The other kids had gone home or else were having fun with their mates in the playground. He used to sit on a big rock in his worn discount jeans and look at me as if I were a messenger from a distant planet. His wispy hair that fell over his forehead. The eczema on his hands that kept getting worse, even though I helped




him to rub cream into them every day. His glasses, almost always broken and held together with tape. I had to cajole him to get him to come away from there. That was when things were at their worst at home, and if it had been up to my brother he would have slept in the woods overnight – maybe even lived there for the rest of his life...

I carried on up the little hill and stood at the top. It was completely silent now. I could no longer hear the shrieks. In the distance behind me, the schoolyard stood deserted. The ceiling lights were on in the classrooms; I saw silhouettes of people sitting down at their desks. *There is always a beginning and an ending. They've killed him. It's not what they wanted to do, but that's what happened, the stakes were raised. And I wasn't able to protect him, I wasn't there when he needed me.* My heart was pounding as if it were an animal trying to escape from my chest, to claw its way out, like the cat had wanted to claw its way out of the carrier bag last winter... Gerard's face had looked almost resigned as he crouched down and set fire to the invisible fuse of petrol. It must have gone very fast, and yet I remember it as if it had lasted several minutes. The fire must have reached the bag in just a few seconds, but in my memory it wended its way over the asphalt like a long, luminescent snake, over towards the wriggling, mewling bag. There was an explosion, but it wasn't particularly loud, more like a banger, sort of like a miniature firecracker.


'Bloody hell,' said Peder. 'I didn't think you would do it.'

'I said I would. I'm freezing... Take a look at the fucker!'

I hadn't known until then that it was trussed up. Each pair of legs was bound together with wire. And it was still trying to run, limping round in a little circle as if it were chasing its tail. It looked like a little burning carousel. The noise it emitted was reminiscent of a whimpering infant. Flames rose up from its fur, as if it were electric. You could



hear the plastic melting, it sort of fizzled around the cat's fur. Its ears were like two pointed wicks on lit candles. The cat opened its jaws, and it looked like it wanted to say something. And for a moment that's what I actually thought: that it wanted, to say *stop*, or *what are you doing*, *have you gone completely mad?* in plainly comprehensible language. But instead its mouth and tongue began to burn, and then it grew silent. It did not emit any more sounds, just ran after its own tail, in an ever-decreasing circle, like a small, fiery swivel chair, and you could hear how the plastic was melting into its skin, how its nose and eyelids were melting, and then came the smell of summer, of barbecues in the garden, of charred meat from the back garden, that scent of food and smoke that hangs over Falkenberg long into August after the last holidaymakers have gone home. Finally it simply lay down. Collapsed under its own weight. Its nose had fused with the plastic somehow, it was lying with its mouth open and panting. Staring straight ahead, wild-eyed, because its eyelids had been burnt off. Loud wheezes came from its windpipe, like those from mine as I stood on the brow of the hill looking down over the woods. Staring and blinking away tears, staring again, alert to the slightest movement among the trees.



I went down the slope. Not a single movement anywhere. Had they let him go? Was he in his classroom right now, reading aloud from the remedial maths book, where everything was far too easy and so difficult for him for precisely that reason? Had they suddenly let him go when the bell rang? I knew that wasn't what it was, yet I couldn't help hoping, wishing, just as I had done my whole life, trying to wish and hope away everything terrible, like trying to change the course of events by sheer will.

There was a small clump of trees over to the left. His cap was hanging in a fork in the branches.

‘Robert?’

No reply. Just the sound of the wind that had started to blow, bringing with it the smells from the sea.

I continued through a thicket of juniper bushes. For the first time I noticed how cold it was. I had left my jacket in the common room. Through the window I had seen them dragging him off, towards the gym: Peder, Ola and the trailers; I’d seen how he was trying to resist in absolute terror, I dropped my books on the floor right then and there and raced towards the doors. Someone grabbed hold of me by the exit, I couldn’t remember who it was, somebody who wanted to stop me helping him, but somehow I broke free, ran in the opposite direction down the corridor and got out through the Year Eight door. By that time I couldn’t see him anywhere.

‘Robert? Where are you?’

A slow movement just behind me. But when I turned round, there was no one there. Only a lone crow flying off between the trees.

‘Robert!’ I shouted. ‘Can you hear me?’

Thirty metres away was the fence that marked the western boundary of the school grounds. There were only fields and gravel tracks on the other side, leading down to the sea. I leaned against a tree trunk, shut my eyes and listened.

*You’re a witness to this, Ironing Board, if any of my mates ask. Gerard did it, you’ll say. Nobody believed he’d dare, but he actually did it. He’s crazy!*

The plastic had melted into the flesh. Its stomach had burst, guts had come out – intestines, I think. Peder had looked away in disgust. There was a strange glow coming from its hindquarters. Gerard, that sick bastard, tried to light his

cigarette on the body. 'Can you feel it?' he asked, 'it's warmer now. I was fucking freezing before. It's better now.'

Eight months had passed since then, and suddenly, today, they had got it into their heads that I had blabbed and decided to take their revenge out on my brother. I didn't understand any of it. Somebody else must have seen them by the newsagent's kiosk that night. That was the only explanation. The question was, why hadn't they come forward until now?

'Here he is, Ironing Board!'

The voice came from the other direction, beyond some juniper bushes... Robert was squatting with his face turned towards the ground. Blood was dripping from his nose. His eyes were shut and he looked like he was sleeping. His trousers had been pulled down and they were wet; he had wet himself out of fear. They had stuffed things into his pants: pine cones, twigs, pages ripped out of his maths book. There were pine needles and grass sticking out of his nostrils and mouth, and a cigarette in one ear. Four lads from the trailer were standing round him in a semicircle. Behind were Ola and Peder.

'What the hell have you done?' I asked. It must have sounded ridiculous, because at the same time I was relieved they hadn't had a chance to do anything worse. It was nothing personal. It was me they wanted to get at, and the easiest way to get at me was through Robert.

'Does it feel better now, you fucking mong?' someone asked, nudging him with their trainers. 'Get up! God, he's disgusting. Totally pissed himself.'

'This is because you snitched on Gerard. Hope you get this into your head, Ironing Board. It's your fault your brother's pissed his pants.'

I recognised him from the games room, where Gerard would hold court during free periods. A big lad in Year Seven. Robert had pointed him out once, he was one of the ones who was always nasty to him. I wondered where he had been when they burnt the cat alive. I couldn't recall.

When we started secondary school we were given a leaflet about what to do in situations like this: *When pupils are treated badly by others: contact the school welfare officer, teachers or head of year.* I remember how I'd just laughed at that. That would have just made everything ten times worse. *Tell your parents if you are unable to contact the school administration yourself.* Some words bear no relation to reality. And it doesn't enter other people's realm of consciousness that someone could have a mother and father like mine.

I put a hand under Robert's chin and gingerly raised his head. They had drawn things in ink on his cheeks. A cock on one, a swastika on the other. They'd written 'mong boy' on his forehead. He still had his eyes shut, and I could understand. Why should he look out onto such a vile world?

'It's my fault,' I whispered. 'Forgive me, Robert. It's me they wanted to get at.'

'Doesn't he look nice?' One of the lads gave him a scratch behind the ear as if he were an animal, maybe a dog. He was still wearing his glasses. The plaster on the left side that I had stuck on there was black with dirt. One of the arms was loose, but it could be mended. That's what I was thinking about: practical things. How it was better in any case than if the lenses were broken or if they had chucked them into the woods. It could take several weeks for the school nurse to get hold of new ones, and during that time he wouldn't be able to see and would get even further behind in his lessons.



*'If there's a beginning then there is an ending,' I whispered, 'and the ending is always better.'*

I crouched down and put my arms round him, exactly the way I used to do when he was little. He shivered slightly, as if he were cold. I could hear his heart fluttering in his chest, like a terrified little bird. *'There is a beginning, but you don't need to worry about that. It's the end that counts, because that's where a new, better story begins.'*

Maybe it was stupid of me to whisper to him. In the animal kingdom, a simple sound or movement from the prey is sufficient for the slaughter to begin.

*'Move it, Ironing Board. He hasn't finished eating his lunch.'*

That was Peder. I'd sort of tried to forget he and Ola were there. And that Gerard was probably pulling the strings behind the scenes. He didn't even need to be there in person; he issued orders to the others, who carried them out to the letter. Or maybe it was Peder's own idea – something he was doing to get on his boss's good side?

*'That's what happens when people blab, Ironing Board.'*

*'I didn't blab!'*

*'Sure. But how many people were actually there? Us and Gerard and then the old lady in the newsagent's, but she couldn't see anything from where she was.'*

He turned to Robert and tried to imitate Gerard's friendly psychopath voice:

*'We told your sister to be a witness and say what she'd seen if somebody didn't believe us. And of course what we meant was if one of the lads at school doubted us, not some fucking teacher or a cop. But your stupid cow of a sister must have misunderstood everything.'*

The trailers appeared unsure what they should do. Their energy was in the process of ebbing away. Someone needed to act to make things start to happen again. Ola tore up a

handful of grass and started stuffing it into my brother's mouth. I tried to cover his face, but someone grabbed me by the hair and dragged me off along the woodland path.

'Have you seen his disgusting scaly fingers, it looks like he's got fucking leprosy. Eat up some more hay, you goddamned donkey. This is because your sister blabbed...' They prised open his face and shoved more grass into his mouth and nose, I could hear him spluttering, heard his gag reflex, and knew I couldn't leave him in the lurch again. I screamed, or at any rate I heard something distantly reminiscent of my own voice, I scratched at the hands that were tearing at my hair, turned round so I ended up on my belly. Now there were several hands pulling at my hair. Someone must have come over to help out. I didn't say anything; dirt and pine needles were poking into my eyes, I shut my eyes and lashed out until someone caught hold of my arms and pinned them up against my back.

'Lie still now, you little cunt.' And then there were hands tearing off my trousers and knickers, ripping them off as if pain had no meaning, as if I were something to which they could do whatever they wanted because I wasn't really alive, hands trying to stuff something into my arse without even bothering to spread my bum cheeks apart, just shoving something sharp and spiny, and I hoped it wouldn't break apart in there.

My vision was starting to turn black. When I could see again, they had turned me round a hundred and eighty degrees so I could see my brother where he was sitting hunched up on the path, five metres behind me, with grass sticking out of his mouth, nose and ears, like a strange scarecrow.

'Now go and feed your sister. Give her some fresh straw. She needs to have a reward so she won't blab any more in the future. Then she can go. But we're keeping you. It feels like we're not finished with you yet...'

It was the commander who had turned up at last: Gerard had sort of materialised among the trees in an unbuttoned leather jacket, trainers with the laces undone, gloves on and his friendly psychopath's smile. The trailers led my brother over to me, where I lay on my front with my arms pinned against my back. He screwed up his eyes for all he was worth as he knelt down in front of me.

'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'I promise. Do what they say, Robert.'

And then I turned to the boss:

'There must be some way to solve this, mustn't there?'

'I can't really hear what you're saying.'

'I said, there must be some way to solve... for you to let him go.'

'Still can't hear. Can you speak up?'

'How much do you want to leave us alone? I can get hold of some money.'

He lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke through his nostrils, like two grey tusks.

'That depends. How much do you value your brother? What do you reckon is a fair price? Fifteen hundred?'


'You can have as much as you want. Just so long as you leave him alone.'

'To be honest, I don't think he's worth fifteen hundred. You can haggle him down a bit. Let's say nine hundred... or a thousand kronor. Then we'll leave him alone for the rest of term. So the next question is, when can you pay?'

I could no longer speak and just stared down at the ground, the green moss and the fallen leaves.

'Did I hear one week? Then we have an agreement. Next Friday. Otherwise, he'll basically be mine, your little brother. Sort of like a security deposit.'

'Here, have a little feed,' I heard Peder hiss to my brother, 'and go and feed your cow of a sister until she's right full



up. She wants to, she said so herself. Come on, you fucking spacker!'

Tears ran down his cheeks as they placed a fistful of grass in his hand. He held it out towards me, keeping his eyes shut. But I did not flinch. There was one way to get out of this, for them to leave us alone, at least for the time being. And so, like a confused animal, I began to eat grass and pine needles out of my brother's outstretched hand.