

BARCELONA 2008

Stefan and Karin had bought the cellphone almost immediately when they arrived in Barcelona just over a month earlier. They had since had it within reach day and night, and they had been careful never to let the battery drain completely, not to miss even a single call. The first time it had rung they had hastened almost in panic to respond, and the disappointment had been great when the voice at the other end hadn't been the one they had hoped would call. But they hadn't given up. Still, they every day went new rounds to put up the small adhesive decals they had had printed. They stuck them on lampposts and other smooth surfaces, in just the right height above ground that a twelve year-old would see them. On the decals were a message directed to the one they were looking for. Additionally, there was a phone number, and at the bottom they were signed "Karin and Stefan."

Again the phone rang. Stefan was the closest, so he took it up and answered:

"Stefan Larsson."

The voice on the other end immediately began with a question:

"Is it you who put up the stickers?"

Stefan was startled. The voice was young, probably a boy, but it had happened before. He spoke Swedish, but that also had happened before. But still ... something was different this time. Stefan pressed the phone closer to his ear.

"Is this Oskar I'm talking to? Oskar Eriksson?"

A moment of silence, then:

"What do you want him? Who is it anyway?"

"Meet him. Talk."

"About what?"

That Stefan hardly knew himself, but he must start somewhere, so he began by telling his and Karin's story. After a while he noticed that the boy was fascinated by how important Stefan's two brief encounters with Oskar Eriksson had been for Stefan and Karin. This encouraged Stefan, and he soon found himself telling details about his and Karin's life together that he had never before imagined that he would mention to anybody. The boy interjected little comments now and then, he obviously had personal

experience of a life with someone he loved. Stefan could still remember the expressions in the faces of the children back at the railway station in Karlstad, just before they had noticed him. That explained a lot. Eventually he dared a comment of his own:

“You seem to know a lot about this.”

“This?”

“Love.”

A brief moment passed before the boy replied:

“You know you love someone when you can do anything to be with that someone. Isn’t that what it’s about?”

The phone went silent. The boy's words had given Stefan a lump in his throat which he struggled with when he again heard the boy's voice:

“Couldn’t we meet? We’d like to see what you look like.”



Stefan and Karin had taken a taxi to the place they have been instructed, had sat down onto a park bench to wait. They had already been there for quite some time when Stefan at last spotted the kids. They stood some distance away in the shadows, close together, looking towards Stefan and Karin. The kids must have been there for quite a while, Stefan realised, but when they noticed that they were discovered, they came forward to the park bench.

As soon as the boy arrived, he turned to Stefan and said:

“I recognise you.”

Stefan smiled, and replied: “I recognise *you*.”

A faint smile crossed the boy's face, as if he and Stefan shared a secret. Then he became more serious and said:

“Though you have grown old. And I think ...”

The boy surprised Stefan by taking step forward and sniff a little in the air right in front of Stefan's face. Then he retreated, nodded and said with a slightly troubled expression:

“You're sick. Cancer. How sad.”

Stefan hadn't even begun thinking about an answer before the boy changed both his expressions and the subject.

“Could you tell me, where do you come from, actually?”

Stefan had lost his track, it took a moment before he could answer.

“Uh ... from Sweden?”

The boy got a wrinkle between his eyebrows, sounded a little annoyed when he replied, the way that children sometimes do in front of slow-witted adults:

“Yeah, yeah, I got that, but *where* in Sweden?”

Now, however, Stefan had had time to collect his thoughts.

“Well ... I've lived in Stockholm for almost my entire adult life, but maybe you're thinking about where I was born?”

The boy nodded. “That's right.”

Stefan continued: “I grew up on Rådmansö, it's north of Stockholm, close to –”

The boy interrupted Stefan, suddenly eager.

“I knew it!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I heard it in the way you talk.”

“Really? Well, I believe I've still got a lot of my childhood dialect. And I've moved back now in my old age. Have you been there, then, on Rådmansö?”

“Yeah, quite a lot ... My father used to live there.”

The boy suddenly looked uncertain, hesitated a little before he continued:

“I wonder ... do you know him? Erik Eriksson?”

The boy looked hopefully at Stefan, who hesitated a little in his reply.

“No ... I do not think so. Where on Rådmansö did he live?”

“Södersvik.”

Stefan replied regretfully:

“Alas no. I'm from Östernäs, I don't know him. I'm sorry.”

The boy looked dejected.

“What a pity.”

The he turned to Karin.

“Maybe you ...”

But he interrupted himself and looked down, shook his head and mumbled rather than said:

“No, please don't say anything. I don't want to know. It might ... no.”

The boy turned to the girl, the children's eyes met a few seconds, for some reason Stefan suddenly felt shut out, he wasn't part of what was going

on between them. Then the boy drew a deep sigh and turned back to Karin and Stefan on the park bench. He smiled faintly and said:

“What do you know, actually?”

Stefan turned to Karin, this was her territory, and she replied.

“About you, you mean?”

“Yes. What else? “

Karin knew that she by her colleagues had been regarded as one of the top on interrogating both witnesses and criminals. She was good at building trust, and that had been very useful to her. Still, she was nervous now, for this was not a police interrogation. The kids could turn on their heels and disappear forever if she made the slightest misstep. She saw the boy in the eye and said sincerely:

“You are Oskar Eriksson, the same Oskar Eriksson who Stefan saw at the train and at the station in Karlstad in 1981.”

“That's, uh ... twenty-seven years ago.”

“Yes.”

“How can you then believe I could be the one that Stefan saw?”

“Aren't you, then?”

The boy didn't answer, he just kept looking searchingly at Karin. He would clearly not say neither yes nor no, so Karin continued:

“I think it is like I said. Although I have been a policewoman, I think that the police were wrong. I don't think you were taken away from the bathhouse, I think you went voluntarily. And that something happened that explains why you can stand in front of me now, twenty-seven years later, looking no older than you were then.”

“What would that be?”

“You became ... the same as your friend here. The girl Stefan saw with you at the station. She hasn't gotten older either.”

The boy looked at the girl a few seconds, as if to check Karin's assertion. Then he turned to Karin again, his face expressionless.

“What *same as*?”

“You are both something that most people say exist only in fairy tales.”

The boy turned quiet again, Karin realised that he wouldn't help her. Although the children didn't look unfriendly, there was a tension in the air, like before a thunderstorm. Karin felt Stefan searching for her hand,

intertwining his fingers with hers. The boy noticed it, of course, a slight hint of a smile flashed in the corners of his mouth. But Stefan's touch gave Karin courage. She squeezed Stefan's hand, looked the boy into his eyes and said:

"You are vampires. You live on blood."

Karin held her breath, waited for a reaction. But the only thing that happened was that the boy and the girl exchanged a brief glance. The girl nodded and the boy turned to Karin again, with the same expressionless face as before, and stated rather than asked:

"You don't seem angry at us."

Karin shook her head slowly. "No."

"Why not?"

"We have no quarrel with you."

The boy's gaze alternated between Karin and Stefan a few times, then he asked:

"What then do you want from us?"

Karin swallowed. She lowered her gaze, looked at her and Stefan's interlaced fingers. This was what they had come for. They had talked about it, and Stefan had said he couldn't ask Karin to do this to save his life, but that he would follow her if she chose it. But that had been earlier, while it was just a fantasy, a dream. Now, with the kids alive and real in front of them, the situation had become very different. She looked at Stefan, searched for his gaze. He looked into her eyes, squeezed her hand and nodded, almost imperceptibly.

Karin turned to the boy again, said:

"Stefan is sick. He'll soon die."

"So?"

"You can help us."

Karin felt that she just had sold her own and Stefan's soul to the Devil. For no matter what the kids now were going to do, she would for the rest of her life know that she had chosen her and Stefan's love for each other before the rest of humanity.

The boy's face had changed, it was no longer expressionless, but Karin could not say what it expressed. Curiosity, surprise, doubt, perhaps. Or something

else. He stood like that for a few seconds before he said anything, as if he couldn't decide what to say. But eventually he replied with a question.

“What do you mean?”

“We would like that you ... helped us become like you. Then Stefan and I could continue ... to ... live together.”

The boy looked at Karin, he seemed sad. Then he turned towards the girl, who shook her head silently. The boy turned back toward Karin, opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he closed it again.

Suddenly he turned around. Karin didn't manage to react before the children had already disappeared in the shadows.



A week had passed since the encounter with the children. Karin was having breakfast at the dining table in the apartment she and Stefan rented, Stefan was still asleep. He had become worse, could barely get up anymore. They had not gone out for eating in a while, instead Karin would cook all their meals in the kitchen. Stefan would just poke into the food, his already poor appetite had become reduced to virtually nil. He really tried to eat, mostly for Karin's sake, she thought, but he just couldn't.

They had talked about going back to Östernäs, but had given it up. Stefan wouldn't manage, and Roslagen in November would be both dark and cold. Then Barcelona was preferable, with its relative warmth. *A good place to die*, Stefan had said, and Karin had fallen into tears. Stefan had had to comfort her, and she had felt ashamed of her inadequacy.

Karin dug listlessly into her yogurt, it didn't taste her, not even though she had bought a luxurious kind with extra large pieces of fruit and even though the muesli she had on was almost half nuts and dried fruit. She was thinking that the trip here had been pointless, that the effort only had accelerated Stefan's disease and reduced the length of their time together. But she knew that it wasn't true, the journey and the quest for Oskar Eriksson had given them a goal, something to do. Both she and Stefan had been revived, had got a respite from the despair that had begun to sneak up on them after Stefan had received the doctor's message.

It had of course been a futile enterprise from the beginning, but the disappointment was infinitely much bigger now that she actually had met Oskar Eriksson and the girl than it would have been if nothing had happened. Karin had reviewed her actions, what could she have done differently, what should she have said instead. But it didn't help her, she couldn't reverse time.

After all, the kids had showed up, and she was wondering why. The boy had asked about his father, maybe that was the reason. He had looked so childishly sincere, and seemed so disappointed when Stefan couldn't tell him anything.

Or maybe the kids just had wanted to check if there was a threat to them. Karin had half-hoped they would come looking for her and Stefan on that ground. The man that had been found dead in the apartment where Håkan Bengtsson and likely also the girl had lived had been looking for a child who was a vampire. Maybe that was the way the kids had managed to stay invisible: They would make short work of anyone who might come too close to the truth. But the kids had not come here, although they would easily have been able to follow Karin and Stefan to the apartment.

They hadn't called, either. Karin was still keeping the mobile phone charged and always on hand, it was laying before her on the kitchen table right now. She had checked the call list the day after the meeting in hope of being able to call the kids, and their call had been there, but without a number. The boy had probably called from a pay phone.

The plate was empty, the coffee cup too. Karin rose heavily from her chair and walked to the bedroom to see if Stefan hadn't woken up yet.



Karin saw the kids again the next evening. She stood and looked out a window when she noticed a movement on the roof of the house opposite. There had been two shadows, barely visible against the city of light illuminated the night sky. Guise Erna had been too large to be pigeons or other birds, there had been men. She had opened the window and shouted, but they had not responded, just sat there completely motionless. She had been standing in the open window and gazed at them while they were there, sure there were kids she saw. It never used to be someone else on the roof.

After a while, they had risen up and disappeared inside the flat roof, and then it had no longer been any doubt.

The experience had given Mrs Hope, the kids had not gone off, not forsaken her. While it was extremely frustrating, her ability to make contact with them was non-existent. And Stefan did not get better, her time was running out.



The night was drawing to a close, Oskar and Eli were sitting on the floor with their worn Go-board between them. Eli played white, Oskar black, it was Eli's turn and he was studying the board concentratedly. They had tried most games, but always turned back to Go. The rules were simple, every child could learn them. Still, the game could be exceedingly difficult, when experienced players were involved. Such as Oskar and Eli, they had worn out several boards over the years. The pieces, however, were the same as they had had all along, ever since Christmas 1981 when they gave each other the game for Christmas. No surprise, of course, but they had wrapped the pieces into two nice packets that they had presented each other.

The door to the room where they were sitting opened, Oskar looked up from the board and greeted those who were standing there.

“So you're finished now?”

The couple in the doorway blushed and looked embarrassed at each other, Oskar and Eli grinned cheerfully at them. It was like they had assumed, the adults had not realised how clearly they were heard, although they probably tried to be quiet. All night they had been going on, ever since the four of them had returned to the apartment late the night before. But now it soon was morning, the sun was crouching just under the horizon and it was time to rest. The man in the doorway cleared his throat.

“Yeah, hrm. We just wanted to say goodnight. Or good morning as it might be. And we wanted to thank you once more.”

Oskar and Eli felt a little awkward, the adults had thanked them several times already. The woman had wept and hugged them, it had almost become too much. Then the door was shut again, Oskar turned towards Eli.

“We did the right thing, didn't we?”

“Yeah. I think they won't become like ... *them*.”

“No, they're not like that, I think. Hope they will make it, though. It's probably more difficult for adults.”

“Yes. But they've got each other. “

“As we have.”

“Exactly.”



LONDON 2012

St Pancras station in London, just before ten in the evening. A couple who are well over middle-age have just got off the train from Paris and is now on their way along the platform towards the entrances. They each have a small suitcase, which they carry by the hand instead of rolling them behind them like most other travellers do with their luggage. They walk effortlessly, with long strides like young people, and constantly look around them with interested gazes. And they walk hand in hand, even though both of them obviously have crossed retirement age.

Further along the platform a different pair has appeared, two children around the age of twelve comes running and throw themselves into the arms of the adults. The couples obviously know each other well, they laugh and hug each other like grandparents who had come to visit their grandchildren.

A while later, all four are seen leaving St Pancras in a taxi, still happily chatting. They have much to tell one other, it has been four years since they last time met. The taxi soon disappears in the traffic, and where it is heading isn't told by this story.



EPILOGUE

During the children's stay in London five months 2011-2012, they killed seventeen people. The adult pair killed three more during their two-week visit. Most of these belonged to the society's absolute bottom layer, few missed them and no one reported their absence to the authorities. Out of the remainder, only one has been found, he was discovered dead in his burned-out car. The car had apparently been set on fire.

