

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, NIGHT

In the end it had become too much for Oskar and he had given up. Not even when Eli had appeared in the bathhouse he had the energy to pull himself together. It was as if he had lost touch with reality, as if his inner self didn't really manage to reach his skin and the reality outside. He was sitting somewhere inside looking out, more through his eyes than with them. His perception had become utterly limited, only what was directly in front of him would penetrate into consciousness.

So Eli had helped him, had led him to the locker room, had helped him get dressed, had urged him on. Eli had told him to sit, and he had sat down. Eli had said he should dress, and he had pulled on the clothes Eli had handed him. Then they had left the gymnasium building.

Now Oskar was standing inside the entrance door at home, looking confusedly in front of him, up towards the door to his and his mother's apartment. He heard Eli say something, it trickled slowly into his consciousness.

"Oskar. Will you let me in? Later?"

The he understood. He was supposed to walk up the stairs, go through the door up there to the left. Home.

But he didn't want to. Not home, he didn't want to be there. He was too tired, couldn't cope. He turned towards Eli to get some guidance, but Eli just kept looking at him, said nothing.

Then Oskar noticed the stairs leading down to the basement. He looked at them for a few seconds, trying to understand what they meant. Then it dawned on him. He made an effort, and took a step in that direction. And then another one. Then Eli got it, and they walked together down the stairs, through the door to the basement passage, away to the storage room that belonged to Oskar's and his mother's apartment.

Oskar had the key to the padlock with him, he had fastened it to his key ring when he had carried Elis boxes down. He unlocked the lock, entered, and sank onto the floor, sat down with his head hanging. Eli looked at him, asked:

"Aren't you going home? To your mother?"

Oskar shook his head slowly, without looking up.

Eli watched Oskar a few moments, sucking his lip, thoughtful. Then he quietly closed the door to the storage room and sat down next to Oskar, put an arm behind Oskar's back and pulled him close. Oskar leaned against Eli, trembled.

He had desperately tried to hold on, struggled to remain *somebody*, balancing on an increasingly narrow edge as his life collapsed around him. But now he couldn't cope anymore. He gave up, let go and let himself fall, down towards the bottomless despair that lay brooding far down there, black, terrifying and calm like the water in an old mine shaft.

Oskar wept a long time, there was infinitely much to cry about. But eventually the tears stopped flowing, and sleep swept him away, from the worst day, the next to last day of his life.



FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, MORNING

Oskar floated up from his sleep. He had dreamt, it was a nice dream, he had been happy. He wanted to keep the dream, lay very still so as not to chase it away. But then he remembered. The bath house. Eli. The basement. His heart made a hiccup, he opened his eyes wide.

But Eli was still there, just a few inches away Oskar saw his pale face like a reverse shadow in the dark. Eli was laying on its side with one arm as a pillow, studying Oskar, the scarce light gleaming in his eyes. He smiled but said nothing, looked a little uncertain.

Oskar thought about the dream again. And of Eli's question a few days ago, *would you like to become like me?* Oskar hadn't been prepared to do it then, but now ... in the dream he had said yes instead, hadn't he? And Eli had become so happy. A thought struck him: *That* would be a nice gift, the best he could give: a friend forever. And, after all, it was what he most wanted, to always be with Eli. Oskar could see it before himself, it would be like in his dream. All that other stuff, the things that had scared him so before, they didn't feel very important anymore. It would be worth it, he would still be happy. Eli would be happy.

At last he had found what he had been searching for the last few days, what he should do but couldn't find out what it was. He reached for Eli's free hand, squeezed it and said:

"We shall be together, always."

Small movements went through Eli's face. Oskar continued:

"I want to become like you. You've got to infect me."

Eli looked with astonishment at Oskar a few seconds, then said:

"You mean it ... you really mean it."

Oskar smiled. "Yes."

Eli's chin quivered a little, his face wrinkled, he let out a sob. A thrill of fear ran through Oskar. He had been so sure that Eli would become happy, but ...

"Are you sad? ... Don't you want to?"

Eli pulled Oskar to him, put his arms around him.

"No. Yes. I mean ... I want to, Oskar. I do want to be with you. Always."

"But ... why are you crying then?"

Eli didn't answer, just kept weeping in Oskar's arms, his warm tears running along Oskar's cheek. Oskar hugged Eli, comforted. It didn't last long, however, soon Eli ended up sobbing, withdrew a little, smiled palely at Oskar.

"Forgive me. I usually don't cry like this."

Eli turned on his back, rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, wiped the tears from his cheeks. He continued speaking, mostly to himself, facing the ceiling:

"I haven't cried for real since ... I don't know. I used to cry, but I quit. You only get sadder if you sit alone crying."

Oskar reached out a hand, stroked Elis cheek and said:

"Poor you."

Eli turned his face towards Oskar and smiled sadly.

"You're kind, Oskar. I'm so glad I met you."

"Me too. That I met you, I mean."

They lay still, looking into each other's eyes, embracing each other, for a while. Oskar would have loved to continue long, but an urgent need had begun to make itself felt. He withdrew from the embrace, threw off the covers and explained:

"Just need to go to the bathroom."

Eli giggled a little when Oskar got up from the improvised and rather hard bed made up of blankets and a quilt. Oskar hurried along the basement passage towards the toilet at the laundry rooms. The pressure had become quite high, he had to keep treading not to wet his pants while fiddling with the keys in the locked doors that were in his way. But he had no mishaps, he managed to get there in time. When he was washing his hands afterwards, he looked into the mirror over the sink. His face had changed, he thought. Maybe it was just that he felt so good. He was euphoric, the depressed state of mind he had been in through the past few days had vanished. A thought came into his mind: He had been given a new life! He had died in the pool yesterday, not physically, perhaps, but in all ways that were important. And now he had been reborn, to a completely new life, free from all the disappointments that had filled his old one. He would finally live.

But on his way back to the storage room and Eli, something hit him. He had been so full of joy that he hadn't thought of it before: The events in the

bathhouse yesterday must have created a huge commotion. He didn't remember clearly what had happened after Jimmy almost had drowned him, but he remembered that there had been an awful lot of blood afterwards. The school must be crawling with police officers by now. And they would certainly come here. Especially since ... Oskar's heart sank in his chest ... especially since he hadn't returned home last night. His mother surely had reported him as missing. And the other boys had seen him leave the bathhouse with Eli. Oskar was a trace, the police would look for him, maybe they were already on their way here, to the basement. Time was running out, Oskar saw at his watch that it was already late in the morning. The daylight was shining in through the basement windows, outside it was bright sunshine, to make it worse. Oskar rushed along the basement passage, burst into the store, shouting:

"We must leave, Eli. It's urgent!"

Eli had sat up while Oskar was gone, he looked surprised at Oskar, said:

"But it's not possible, you know that. The sun ..."

"Yes, but ... isn't there a way? If you wrap yourself up in blankets or something?"

Eli shook his head gloomily. "No. That wouldn't be sufficient."

Oskar felt miserable. If he hadn't slept for so long. If Eli just had...

"Why didn't you wake me up? You should have woken me up!"

It had sounded like an accusation, Oskar was already regretting it, but Eli hadn't taken offence. He looked towards Oskar, answered simply:

"You needed to sleep, you were so tired."

It was true, Oskar *had* been tired, he had probably never before been as tired as he was last night. Tired and lost. Consumed.

"But ... what shall we do?"

"We have to wait. Until tonight."

Eli looked up towards Oskar with an expression of regret, but this rather strengthened Oskar's misgivings. He exclaimed:

"No! They'll come here, I know it!"

Oskar explained that the police would look for him, search everywhere, here in the basement as well.

"They'll find you, you ... you'll *die*!"

Eli watched Oskar for a while, biting thoughtfully at his lower lip. Then he said:

“Oskar, there is a way for us to travel in daylight. But it will be really hard for you.”

Oskar brightened. “There is? How?”

Eli turned, pointed towards the inner wall.

“I can be inside that thing. It would protect me well enough.”

Oskar looked in the direction that Eli pointed. In a corner stood an old trunk that had belonged to some relative in the past. Inside was a lot of tablecloths, embroidered linen and other similar stuff, things that never were used, but that his mother couldn’t make herself to dispose of. The trunk was large, would surely accommodate Eli.

Eli turned to Oskar again.

“But you understand that if we go like that you’ve to take care of everything yourself, don’t you?”

Oskar didn’t answer, instead he went to the trunk and began to empty it of its contents. He had already made up his mind, he would do it. He had to do it.

Eli came over to the corner and helped Oskar with the trunk, it was soon empty so that Eli could try to crawl into it. There was plenty of room for him there, he could wrap himself in blankets for extra protection. But the trunk was too heavy and unwieldy for Oskar when Eli was inside, he could lift one end and drag it along the floor, but couldn’t carry it.

Eli had got out of the trunk again, stood looking at it, saying:

“We need a cart.”

Oskar thought, tried to get some idea. *A cart ... a cart ... a ...*

“I know! A pram!”

Eli lit up. “Good thinking! There use to be one —”

But Oskar already had gone. The pram was standing in it’s usual place, below the stairs in the basement. Oskar soon was back in the storage room with it, and after a some hassle he and Eli succeeded to remove the insert and fold up the base, so that the base was low enough for placing the trunk on top. They looked satisfied upon their work, then Eli stepped up into the trunk and curled inside, wrapping himself in a couple of blankets. Oskar held the lid open, looked down at Eli, and said:

“We at least travel together this time.”

Eli smiled in response, nodded in confirmation. Oskar hesitated, before he continued:

“I love you, Eli. Whatever happens.”

He had *thought* it before, but hadn't dared saying it, he had felt that he was somehow too small to say those words. But now he realised that he had been wrong, he wasn't too small or too childish. Because it was true.

Eli met Oskar's eyes, but said nothing, it wasn't necessary. They looked at each other a few seconds, feeling the gravity of the moment. Then Eli said “see you tonight” and pulled the blanket over his head. Oskar closed the lid, snapped the locks shut. He put Eli's two boxes on top of the trunk, and rolled out the carriage into the basement passage. Then he turned to shut the door. The storage room was all upset, blankets on the floor, all the stuff from the trunk in pile. Looked as if there had been a break-ins perhaps. If he didn't to lock it up. Oskar pushed the door shut and put the lock into his pocket. Then he pushed the cart down the passage, towards the door to the stairwell. On the other side of it was the world. Oskar's heart rate increased, he felt nervous, but clenched his teeth, thinking: *This is it*. He gently opened the door, listening. There was nobody there, he rolled the carriage through the door. He was in the farthest stairwell, where Eli had lived. It was at the bottom of the slope so the entrance was in the basement, not half a stair up like his own entrance. He could roll straight out, but first he wanted to prepare a bit, in case someone would see him, so he put on his cap, pulled it down as far as he could. Then he wrapped his scarf around his lower face, so that finally only his eyes were visible. Thus disguised, he rolled the trunk across the floor and further on through the door, out into the sunlight. He hurried across the yard through the arch, crossed Elias Lönnrots väg. It was difficult to get off the sidewalk and then back up on the other hand, he swore when the boxes tended to slide off, but he made it. He continued along the footpath between the houses, took off to the left along Björnsongatan. It was a detour, but the nearest way went across the schoolyard, he couldn't use that. He caught a glimpse of the headlines when he passed the Lover's kiosk, they shouted about murder, carnage in Blackeberg. He felt exposed, and hurried past the kiosk.

A while later Oskar was sitting on the underground toward the Underground Central, he had managed the first part. The streets had been nearly empty, he hadn't met anyone. The police officers he had feared had stayed out of sight. The station had been almost as deserted as the streets, a few passengers, but no one he had recognised. He had worried a little about how he would get past the ticket gate, had thought that the clerk would notice him and his quirky luggage. But the woman behind the window hadn't even looked up when Oskar slid his ticket strip under the glass, had just stamped it, she had barely even taken her eyes off the book she was reading. Oskar had taken the elevator down to the platform, a train had almost immediately come and he had rolled aboard onto a virtually empty car. More passengers stepped on at the stations on the way to the Underground Central, but the car never became completely full. As usual, people avoided all contact with their fellow travellers, opted out of a seat if there already was someone sitting next to it, so Oskar didn't have to sit close to anybody. He kept looking out the window towards the tunnel walls whirling by, or else he focused on the reflection of the car inside in the glass, gazing stealthily at the other passengers. No one showed him any interest, either they were sitting with tired faces looking out the window just like he was doing, or else they had pulled out something to read and sunken into it, everyone in their own bubble of unreachability.

Oskar stepped off at the Underground Central, was after a while rolling down the tunnel towards the Central Station. There was a lot more people moving about here, but everybody had their own objectives and weren't concerned with those of other people. Although a few individuals did for a moment look at Oskar and his unusual luggage, no one stopped him or asked anything.

He passed an newsagents, saw the same news bills as before, with the same headlines. Again he felt accused, and a little irritated, couldn't they leave him alone?

At the Central Station Oskar went up by the elevator and rolled up the trunk to one of the yellow posters with departures, in order to figure out where to he would travel. The list told him little, he recognised the names but knew nothing about the places they represented. But he had to decide something, he couldn't walk up to the counter and just order a ticket. He

imagined the situation. *–I'd like a ticket, please. –Where to? –Away.* That wouldn't work. He searched along the lines of the poster, found that a train to Karlstad would leave pretty soon. Karlstad was in Värmland, that much he remembered of Swedish geography in any case. He tried the name: *Värmland*. It was a funny word, what could a *värm* be? He had no idea. Värmland at least sounded exotic and distant, that made his decision. He rolled over to the ticket counter and bought a child ticket to Karlstad. One way, please. No, no return. Second class. He received the ticket and noticed that he would arrive quite late, it would be dark then. That was good. Then he bought a cellophane wrapped sandwich and a Coca-Cola in a kiosk. He was quite hungry, it was already close to lunch and he hadn't yet had any breakfast. He bought some bananas too, for the trip. And some candy, Eli couldn't eat sweets, Oskar wouldn't probably either, later. Best taking the opportunity while he still could. Finally, he asked for a Daily News, he wanted to see what actually was in the paper. Then he rolled over to the platform where the train would depart and sat down to wait, as he ate his sandwich, drank his Coke and read the newspaper. There wasn't much more inside the paper than the headlines had revealed. No names, relatives must be informed first. The police couldn't tell more for reasons of the investigation, so there was mostly a lot of pictures of the school and other places in Blackeberg, recaps of past events, and journalists' own theories. Håkan Bengtsson was mentioned, Oskar for a moment thought about Tommy, wondered if he had got the money. Then he folded the newspaper and put it on the bench beside him, simultaneously disappointed and relieved. He hadn't been told much, but on the other hand he wasn't mentioned, so he wouldn't have to be afraid of being recognised.

The train to Karlstad arrived eventually, Oskar got help with the trunk by a fellow passenger. As the train started rolling he could finally relax, he and Eli had escaped. Now everything would become all right, tonight Eli would infect him, then nothing would separate them again. He looked up at the trunk on the luggage rack above the seat, and smiled to himself.

