



VINTAGE

FROZEN TRACKS

ÅKE EDWARDSON

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About the Book

It's autumn in Gothenburg and an anxious mother calls the police; her little boy was lured into a car by a man offering sweets. The child is returned unharmed but then the same thing happens with a little girl, and then another. Each child attends a different nursery, and each parent contacts a different police station, so, at first, no connection is established between the incidents and the reports are filed and forgotten.

Meanwhile DCI Winter is investigating a series of random attacks on strangely uncooperative university students, but when a four-year-old boy is abducted and found injured, the forgotten files resurface and a link between the stories becomes apparent. As Gothenburg prepares for Christmas, Winter is in a race against time to prevent a horrific catastrophe.

About the Author

Åke Edwardson was born in 1953. He has worked as a journalist and as a press officer for the UN, and has written books on journalism and creative writing. Now a professor at Gothenburg University, he is also a prize-winning author, both for his best-selling detective novels and for his books for children. He has on three occasions been awarded the Swedish Crime Writers' Award for best crime novel.

Laurie Thompson was editor of *Swedish Book Review* 1983-2002 and has translated many books from Swedish, including novels by Henning Mankell, Håkan Nesser and Mikael Niemi.

Also by Åke Edwardson

Sun and Shadow
Never End

ÅKE EDWARDSON

Frozen Tracks

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY
Laurie Thompson

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ONE OF THE children jumped down from the climbing frame into the sandpit below, and he laughed out loud, suddenly, briefly. It looked like good fun. He wanted to join in, but that would mean getting out of his car, walking round the fence and in through the gate, and climbing up the frame, which was red and yellow.

A drop of rain fell on the window, then another. He looked up and could see the sky was darker now. He turned his attention back to the playground and the trees beyond it and along the left-hand side. There were no leaves on the branches, the trees were naked. Things you couldn't see in the summer were visible now. The city was naked. That thought had struck him as he drove there through the wet streets. This city is naked again. He didn't like it. It was almost worse than before.

Now another child jumped down. He could hear the boy laughing as he lay in the sand, he could hear that even when the radio was on, as it was now. He wasn't listening to it. He was listening to the boy's laughter. He was laughing himself now. He wasn't happy, but he was laughing because, hearing the child laughing, it sounded so much fun to be a child getting up to climb the frame and jump down once more.

It stopped raining even before it had really started. He wound the window down a bit more. There was a smell of autumn turning into winter. Nothing else smelled like it.

Leaves lay on the ground and had turned black. People were walking along paths through the park. Some were pushing prams. A few people were standing around in the playground, grown-ups. There weren't many of them. But lots of children, and many of them were laughing.

He had also laughed, not now, but when he was a child. He could remember laughing once when his mum had lifted him up high and his head had caught the ceiling lamp and there had been a light up there that had gone out when she put him down again.

Somebody said something on the radio. He didn't hear what, as he was still in a land where he was a small boy who'd come down to the ground again and his mum had said something that he could no longer remember; he couldn't remember any of it, but she had said something and afterwards he had spent a long time thinking about what she had said, how important it was to him, those last words she had said to him before walking out of the door, never to come back.

She never, ever came back.

He could feel his cheek was wet, like the windscreen would have been if it had continued raining. He heard himself saying something now but didn't know what it was.

He looked back at the children.

He could see the room again. It was later but he was still a small boy; he sat looking out of the window and there was rain on the window pane and he'd made a drawing of the trees outside that didn't have any leaves left. His mum was standing beside the trees. If he drew a car, she was inside it. A horse, and she was riding it. A little child, and she was holding its hand. They were walking on grass where red and yellow flowers were growing.

He drew the fields. He drew an ocean on the other side of the fields.

Every night he made a bed for his mum. He had a little sofa in his bedroom and he made her a bed on it, with a

blanket and a pillow. If she suddenly appeared she'd be able to sleep there. Just lie down without him needing to get the bed things ready, it would be all done.

Now he wound the window right down and took a deep breath. Wound it up again and started the engine and drove round the playground so that he could park immediately outside the entrance. He opened the door. There were several other cars around. He could hear the children's voices now, as if they were actually inside his car. As if they'd come to his car, to him.

There was music on the radio now, and that voice he recognised came back and said something. It was a voice he'd heard several times. It spoke when he drove back from work at the end of the day. Sometimes he drove at night.

He could feel how wet the ground was under his feet. He was standing beside his car but didn't know how he'd got there. It was strange: he'd thought about the radio and then suddenly he'd been standing beside the car.

Children's laughter again.

He was standing beside the playground that was next to the trees that no longer had any leaves, only bare branches.

The video camera in his hand was hardly any bigger than a cigarette packet. A little bit bigger, perhaps. Amazing what they could make nowadays. He could hardly hear the faint hiss when he pressed the button and filmed what he could see.

He moved closer. There were children all around but he couldn't see a single grown-up just then. Where were all the grown-ups? The children couldn't manage on their own, they might get hurt when they jumped down from the red and yellow climbing frame or fell off the swings.

The climbing frame was right here, next to the entrance. He was standing by it.

A leap.

'Wheee!'

Laughter. He laughed again himself, jumped, no, but he could have jumped. He helped the little boy to his feet. Up again, up, up! Lift him up to the sky!

He took it from his pocket and held it out. Look what I've got here.

It was three paces to the entrance. Then four more to the car. The boy's steps were shorter, six to the entrance and eight to the car.

Children, children everywhere; it struck him that he was the only one who could see the boy now, keep an eye on him. The grown-ups were standing over there with their coffee cups making steam in the air that was cold and damp, just like the ground.

Several cars. The boy couldn't be seen at all now, not from any direction. Only *he* could see him, he was holding his hand now.

'There we are. Yes, I've got a whole bag full, how about that? So, let's open the door. Can you climb in all by yourself? You *are* clever.'

* * *

The back of the student's head had been struck in such a way that the wound looked like a cross, or something very similar. His hair had been shaved off, making the wound all the more visible. It was horrific, but he was still alive. Only just; but he had a chance.

As they left the hospital, Bertil Ringmar's face looked blue, thanks to the lights in the entrance hall.

'I thought you ought to see that,' said Ringmar.

Winter nodded.

'What weapon would make that kind of wound?' wondered Ringmar.

'Some sort of pickaxe. Maybe an agricultural implement. A kitchen utensil. A gardening tool. I don't know, Bertil.'

‘There’s something about it, I don’t know. It reminds me of something.’

Winter zapped the doors of his Mercedes. The car park was deserted. The car lights flashed like a warning.

‘We’d better have a word with our yokel,’ said Winter as they drove down the hill.

‘Don’t make fun of it.’

‘Make fun of it? What is there to make fun of?’

Ringmar made no reply. Linnéplatsen was just as deserted as the car park had been a few moments back.

‘This is the third one,’ said Ringmar.

Winter nodded, loosened his tie and unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt.

‘Three youths more or less battered to death with something, but we can’t work out what,’ said Ringmar. ‘Three students.’ He turned to look at Winter. ‘Is there a pattern?’

‘You mean the fact that they’re all students? Or that we think the wounds look like a cross?’

‘That they’re all students,’ said Ringmar.

‘Students form a big category,’ said Winter, continuing in a westerly direction. ‘There must be thirty-five thousand of them in this city.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Plenty of people to make friends with, even if they only mix with their own kind,’ said Winter.

Ringmar drummed his fingers on the armrest. Winter turned off the main thoroughfare and drove north. The streets grew narrower, the houses bigger.

‘A pickaxe,’ said Ringmar. ‘Who wanders around with a pickaxe on a Saturday night?’

‘I daren’t even think about it,’ said Winter.

‘Were you a student here in Gothenburg?’

‘Briefly.’

‘What did you read?’

‘Prudence. Then I packed it in.’

‘Prudence?’

‘Introduction to Jurisprudence. But I dropped it, like I said.’

‘Imprudence follows Prudence,’ said Ringmar.

‘Ha, ha,’ said Winter.

‘I was a student of life myself,’ said Ringmar.

‘Where do you study that? And when do you qualify for a degree in it?’

Ringmar gave a snort.

‘You’re right, Erik. A student of life is examined all the time. Continuous assessment.’

‘By whom?’

Ringmar didn’t reply. Winter slowed down.

‘If you turn right here, you’ll avoid that awkward junction,’ said Ringmar.

Winter did as he’d been advised, made his way past a couple of parked cars and pulled up outside a timber-clad detached house. The inside lights cast a faint glow over the lawn and between the maples that reached up to the sky like human limbs.

‘Why don’t you come in for a late-night sandwich?’ Ringmar asked.

Winter looked at his watch.

‘Is Angela waiting up for you with oysters and wine?’ wondered Ringmar.

‘It’s not quite the season yet,’ said Winter.

‘I expect you’ll want to say good night to Elsa?’

‘She’ll be fast asleep by now,’ said Winter. ‘OK, I’ll have a bite to eat. Have you got any south Slovakian beer?’

Ringmar was rummaging in the fridge as Winter came up from the cellar, carrying three bottles.

‘I think I only have Czech pilsner, I’m afraid,’ said Ringmar over his shoulder.

‘I’ll forgive you,’ said Winter, reaching for the bottle opener.

‘Smoked whitefish and scrambled egg?’ Ringmar suggested, examining what was in the fridge.

‘If we’ve got time,’ said Winter. ‘It takes ages to make decent scrambled egg. Have you got any chives, by the way?’

Ringmar smiled and nodded, carried the ingredients over to the work surface and got started. Winter sipped his beer. It was good, chilled without being cold. He took off his tie and hung his jacket over the chair back. His neck felt stiff after a long day. A student of life. Continuous assessment. He could see the student’s face in his mind’s eye, then the back of his head. A law student, just like he’d been once. If I’d stuck with it I could have been Chief of Police now, he thought, taking another sip of beer. That might have been better. Protected from the streets. No bending over bodies with shattered limbs, no new holes, no blood, no wounds in the shape of a cross.

‘The other two don’t have an enemy in the world,’ said Ringmar from the stove, where he was stirring the egg mix with a wooden fork.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The other two victims who survived with the cross-shaped wounds on their heads. Not an enemy in the world, they reckon.’

‘That goes with being young,’ said Winter. ‘Not having an enemy in the world.’

‘You’re young yourself,’ said Ringmar, lifting up the cast-iron pan. ‘Do you have any enemies?’

‘Not a single one,’ said Winter. ‘You make enemies later on in life.’

Ringmar put the finishing touches to the open sandwiches.

‘We should really have a drop of schnapps with this,’ he said.

‘I can always take a taxi home.’

‘Right, that’s settled then,’ said Ringmar, going to fetch the hard stuff.

‘The same man was responsible for all the attacks,’ said Ringmar. ‘What’s he after?’

‘Satisfaction from causing injury,’ said Winter, draining the last of his second schnapps and shaking his head when Ringmar lifted the bottle.

‘But not any old how,’ said Ringmar.

‘Nor any old victim.’

‘Hmm. You could be right.’

‘We’ll have to hear what this lad has to say tomorrow,’ said Winter.

‘Attacked from behind in an unlit street. He saw nothing, heard nothing, said nothing, knows nothing.’

‘We’ll see.’

‘Pia Fröberg will have to make an extra effort to help us with the weapon,’ said Ringmar.

Winter could see the forensic pathologist’s pale, tense face in his mind’s eye. Once upon a time they’d been an item, or something pretty close to that. All forgiven, forgotten and in the past now. No hard feelings.

‘Always assuming that will help,’ Ringmar added, gazing down into his beer glass.

They heard the front door open and shut, and a shout from a female voice.

‘We’re in here,’ Ringmar informed her.

His daughter came in, still wearing her anorak. As dark as her father, almost as tall, same nose, same eyes focused on Winter.

‘Erik needed a bit of company,’ said Ringmar.

‘Pull the other one,’ she said, reaching out her hand. Winter shook it.

‘Well, do you still recognise Moa?’ asked Ringmar.

‘Haven’t seen you for ages,’ said Winter. ‘Let’s see, you must be ...’

‘Twenty-five,’ said Moa Ringmar. ‘Well on the way to being a pensioner, and still living at home. What do you say to that?’

‘You could say that Moa’s in between flats at the moment,’ Ringmar explained.

‘It’s the times we live in,’ said Moa. ‘Fledglings always return to the nest.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Winter.

‘Bullshit,’ said Moa.

‘OK,’ said Winter.

She sat down.

‘Any beer left for me?’

Ringmar fetched her a glass and poured out what was left of the third bottle.

‘I gather there’s been another assault,’ she said.

‘Where did you hear that?’ wondered Ringmar.

‘At the department. He’s a student there. Name of Jakob, I’m told.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘No, not personally.’

‘Do you know anybody who knows him?’ asked Winter.

‘Hey, what’s all this?’ she protested. ‘I see you’re back at work again.’ She looked at Winter, then turned to her father. ‘Sorry. It *is* serious. I didn’t mean to tease.’

‘Well?’ wondered Winter.

‘I might know somebody who knows somebody who knows him. I don’t know.’

Vasaplatsen was quiet and deserted when he got out of the taxi. The street lamps lit up the newspaper kiosk at the edge of Universitetsplatsen. A student of life, he thought as he punched the code to the front entrance.

There was a faint smell of tobacco in the lift, a persistent aroma that could have been caused by him.

‘You smell of booze,’ said Angela when he bent down to kiss her as she lay in bed.

‘Ödåkra Taffel Aquavit,’ he said.

‘I thought as much,’ she said, turning over to face the wall. ‘You’ll have to look after Elsa tomorrow morning. I have to get up at half past five.’

‘I’ve just been in to see her. Sleeping like a log.’

Angela muttered something.

‘What did you say?’

‘Just wait until tomorrow morning,’ she said. ‘Early.’

He knew all about that. Hadn’t he just been on six months’ paternity leave? He knew all there was to know about Elsa, and she knew all about him.

It had been a terrific time, maybe his best. There was a city out there that he hadn’t seen for years. The streets were the same, but he’d been able to view them at ground level for a change, in his own time, not needing to be on the lookout for anything more than the next café where they could pause for a while and he could sample a bit of that other life, real life.

When he went back to work after his paternity leave, he felt a sort of ... hunger, a peculiar feeling, something he almost found a bit scary. As if he were ready for battle again, ready for the war that could never be won, but had to be fought even so. That’s the way it was. If you cut an arm off the beast, it promptly grew another one, but you had to keep on cutting even so.

As Winter fell asleep, he was thinking yet again about that remarkable wound on the back of the student’s head.

2

IT WAS A quiet night at the emergency desk, and felt like the calm before the storm. But there won't be any storm tonight, thought Bengt Josefsson, the duty officer, gazing out at the trees that were also still, like they were before an autumn gale. But it's too late for autumn gales now, he thought. It'll soon be Christmas. And after that maybe we shan't exist any more. They're talking of closing down this station, and Redbergsplatsen will be handed back to the enemy.

The telephone rang.

'Police, Örgryte-Härlanda, Josefsson.'

'Ah, yes. Well. Er, good evening. Is that the police?'

'Yes.'

'I phoned the police headquarters and they said they'd connect me to a station close to Olskroken. Er, that's where we live.'

'You've come to the right number,' said Josefsson. 'How can I help you?'

'Well, er, I don't really know what to say.'

Josefsson waited, pen at the ready. A colleague dropped something hard on the floor in the changing room at the end of the corridor.

'Just tell me what it's about,' he said. 'Who am I talking to?'

She gave her name and he wrote it down. Berit Skarin.

‘It’s about my little boy,’ she said. ‘He, er, I don’t know ... He told us tonight, if we understood him rightly, er, that he’s been sitting in a car with a “mister”, as he put it.’

Kalle Skarin was four, and when he got back home from the day nursery he’d had a soft-cheese sandwich and a cup of hot chocolate – he’d mixed the cocoa and sugar and a splash of cream himself, and then Mum added the hot milk.

Shortly afterwards he’d said he’d been sitting in a car.

A car?

A car. Big car, with a radio. Radio talked and played music.

Have you and your friends been out on a trip today?

Not a trip. Playground.

Are there cars there?

The boy had nodded.

Toy cars?

BIG car, he’d told her. Real car. Real, and he’d moved his hands as if he were holding a steering wheel. Brrrrm, brrrrmm.

Where?

Playground.

Kalle. Are you saying you went for ride in a car at the playground?

He’d nodded.

Who did you go with?

A mister.

A mister?

Mister, mister. He had sweeties!

Kalle had made a new gesture that could have been somebody holding out a bag of sweets, or maybe not.

Berit Skarin had felt a cold shiver run down her spine. A strange man holding out a bag of sweets to her little boy.

Olle ought to hear this, but he wouldn’t be back until late.

And Kalle was sitting there in front of her. She'd taken hold of him when he'd jumped up to go and watch a children's programme on the telly.

Did the car drive away?

Drove, drove. Brrrrrrmm.

Did you go far?

He didn't understand the question.

Was teacher with you?

No teacher. Mister.

Then he'd run off to the television room. She'd watched him go and had thought for a moment, then gone to fetch her handbag from a chair in the kitchen and looked up the home telephone number of one of the nursery staff, hesitated when she got as far as the phone, but rung even so.

'Ah. Sorry to disturb you in the evening like this, er, it's Berit Skarin. Yes, Kalle's mum. He's just told me something and I thought I'd better ask you about it.'

Bengt Josefsson listened. She told him about the conversation she'd had with one of the nursery school staff.

'Nobody noticed anything,' said Berit Skarin.

'I see.'

'Can that kind of thing happen?' she asked. 'Can somebody drive up in a car and then drive off with one of the children without any of the staff seeing anything? Then bring the child back again?'

Much worse things than that can happen, thought Josefsson.

'I don't know,' he said. 'The staff didn't notice anything, you say?'

'No. Surely they must have done?'

'You'd have thought so,' said Josefsson, but in fact he was thinking differently. Who can be on the lookout all the time? Thinking, who's that man standing under the tree over there? Sitting in that car?

'How long does your boy say he was away?'

'He doesn't know. He's a child. He can't distinguish between five minutes and fifty minutes if you ask him afterwards.'

Bengt Josefsson pondered this.

'Do you believe him?' he asked.

No reply.

'Mrs Skarin?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I just don't know.'

'Does he have, er, a lively imagination?'

'He's a child. All children have lively imaginations if there's nothing wrong with them.'

'Yes.'

'So what should I do?'

Bengt Josefsson looked down at the few sentences he'd jotted down on his notepad.

Two colleagues came racing past his desk.

'Robbery at the newspaper kiosk!' one of them yelled.

He could already hear the siren from one of the cars outside.

'Hello?' said Berit Skarin.

'Yes, where were we? Well, I've noted down what you said. Anyway, nobody's gone missing. So, if you want to report it, then ...'

'What should I report?'

That's the point, thought Josefsson. Unlawful deprivation of liberty? No. An attempted sexual offence, or preparing the way for one? Well, perhaps. Or the imagination of a very young child. He evidently hadn't come to any harm be—

'I want to take him to a doctor now,' she said, interrupting his train of thought. 'I take this very seriously.'

'Yes,' said Josefsson.

'Should I take him to a doctor?'

'Have you, er, examined him yourself?'

'No. I phoned straight after he'd told me.'

‘Oh.’

‘But I will do now. Then I’ll see where we go from there.’ He heard her shouting for the boy, and a reply from some distance. ‘He’s watching the telly,’ she said. ‘Now he’s laughing.’

‘Can I make a note of your address and phone number?’ said Josefsson.

There were the sirens again. It sounded as if they were heading east. Chasing the robbers. A couple of thugs from one of the ghettos north of the town, drugged up to the eyeballs. Dangerous as hell.

‘OK, thank you very much,’ he said, his mind miles away, and hung up. He made his handwriting clearer in a couple of places, then put the page to one side, ready for keying into the computer. Later on he’d put his notes into the file, if he got round to it. Filed under ... what? Nothing had happened after all. A crime waiting to be committed?

There were other things that had already happened, were happening right now.

The phone on his desk rang again, phones were ringing all over the station. Sirens outside, coming from the south. He could see the flashing blue light on the other side of the street, whirling round and round as if the officers in the patrol car were about to take off and fly over to where all the action was.

Jakob, the student, was conscious but very groggy and in a world of his own. Ringmar sat by his side, wondering what had happened and how. There were flowers on the bedside table. Jakob was not alone in this world.

Somebody entered the ward behind Ringmar. Could that be a flash of recognition in Jakob’s eyes? Ringmar turned round.

‘They said it was all right for me to go in,’ said the girl, with a bunch of flowers in her hand. She seemed to be about the same age as his own daughter. Maybe they know

each other, he thought, getting to his feet as she walked over to the bed, gave Jakob a cautious little hug and then put the flowers down on the table. Jakob's eyes were closed now, he'd probably nodded off again.

'Even more flowers,' she said, and Ringmar could see she would have liked to take a look at the card with the other bouquet, but couldn't bring herself to do it. She turned to face him.

'So you're Moa's dad, are you?'

Good. Moa had done her bit.

'Yes,' he said. 'Maybe we should go to the waiting room and have a little chat.'

* * *

'I suppose he was just unlucky,' she said. 'Or whatever it is you say. Wrong man in the wrong place, or however you put it.'

They sat down on their own, by a window. The grey light of day outside seemed translucent. The room was in a strange sort of shadow cast by a sun that wasn't there. A woman coughed quietly on a sofa by a low wooden table weighed down by magazines with photos of well-known people, smiling. Well-known to whom? Ringmar had wondered more than once. Visiting hospitals was part of his job, and he'd often wondered why *Hello!* and similar magazines were always piled up in dreary hospital waiting rooms. Maybe they were a kind of comfort, like a little candle burning on the tables of such cavernous barns. All of you in that magazine, who are photographed at every premiere there is, maybe used to be like us, and maybe we can be like you if we get well again and are discovered in the hectic search for new talent. That search was nonstop, neverending. The photos of those celebrities were proof of that. There was no room for faded Polaroids of crushed skulls.

'It wasn't bad luck,' said Ringmar now, looking at the girl.

'You look younger than I'd expected,' she said.

'On the basis of Moa's description of me, you mean,' he said.

She smiled, then turned serious again.

'Do you know anybody who really disliked Jakob?' Ringmar asked.

'Nobody disliked him,' she said.

'Is there anybody he dislikes?'

'No.'

'Nobody at all?'

'No.'

Maybe it's the times we live in, Ringmar thought, and if so it has to be a good thing. When I was a youngster we were always mad at everything and everybody. Angry all the time.

'How well do you know him?' he asked.

'Well ... he's my friend.'

'Do you have several mutual friends?'

'Yes, of course.'

Ringmar looked out of the window. Some fifty metres away, two youths were standing at the bus stop in the rain, holding their hands up to the sky as if giving thanks. Not an enemy in the world. Even the rain was a dear friend.

'No violent types in your circle of friends?' asked Ringmar.

'Certainly not.'

'What were you doing when Jakob was attacked?'

'When exactly was it?' she asked.

'I'm not really allowed to tell you that,' he said, and proceeded to do so.

'I'd been asleep for about two hours,' she said.

But Jakob wasn't asleep. Ringmar could see him in his mind's eye, walking across the square named after Doktor Fries. Heading for the tram stop? There weren't any trams

at that time of night. And then somebody appeared out of nowhere, and one hell of a bash on the back of his head. No help from Dr Fries. Left there to bleed to death, if the bloke who'd called the police hadn't happened to pass by shortly after it had happened and see the lad lying there.

Jakob, the third victim. Three different places in the same town. The same type of wound. Fatal, really. Perhaps. But none of them actually died. Not yet, he thought. The other two victims had no idea. Just a blow from behind. Saw nothing, just felt.

'Do you live together?' he asked.

'No.'

Ringmar said nothing for a moment. The two youths had just jumped aboard a bus. Maybe it was getting a bit brighter in the west, a slight glint of light blue. The waiting room was quite high up in the hospital, which itself was on the top of a hill. Maybe he was looking at the sea, a big grey expanse under the blue.

'You weren't worried about him?'

'What do you mean, worried?'

'Where he was that night? What he was doing?'

'Hang on, we're not married or anything like that. We're just friends.'

'So you didn't know where he was that night?'

'No.'

'Who does he know out there?'

'Where?'

'In Guldheden. Round about Doktor Fries Torg, Guldheden School, that district.'

'I haven't the slightest idea.'

'Do you know anybody around there?'

'Who lives there, you mean? I don't think so. No.'

'But that's where he was, and that's where he was attacked,' said Ringmar.

'You'll have to ask him,' she said.

'I'll do that, as soon as it's possible.'

Winter had taken Elsa to the day nursery. He sat there for a while with a cup of coffee while she arranged her day's work on her little desk: a red telephone, paper, pencils, chinks, newspapers, tape, string. He would get to see the result that afternoon. It would be something unique, no doubt about that.

She barely noticed when he gave her a hug and left. He lit a Corps in the grounds outside. He couldn't smoke anything else after all these years. He'd tried, but it was no use. Corps were no longer sold in Sweden, but a colleague made regular visits to Brussels and always brought some of the cigarillos back for him.

It was a pleasant morning. The air smelled of winter but it felt like early autumn. He took another puff, then unbuttoned his overcoat and watched children hard at work on all sides: building projects involving digging and stacking, moulding shapes; every kind of game you could think of. Games. Not much sign of games in the sports grown-ups indulge in nowadays, he thought, and noticed a little lad running down the slope towards a gap in the bushes. Winter looked round and saw the two members of staff were fully occupied with children who wanted something or were crying or laughing or running around in all directions, and so he strode swiftly down the hill and into the bushes, where the lad was busy hitting the railings with his plastic spade. He turned round as Winter approached and gave him a sheepish grin, like a prisoner who'd been caught trying to escape.

Winter shepherded the little lad back to the fold, listening to some story he couldn't quite understand but nodding approvingly even so. One of the ladies in charge was standing halfway up the slope.

'I didn't know there was a fence there,' said Winter.

'It's a good job there is,' she said. 'We'd never be able to keep them on the premises otherwise.'

He caught sight of Elsa on her way out into the grounds: she'd clearly decided it was time to take a rest from all that paperwork.

'Hard to keep an eye on all of them at the same time, I suppose?' he said.

'Yes, it is now.' He detected a sort of sigh. 'I shouldn't stand here complaining, but since you ask, well, it's a case of more and more children and fewer and fewer staff.' She made a gesture. 'But at least we've got them fenced in here.'

Winter watched Elsa playing on the swings. She shouted out when she saw him, and he waved back.

'How do you manage when you take them out for excursions? Or take the whole lot of them to the park, or to a bigger playground?'

'We try not to,' she said.

Ringmar was with the student, Jakob Stillman. The latter had been living up to his name, but now he seemed able to move his head slowly, and with some difficulty he could focus on Ringmar from his sick-bed. Ringmar had introduced himself.

'I'd just like to ask you a few questions,' he said. 'I suggest you blink once if your answer is yes, and twice in succession if it's no. OK?'

Stillman blinked once.

'Right.' Ringmar moved the chair a bit closer. 'Did you see anybody behind you before you were hit?'

One blink.

'Ah, so you did see something?' Ringmar asked.

One blink again. Yes.

'Was it far away?'

Two blinks. No.

'Were you alone when you started walking across the square?'

Yes.

'But you were able to see somebody coming towards you?'

No.

'So somebody was behind you?'

Yes.

'Could you make anything out?'

Yes.

'Did you see a face?'

No.

'A body?'

Yes.

'Big?'

No blinking at all. This lad is smarter than I am, thought Ringmar.

'Medium-sized?'

Yes.

'A man?'

Yes.

'Would you recognise him again?'

No.

'Was he very close when you saw him?'

Yes.

'Did you hear anything?'

Yes.

'Did you hear the sound before you saw him?'

Yes.

'Was that why you turned round?'

Yes.

'Was it the sound of his footsteps?'

No.

'Was it the sound of some implement or other scraping the ground?'

No.

'Was it a noise that had nothing to do with him?'

No.

'Was it something he said?'

Yes.

'Did it sound like Swedish?'

No.

'Did it sound like some other language?'

No.

'Was it more like a shriek?'

No.

'More like a grunt?'

Yes.

'Something deeper?'

Yes.

'A human sound?'

No.

'But it came from him?'

Yes.

3

HE DROVE THROUGH the tunnels, which were filled with a darkness denser than the night outside. The naked lamps on the walls made the darkness all the more noticeable. The cars coming towards him made no noise.

He had the window down, letting in some air and a cold glow. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, only darkness.

It was like driving through hell, tunnel after tunnel. He was familiar with them all. He would drive round and round the city through the tunnels. Is there a name for this? he wondered. A term?

Music on the radio. Or had he put a CD in? He couldn't remember. A beautiful voice he liked to listen to when he was driving under the ground. Soon the whole of the city would be buried. The whole of the road alongside the water was being dug down into hell.

He sat down in front of the television and watched his film. The playground, the climbing frame, the slide the children slid down, and one of the children laughed out loud and he laughed as well because it looked such fun. He pressed rewind, watched the fun bit once again and made a note on the sheet of paper on the table beside him, where there was also a vase with six tulips that he'd bought that same afternoon. Both the vase and the tulips.

Now the boy was there. His face, then the car window behind him, the radio, the back seat. The boy told him what