

A man in a dark suit stands with his back to the camera on a snow-covered road that stretches into the distance. The road is flanked by bare trees, and the sky is overcast. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

THE FIRST
INTERCRIME
THRILLER

ARNE
DAHL THE
BLINDED
MAN

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About the Book

Two of Sweden's most powerful businessmen have been murdered.

In the face of mounting panic amongst the financial elite, a task force has been created to catch the culprit before he kills again. To his surprise, Detective Paul Hjelm, currently under investigation for misconduct after shooting a man who took a bank hostage, is summoned to join the team.

But the killer has left no clues - even removing the bullets from the crime scenes - and Hjelm and his new teammates face a daunting challenge if they are to uncover the connection between the murdered men and identify any potential victims before he strikes again.

About the Author

Arne Dahl is an award-winning Swedish crime novelist and literary critic. *The Blinded Man* is the first book in the internationally acclaimed Intercrime series. The second book in the series, *Bad Blood*, will follow in Harvill Secker in 2013.

Tiina Nunnally has translated more than fifty books from Swedish, Danish and Norwegian.

ARNE DAHL

The Blinded Man

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY
Tiina Nunnally

VINTAGE BOOKS
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1

SOMETHING WAS FORCING its way through the winter.

He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something. Maybe a warming breeze, a flicker of light smack in the middle of the mass of grey clouds, or possibly just the fact that he heard a splash rather than a crunch when he stepped in the puddle that all winter long had encircled his personal parking space - the one that still bore his name.

He paused for a moment and squinted up at the morning cloud cover. It looked the same as usual, hovering there like a virtual ceiling of security above the bank, bidding him welcome.

The same silence as always.

A short distance away was the little town, undisturbed, sending up only one sign of life: fine tendrils of smoke from chimneys. He heard the repetitive cheeping of the marsh tit and saw it peek from its nest just under the eaves. Then he locked the car and strode the few yards to the small, modest door of the employees' entrance. He took out his even more modest key ring and one by one opened the three deadbolts.

Inside the bank office it smelled like an ordinary Monday, a bit stuffy from the weekend, but Lisbet would soon air it out when she arrived second, as usual, bringing her flood of cheerful chatter.

He himself was always the first to arrive; that was the routine.

Everything was exactly the same as always.

That was what he told himself several times: *Everything is exactly the same as always.*

He may have said it once too often.

He stood at his teller's window and pulled out the drawer. He took out an oblong gilded case and cautiously weighed one of the long, bristled darts in his hand. His special weapon.

Not many people, even among the initiated, really knew how a dart was supposed to look. His darts were long – specially designed to four and three-quarter inches, almost two and three-quarters of which were a long point that always surprised his opponents, and very short, bristly flights.

He picked up the three darts and slipped around the dividing wall into the office interior. There was the board. Without looking down, he took up position with the tips of his toes on the little black throw line exactly seven feet nine-and-a-quarter inches from the dartboard and rhythmically flung the three darts. All three stuck in the large bed of the 1. He was just warming up.

Everything landed where it should.

Everything was as it should be.

He clasped his hands and stretched them outwards until they made a light cracking sound, then let his fingers flutter freely in the air for several seconds. Again he took the key ring out of his jacket pocket, swung back around the dividing wall to the public area of the bank, went over to the vault and unlocked it. The vault door opened slowly, ponderously, with a muted groan.

It sounded the way it always did.

He carried a box containing thick bundles of banknotes to his teller's station and spread them out over the work

surface. He studied them for a moment, just as he always did.

Soon Lisbet would come drifting in through the employees' entrance and start babbling on about her family; then Albert would arrive, clearing his throat in a slightly superior way and nodding stiffly; and last would be Mia, dark, silent and reserved, peering out from under her fringe. Soon the smell of Lisbet's coffee would waft away any remaining stuffiness and fill the office with an air of quiet humanity.

Then the scattered knots of customers would appear: the farmers fumbling with ancient passbooks, housewives meticulously recording their meagre withdrawals, pensioners struggling to avoid resorting to cat food.

This was where he had been happy for so long. But the town was getting smaller and smaller, the customers fewer and fewer.

Everything is exactly the same as always, he thought.

He went back around the dividing wall to play a quick round of 501. From 501 down to zero. A couple of triple-20s and some single bulls sped up the countdown. Exactly as always. The darts landed where they were supposed to. The slightly unusual wavering flight, which was the trademark of his darts, made them hit the mark every time. He had 87 points to go when the alarm clock rang.

Nine-thirty.

Still engrossed in the strategy for the last round, he went over to the front door and unlocked it.

Everything was exactly the same as always.

Let's make it simple, he thought, a simple 15 and a simple 20 and then the one double bull of the morning for 50 points, as the perfect combination: 85. Then only the checkout left, the double ring of the 1. Eighty-seven. No problem. The hard part was putting the third dart in the little black centre of the bull's-eye. A good start to the day.

A good start to a completely ordinary day.

He hit 15 in the outer bed and 20 in the inner, just to make things interesting. The dart teetered at the wire next to the irksome 1, but it held. The wire trembled a bit from the contact. Then the bull's-eye was left, right in the centre. He focused his attention, raised the dart, lined up the ring with the long point and drew the dart back four inches, exactly at eye level.

The door slammed.

That couldn't be. It wasn't right. It was too early. Damn.

He lowered the dart and walked out to the bank office.

An enormous, ox-like man was pointing a big, long pistol at him.

He stood there petrified. Everything fell apart. This was wrong, this was so wrong. *Not now. Not now, please.* The floor seemed to fall away from under him.

The man came up to the teller's window and held out an empty suitcase.

He put down the dart, opened the hatch; stunned, he took the bag.

'Fill it up,' the ox-like man said in heavily accented English.

Quietly and methodically he placed one bundle of banknotes after another into the suitcase. Next to the bag lay the dart with the long point. Thoughts were surging through his mind, helter-skelter. *Only the bull's-eye left*, he thought. He thought about Lisbet and about nine-thirty, and about a bank door he had unlocked out of old habit. He thought about checking out in the double ring.

The ox-like man lowered the pistol for a moment and looked around nervously.

He thought about his ability to perform his best under extreme pressure.

'Hurry up!' snarled the ox, casting nervous glances out the window. His eyes were very black inside reddish rings.

Bull's-eye, he thought and grabbed the dart.

Then all that remained was the checkout.

2

WHAT STRUCK PAUL Hjelm first was how long it had been since he'd sat in a patrol car with flashing blue lights and a wailing siren. Now he was squeezed into the back seat between two uniformed cops and a plain-clothes detective who looked exactly like him. He leaned forward and placed his hand on the driver's shoulder just as the car burned rubber, pulling out abruptly onto Botkyrkaleden.

'I think it'd be best to turn off the siren,' Hjelm said.

The driver reached out his hand to push the button, but that didn't bring silence; the squealing tyres and the furiously accelerating engine kept the noise level high.

Hjelm studied his plain-clothes colleague. Svante Ernstsson was clinging to the little strap that hung from the roof. *Are there really straps hanging from the roof in modern police vehicles?* thought Hjelm, thinking that was probably not what he should be thinking about right now.

Then he thought about the fact that he often thought things that he shouldn't be thinking.

Which just made him think about them all the more.

It was only a month since Ernstsson had climbed unharmed out of a demolished police patrol car on Tegelängsvägen after an absurd high-speed chase down in the Fittja industrial area. Now Ernstsson laughed faintly as the car flew across the busy dual carriageway at Fittjamotet, careened to the left through the long curve

towards Slagsta and passed the intersection. Tegelängsvägen stretched off to the right; Ernstsson kept his slightly rigid gaze fixed on the left. After that he relaxed just a bit.

Hjelm thought he was seeing exactly what his partner saw and feeling exactly what he felt. After almost seven years of working closely together in one of the country's toughest police districts, they knew each other inside out. And yet he realised that what they actually knew about each other was minuscule. Was that really all he had learned?

Hjelm felt completely empty. That was why he had stepped into his colleague's fleeting terror – to escape from himself for a moment.

The day had started in the worst imaginable way. The bedroom was utterly suffocating; the early spring sun had played over the blinds for a while, trapping the stuffiness. With a stiff, persistent morning erection, he had crept closer to Cilla, who as unobtrusively as possible had wriggled in the opposite direction. He didn't notice, refused to notice, crept closer with his stubborn, stifled urgency. And she slipped away, inch by inch, until she suddenly got too close to the edge of the bed and fell to the floor.

He bolted upright, sitting up in bed wide awake, his erection abruptly lost. She quietly got up off the floor, shaking her head, wordless with fury. She stuck her hand into her pants and fished out a pad soaked with blood, holding it out towards him. He gave a slight grimace that was both apologetic and filled with disgust. Then they noticed that Danne was standing in the doorway, a look of obvious horror on his pimply fourteen-year-old face. He ran off. They heard a key turn, and Public Enemy started rapping at full blast.

They exchanged looks. Suddenly they were reunited by a bewildered sense of guilt. Cilla dashed out of the room, but knocking on Danne's door was pointless.

Then they were sitting at the breakfast table.

Tova and Danne had left for school. Danne hadn't eaten any breakfast, hadn't uttered a word, hadn't exchanged a glance with any of them. With her back to Paul, Cilla said, looking at the sparrows on the bird feeder outside the window of their terraced house in Norsborg, 'You've witnessed two births. Why the hell are you still disgusted by a woman's bodily functions?'

He felt completely empty. The car passed the Slagsta allotment gardens on the right and the Brunna School on the left. It made a sharp left turn down towards Hallunda Square; for a moment he had Ernstsson in his lap. They exchanged tired glances and watched as the truncated but crowded stretches of Linvägen, Kornvägen, Hampvägen and Havrevägen flew past outside the window. The street names – *flax, grain, hemp, oats* – were like a textbook on agronomy. Everywhere loomed the antithesis of the agrarian society, the brutally unimaginative facades of the identical tall apartment buildings from the Sixties and Seventies. *A breeding ground*, thought Hjelm without understanding what he meant. The extinct voices of a peasant society echoed through him like ghosts.

Over by the square three police cars were parked with their doors wide open. Behind a couple of the doors crouched uniformed officers with their weapons drawn. They were pointed in all different directions. The rest of the cops were running around, shooing away curious bystanders, baby buggies and dog owners.

Hjelm and Ernstsson pulled up alongside the others. The officers were helping with what would later be called 'the evacuation of the area'. Hjelm was still sitting halfway inside the vehicle while Ernstsson got out and went over to the next car. Squeezing out of it came the dishevelled figure of Johan Bringman, who stretched his creaky back.

'The immigration office,' he managed to say in the middle of his stretching. 'Three hostages.'

‘Okay, what do we know?’ asked Ernstsson, peering down from his towering height at Bringman’s hunched form and unbuttoning his leather jacket in the late-winter sun.

‘Shotgun, third floor. The majority of the building has been cleared. We’re waiting for the hostage negotiators.’

‘From headquarters at Kungsholmen?’ said Hjelm from inside the car. ‘That’ll take a while. Have you seen the traffic on the E4?’

‘Where’s Bruun?’ said Ernstsson.

Bringman shook his head. ‘No idea. Maybe he’s waiting for the top brass to arrive. In any case, it was a clerk from the office who managed to get out. Come on out, Johanna. Over here. This is Johanna Nilsson. She works inside the building.’

A blonde woman in her forties got out of the police car and went to stand next to Ernstsson. She held one hand on her forehead and the other to her lips, chewing on one fingernail, then another.

Ernstsson attempted to comfort her by placing his hand on her shoulder and said in his most reassuring voice, ‘Try and take it easy. We’re going to resolve this situation. Do you know who he is?’

‘His name is Dritëro Frakulla,’ said Johanna. Her voice broke, but her words were firm. ‘A Kosovar Albanian. His family has been here a long time, and now they’ve been sucked into the general wave of deportation. They thought everything was fine and were just waiting for their citizenship. Then all of a sudden they were informed of the opposite. I assume that’s when things went wrong. The rug was pulled out from under them. I’ve seen it so many times before.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘Know him? For God’s sake, he’s my friend! It was my case. I know his children, his wife, even his freaking cats. I’m probably the one he’s after. He’s a timid man – he’d

never hurt a fly. But I lied to him.' She raised her voice. 'Without knowing it, I was lying to him the whole goddamned time! The rules kept changing and changing and changing. How the hell are we supposed to do our job when everything we say gets turned into lies?'

Hjelm got wearily to his feet. He took off his heavy denim jacket with the sheepskin collar, unfastened his shoulder holster and tossed it inside the car. He stuck his service revolver into his waistband behind his back and put his jacket on again.

He felt empty.

'What the hell are you doing?' said Svante Ernstsson and Johan Bringman in unison.

'I'm going in.'

'The hostage team will be here any minute, for fuck's sake!' Ernstsson shouted at Hjelm as he crossed Tomtbergavägen. He ran after him and grabbed his arm. 'Wait, Paul. Don't do anything stupid. It's not necessary. Leave it to the experts.'

He met Hjelm's gaze, saw the blank look of resolve and let go of his arm.

We know each other too well, he thought, and nodded.

Hjelm slowly made his way up the stairs to the immigration office. He saw nothing, heard nothing. The air was stifling in the dreary, deserted building. Everything was concrete. Concrete with thick, plastic-like paint that seemed grey-tinged no matter what colour it was. The walls were covered with chips of flecking paint like half-hearted decorations. A strange heat, shimmering as if in the desert, sucked up the stench of urine, sweat and alcohol. *This is how Sweden smells*, Hjelm thought as he reached the third floor.

It was the mid-1990s.

He made his way cautiously down the empty, dismal government corridor until he was standing outside the closed door. He took a deep breath and shouted, 'Frakulla!'

It was very, very quiet. Not wanting to give himself time to think, he went on.

‘My name is Paul Hjelm, and I’m a police officer. I’m alone and unarmed. I just want to talk to you.’

A faint rustling sound could be heard behind the door. Then a husky, barely audible voice said, ‘Come in.’

Hjelm took another deep breath and opened the door.

Sitting on the floor of the office were two women and a man with their hands on their heads. Standing very close to them, against the windowless wall, was a short, dark man in a brown suit, complete with waistcoat, tie and shotgun. The last was pointed straight at Hjelm’s nose.

He closed the door behind him and raised his hands in the air.

‘I know what’s happened to you, Frakulla,’ he said calmly. ‘We need to resolve this situation so nobody gets hurt. If you surrender now, you can still appeal the decision; otherwise it’s going to be prison and then deportation for you. Look, I’m unarmed.’ He carefully shrugged out of his denim jacket and dropped it to the floor.

Dritëro Frakulla was blinking rapidly. He aimed the gun alternately at Hjelm and at the three civil servants on the floor.

Don’t ask me to turn round, thought Hjelm. Keep talking, keep talking. Focus on showing him sympathy. Use words that’ll make him think. Distract his attention.

‘Think about your family,’ he managed. ‘What will your children do without you to support them? What about your wife – does she work? What kind of job will she be able to get, Frakulla? What sort of qualifications does she have?’

The shotgun was now aimed at him; that was what he wanted.

Frakulla suddenly spoke, almost as if he were reciting the words, in clear Swedish: ‘The worse crimes I commit, the longer we’ll be able to stay in this country. They won’t

send my family away without me. I'm sacrificing myself for their sake.'

'You're wrong, Frakulla. Your family will be deported immediately, forced to return to the Serbs without any means of defending themselves. What do you think the Serbs will do with a woman and a couple of pre-school kids that tried to flee from them? And what do you think will happen to you if you're charged with murdering a cop, an unarmed cop?'

For a second the man lowered the shotgun an inch or two, looking utterly confused. That was enough for Hjelm. He reached back to fumble at his waistband, pulled out his service revolver and fired one shot.

A voice was silenced inside him: *'Why the hell are you still disgusted by a woman's bodily functions?'*

For a moment that seemed lifted out of time everything was absolutely still. Frakulla held the shotgun in a tight grip. His inscrutable eyes bored straight into Hjelm's. Anything could happen.

'Ai,' said Dritëro Frakulla, dropped the gun and toppled forward.

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, thought Hjelm, and felt sick.

The male civil servant grabbed the shotgun and pressed the muzzle hard against Frakulla's head. A patch of blood was growing larger under the man's right shoulder.

'Drop the weapon, you fuck!' yelled Hjelm, and vomited.

3

AT FIRST IT'S only the piano's bizarre little strolls up and down the keys, accompanied by a hi-hat and maybe the faint clash of a cymbal, possibly the sweep of the brushes on the snare drum as well. Occasionally the fingers digress a bit from the marked path of their climb, into a light, bluesy feeling, but without breaking the choppy rhythm of the strutting two-four beat. Then a slight pause, the saxophone joins the same riff and everything changes. Now the bass comes in, calmly walking up and down. The sax takes over, and the piano scatters sporadic comping chords in the background, broken by a few ramblings behind the apparently indolent improvisations of the sax.

He presses the tweezers into the hole, tugging and tugging.

The saxophone chirps with slight dissonance, then instantly falls back into the melodic theme. The piano goes silent; it's so quiet that the audience can be heard in the background.

The tweezers pull out what they've been looking for.

The sax man says 'Yeah' a couple of times, in between a couple of rambles. The audience says 'Yeah'. Long drawn-out notes. The piano is still absent. Scattered applause.

Then the piano returns and takes over. It meanders as before, making successive detours, rumbles, ever freer trills. Just the piano, bass and drums.

He presses the tweezers into the second hole. This time it's easier. He drops both lumps into his pocket. He sits down on the sofa.

The wanderings of the piano have returned to their starting point. Now the bass is gone. Then it comes back in, along with the sax. All four now, in a veiled promenade. Then the applause. Yeah.

He presses the remote. A vast silence ensues.

He gets up cautiously. Stands for a moment in the big room. High over his head dust motes circulate in the non-existent draught around the crystal chandelier. The dull metal on the streamlined shape of the stereo reflects nothing of the faint light: Bang & Olufsen.

Bang, bang, he thinks. *Olufsen*, he thinks. Then he stops thinking.

He runs his gloved hand lightly over the shiny leather surface of the sofa before he allows himself to tread tentatively across the pleasantly creaking parquet floor. He avoids the huge Pakistani carpet, hand-knotted over a month's time by the slave labour of Pakistani children, and goes out into the corridor. He opens the door and steps out onto the terrace, stopping for a moment, close to the hammock.

He fills his lungs with the tranquil, chilly air of the spring night, letting his eyes rest on the rows of apple trees: Astrakhans and Åkerös, Ingrid Maries and Lobos, White Transparents and Kanikers. Each tree is labelled with a little sign; he noticed that on his way in. So far the apples can be found only on the signs, showy, brilliantly hued, long before any blossoms have even appeared. Flat, surrogate apples.

He would like to believe that it's crickets that he hears; otherwise it's inside his head. *Sonic bang*, he thinks. *And Olufsen*, he thinks.

Although it wasn't a real bang, of course.

Leaving the terrace, he closes the door behind him, goes back down the long corridor and returns to the enormous living room. Once again he avoids the red-flamed frescos of the hand-knotted carpet, goes over to the stereo and presses the eject button. In a vaguely elliptical trajectory, the cassette tape gently rises out of the tape deck. He plucks it out and puts it in his pocket. He turns off the stereo.

He looks around the room. *What an atmosphere*, he thinks. Even the dust motes seem custom-made to complement the crystal chandelier, as they elegantly swirl around it.

In his mind's eye he sees a list. In his mind he ticks off each item.

Kuno, he thinks, laughing. *Isn't that the name of a party game?*

He leaves the living room by a slightly different route. A teak table and four matching, high-backed chairs stand on another hand-knotted rug; he imagines that it's Persian. It is predominantly beige, in contrast to the red Pakistani carpet.

Although right now they're very similar.

Close to the table he has to step over what is colouring the Persian rug red. Then he lifts his legs to step over someone else's.

Out in the garden a drowsy full moon peeks from behind its fluffy cloud cover, as a veiled fairylike dance skims the bare apple trees.

4

DETECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT ERIK Bruun must have pressed a green button somewhere on his desk, because accompanied by a buzzing sound a green light lit up his name-plate on the doorframe out in the hallway. Paul Hjelm, in turn, pressed down on the handle to the perpetually locked door and went in.

This was the police station, whose peculiar geographic coordinates were something like this: located in Fittja, with mailing address in Norsborg, in Botkyrka municipality, Huddinge police authority. If you wanted to avoid using the name Fittja, because of its obscene and derogatory association with the Swedish word for *pussy*, you could always say Botkyrka, which, in addition to providing the location for the church, encompassed quite lovely areas such as Vårsta and Grödinge; or you could say Norsborg, the hometown of the table-tennis genius J. O. Waldner and the Balrog floorball team; or you could use the name Huddinge, even if it sounded like a bedroom suburb. Hjelm lived in a terraced house in Norsborg, just a few doors from Waldner's birthplace. But he could never really specify which district he lived in, least of all now.

The place that God forgot, he thought fatefully as he stepped into Bruun's room. The wallpaper was changed at least once a year, nevertheless it would turn brown within a matter of days. Erik Bruun always inaugurated his new

wallpaper by allowing his black cigars and equally black lungs to puff clouds of smoke over the walls. Hjelm had never visited Bruun in his bachelor apartment in Eriksberg; the place had acquired a reputation of mythic proportions, but he could imagine how the walls must look. Hjelm was a non-smoker, although he did inhale an occasional cigarette to avoid becoming a slave to virtue, as a wise man once expressed it.

Today Hjelm had already smoked six, and he knew that there would be more. The nicotine was swirling around in his head, and for once he sensed no immediate shock upon stepping into Bruun's inner sanctum, which the authorities had designated a serious health hazard. An overly zealous official had once taped a skull and crossbones to the door, and Hjelm and Ernstsson had spent three hours of valuable work time scraping it off.

Erik Bruun was not alone in the room. He was sitting behind his cluttered desk, puffing on an enormous Russian cigar. On the sofa below the row of windows sat two well-dressed gentlemen. They were about Hjelm's age, somewhere in their forties. But no one would ever think of calling Hjelm a gentleman; in their case, it seemed natural. He didn't know these gentlemen, but he recognised the stern set of their expressions.

Oh well. This was pretty much what he'd been expecting.

Bruun raised his substantial body to a standing position and came forward to meet him; such an attempt at a jogging workout was rare for him. He shook hands with Hjelm and scratched his greyish-red beard.

'My congratulations,' he said, putting obvious stress on the word *my*. 'Excellent job. How do you feel? Have you talked to Cecilia?'

'Thanks,' said Hjelm, glancing at the gentlemen on the sofa. 'I haven't been able to get hold of her yet. I assume she'll probably hear about it some other way.'

Bruun nodded several times and returned to his favourite chair.

'As I said, you have the congratulations and support of everyone here at the station. But you didn't answer my question about how you're feeling.'

'No, I didn't,' said Hjelm, and sat down on the chair in front of the desk.

Bruun nodded several times again, in the same knowing manner.

'I understand,' he said, sucking on his cigar. 'This is Niklas Grundström and Ulf Mårtensson, from Internal Affairs. Whether they intend to offer you their congratulations is an open question at the moment.'

Since Bruun's little tirade sounded as if he was on the verge of leaving, both gentlemen got up from the sofa. Then came a moment of doubt as the superintendent remained where he was and continued puffing on his black cigar. This display of a hint of uncertainty was what both of them would have given anything to avoid. Hjelm thanked Bruun with a seemingly neutral expression and received the same look in return.

The superintendent took one last puff and sluggishly got to his feet. 'The ombudsman for department safety has determined that I'm not allowed to leave my office holding a cigar,' he apologised, stubbing the butt into an ashtray. Then he left the office swathed in a cloud of cigar fumes.

The crushed butt continued to emit brown smoke. Grundström pushed aside the ashtray as if it were a month-old latrine bucket and sat, with some reluctance, in Bruun's smoke-saturated executive desk chair. Mårtensson sat back down on the sofa. Grundström set his briefcase on the desk and pulled out a pair of glasses with almost perfectly round lenses, which he ceremoniously placed on the bridge of his nose. Then he took out a large brown envelope and an evening newspaper. He set the briefcase on the floor and held up the front page of *Expressen*. In big letters the

headline screamed: EXTRA. HERO IN FITTJA. POLICE HERO IN HOSTAGE DRAMA. Under the headline was a photograph, almost ten years old, of Paul Hjelm, who had been a police sergeant when it was taken.

'The media have assigned the roles,' Niklas Grundström said in a clear, educated voice, tossing the newspaper aside. He fixed his gaze on Hjelm. 'Things certainly move fast these days, don't they? Imagine, they got the story into the evening edition. The pen moves faster than the brain.'

'An old proverb,' Hjelm said without thinking. He bit his tongue.

Grundström regarded him without expression. He leaned down and pulled a little tape recorder from his briefcase. 'I was hoping to avoid this,' he said, pressing the start button. 'Interrogation with Detective Inspector Paul Hjelm, born 18 February 1957, conducted by Grundström and Mårtensson at the Huddinge police station on March the thirtieth at seventeen-o-six hours.'

'Interrogation?' said Hjelm.

'Interrogation,' said Grundström. 'It was your choice.'

Hjelm bit his tongue again. *Don't give them anything.*

Then it came. 'Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of any anti-immigrant organisation?'

'No,' replied Hjelm, trying to stay perfectly calm.

'What is your attitude towards immigrants?'

'Neither good nor bad.'

Grundström rummaged through the big brown envelope, took out something that looked like a report and began reading. 'Of all your arrests made during your time in this district, forty-two per cent were of individuals of foreign origin. And in the past year that figure increased to fifty-seven per cent.'

Hjelm cleared his throat and paused to gather his thoughts. 'According to the latest figures, in all of Botkyrka municipality, thirty-two per cent of the population are of foreign origin, and twenty per cent are foreign-born

citizens. Up here in the north, in Alby, Fittja, Hallunda and Norsborg, the figures are even higher, well over fifty per cent and fifty-seven per cent. A forty-two per cent arrest rate of immigrants actually indicates that there is a greater propensity to commit a crime among Swedish-born individuals in the area. The figures demonstrate no basis whatsoever for racism, if that's what you're getting at.' Hjelm was quite pleased with his reply.

Grundström was not. 'Why the hell did you think you could go in there like some sort of Dirty Harry and shoot that man?'

'That man, as you call him, is named Dritëro Frakulla, and he belongs to the Albanian minority in the province of Kosovo in southern Serbia, and I'm sure you're aware of the situation there. Nearly all the Kosovar Albanians that we've had anything to do with here, people who have become acclimatised and learned Swedish and who have children in the Swedish school system - nearly all of them are now going to be deported. But it's not going to happen without resistance.'

'All the more reason not to go in and shoot him down. The hostage team of the National Criminal Police was on its way. Specialists, experts. Why in holy hell did you go in alone?'

Hjelm could no longer keep silent. 'To save his life, goddamn it!'

* * *

It was approaching eight P.M. Hjelm and Bruun were sitting in Bruun's office, the superintendent in his armchair and Hjelm in a semi-reclining position on the sofa. In front of them on the desk stood a large cassette recorder. The tape was playing. They heard: 'To save his life, goddamn it!'

Bruun practically swallowed his cigar. He hit the stop button with a swift chop.

'You, sir,' he said, pointing at Hjelm with the same abrupt movement, 'are a very foolhardy person.'

'It was stupid, I know ...' said Hjelm from the sofa. 'Just as stupid as secretly taping an Internal Affairs interrogation.'

Bruun shrugged and started the tape again. First a brief pause, then Hjelm's voice resumed:

'That unit specialises in one thing, and you know that as well as I do: their directive is to render the perpetrator harmless without injuring the hostages. Render harmless, meaning eliminate, meaning kill.'

'Do you really want us to believe that you shot him in order to save his life?'

'Believe whatever the hell you like.'

Bruun glanced at Hjelm, shaking his head sternly; now it was Hjelm's turn to shrug.

'That's precisely what we're not allowed to do.' Grundström had spoken in his normal voice; the last couple of things he said had sounded different. 'We're here to determine right from wrong, to ensure that you haven't committed any dereliction of duty, and then clear your name without issuing any reprimands. That's how the justice system becomes undermined. If necessary, we may have to censure you. This has nothing to do with our personal beliefs.'

'For the record' - Hjelm - 'the shooting took place at eight forty-seven A.M., the special unit arrived at nine thirty-eight. Were we supposed to just sit there taking cover outside, and wait for almost an hour, with a desperate gunman, terrified hostages and a paralysed Hallunda shopping centre on our hands?'

'Okay, for the moment let's drop the question of why and take a look at what you *de facto* did.'

Pause. Grundström and Mårtensson had switched places then, while Hjelm pondered what sort of person says *de facto*.

The sharp voice was replaced by one that was significantly coarser. 'All right then. So far we've just skimmed the surface. Now let's get down to brass tacks.'

With a frown, Bruun switched off the tape recorder and turned to Hjelm with genuine surprise.

'Do you mean to tell me that they in all seriousness tried to pull that good-cop-bad-cop routine on you? When you're an experienced interrogator?'

Hjelm shrugged as fatigue overtook him. An already long day wasn't going to get any shorter. When Mårtensson spoke again, his voice merged with words and images from all the other layers of Hjelm's mind. For a brief moment as he hovered between wakefulness and sleep, these layers fought for dominance. Then he fell asleep.

'Okay, one step at a time. First, you shouted through the door without any warning; that alone could have caused a disaster. Second, you claimed to be unarmed, even though your gun was sticking out of your waistband. All he had to do was ask you to turn round, which would also have been a disaster. Third, you lied to the perpetrator. If he'd been aware of certain facts, again, disaster would have ensued. Fourth, when you fired, you aimed at a spot that was not according to regulations; that also could have led to disaster.'

'How is he?' Hjelm's voice.

'What?' Mårtensson's.

'How is he?'

'Who the hell do you mean?'

'Dritëro Frakulla.'

'What the fuck is that? The name of some kind of orange? A Transylvanian count? Just focus on the facts, for fuck's sake!'

'It is a fact. *That* is a fact.'

The pause went on so long that Bruun fidgeted, wondering if it was over. Hjelm was sound asleep. Then Grundström's voice piped up from the background.

'He's in the Huddinge clinic, under round-the-clock guard. His condition is stable. I can't say the same about your situation. We'll continue tomorrow morning at ten-thirty. Thanks for your time today, Hjelm.'

Sounds of chairs scraping, a tape recorder being switched off, papers shuffled, a briefcase snapped closed, a door shutting.

Superintendent Erik Bruun lit another pitch-black cigar that had been unevenly rolled, and listened. Then came what he'd been waiting for. It was Grundström.

'He's incredibly cunning. Why the hell did you let him off so easy? "A Transylvanian count"? Damn it, Uffe! We can't let this guy slip through our fingers. A Dirty Harry who knows how to use the system and come out unscathed opens the door to hundreds of others all over Sweden, all of them more or less racist.'

Mårtensson mumbled something, Grundström sighed, chairs clattered, a door opened and closed.

Bruun stopped the tape and for a moment didn't move.

Outside the police station the bright spring day had dissolved into pitch-darkness. Slowly and laboriously he got up from his chair and went over to Hjelm, still in a deep sleep. Before taking in a big breath and blowing smoke right in his face, Bruun studied his subordinate and gently shook his head.

I won't be able to keep him here much longer, he thought. One way or another, he's going to disappear.

Hjelm coughed himself awake. His eyes were running, and the first thing he saw through the cloud of smoke was the combination of a reddish-grey beard and a double chin.

'Ten-thirty,' said Bruun, packing up his ratty old briefcase. 'You can sleep in. Try to be clear and concise tomorrow. Maybe a little better than today.'

Hjelm stumbled towards the door. He turned round. Bruun gave him a good-natured nod. It was his way of offering a hug.

* * *

What is it they usually say? Hjelm wondered as he opened the fridge and took out a beer. Middle-aged heterosexual men with full-time jobs and white complexions are the societal norm. It's on that set of features that all assessments of what is normal are based. And health standards. Another phrase appeared in his mind: *Being a woman is not a disease*. But it *is* a deviation. Not to mention homosexuality and youth and old age and dark skin and speaking with an accent.

That was how his world looked: inside the boundaries were all those heterosexual, middle-aged white policemen; outside was everybody else. He looked at the deviants sitting on the sofa: his – how old was she now? – thirty-six-year-old wife, Cecilia, and his twelve-year-old daughter, Tova. Public Enemy was playing from the opposite direction, clearly audible.

'It's on, Papa!' cried Tova. 'It's on now!'

He went into the living room, slurping the beer between his teeth. Cilla regarded this decades-old habit of his with a certain distaste, but turned her attention back to the TV. The theme music of the evening news programme was playing. The story was part of the headlines. *Way out of proportion*, he thought.

'A hostage drama was played out this morning at the Hallunda Immigration Office south of Stockholm. An armed man forced his way into the office just after it opened and threatened three staff members with a sawn-off shotgun. Fortunately, the drama had a happy ending.'

Happy, he thought. He said, 'The Botkyrka Immigration Office. Located in Hallunda.'

The women in his family looked at him, trying to evaluate his statement, each in her own way. Tova thought, *But that's not the point*. Cilla thought, *You always have to make a point of your own dissatisfaction by finding little*

factual errors; emotions become thoughts; perceptions become facts.

The phone rang. Hjelm belched, then answered it.

'The Hallunda Immigration Office?' said Svante Ernstsson.

'Sawn-off shotgun?' said Paul Hjelm.

Laughter on both ends of the line, laughter only they shared. The Noble Art of Talking Shop Without Getting Noticed.

The requisite childishness.

The different types of laughter.

It's possible to hear from the sound that it's aimed only at somebody else.

It deepens if it's aimed inwards at the same time.

'How are things?' Ernstsson finally asked.

'So-so.'

'It's on now,' said Cilla, Tova and Svante in unison.

The weatherbeaten reporter was standing on Tomtbergavägen with Hallunda Square behind him. It was afternoon, in the dazzling spring sunshine. The square was swarming with people. Everything looked normal. A gang of football fans wearing AIK scarves stopped behind the enthusiastic figure of the reporter to make V signs.

'At eight-twenty this morning -' said the reporter.

'Eight twenty-eight,' said Hjelm.

'- a man of Albanian-Kosovar origin went into the immigration office in Hallunda, armed with a shotgun. Four staff members were present at the time, and the man took three of them hostage. The fourth managed to escape. The man forced the hostages up to the third floor and made them lie on the floor. After about twenty minutes, police officer Paul Hjelm from the Huddinge police department appeared ...'

The ten-year-old photograph now filled the TV screen.

'Where did that come from?' said Hjelm.

'What a cutie,' said Ernstsson, over the phone.