JOHN AJVIDE LINDQVIST

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN



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LET THE RIGHT ONE IN

John Ajvide Lindqvist

Translated from the Swedish by Ebba Segerberg

Quercus

To Mia, my Mia

‘Do they die fast, the pigs?’

Tommy met his gaze with equal seriousness.

‘No, they don’t.’

✳

‘I’m going out for a while.’

‘No.’

‘Just out into the courtyard.’

‘And nowhere else, do you hear?’

‘Sure, sure.’

‘Do you want me to call for you when…’

‘No, I’ll be back in time. I have a watch. *Don’t* call for me.’

Oskar put on his jacket, his hat. He paused as he was putting his boot on. Went quietly back to his room and took out the knife, tucked it inside his jacket. Laced up the boots. He heard his mum’s voice again from the living room.

‘It’s cold out there.’

‘I’ve got my hat.’

‘On your head?’

‘No, on my feet.’

‘This is no joking matter, Oskar, you know how it is…’

‘See you in a while.’

‘…your ears…’

He walked out, looked down at his watch. A quarter past seven. Forty-five minutes until the program started. Tommy and the others were probably down in their basement headquarters but he didn’t dare go down there. Tommy was all right, but the others…They could get strange ideas, especially if they had been sniffing.

So he went down to the playground in the middle of the yard. Two big trees, sometimes used as a soccer goal, a play structure with a slide, a sandpit and a swing set consisting of three tyre-swings suspended from chains. He sat down in one of the tyre swings and rocked gently to and fro.

He liked this place at night. Hundreds of lighted windows all around him on four sides, himself sitting in the dark. Safe and alone

at the same time. He pulled the knife out of the holster. The blade was so shiny he could see windows reflected in it. The moon.

A bloody moon…

Oskar got up, snuck over to one of the trees, talked to it.

'What are you looking at, you fucking idiot? Do you want to die?'

The tree didn't answer and Oskar carefully drove the knife into it. Didn't want to damage the fine smooth edge.

'That's what happens if you so much as look at me.'

He turned the knife so a small wedge of wood popped out of the trunk. A piece of flesh. He whispered, 'Go on, squeal like a pig.'

He stopped, thought he heard a sound. He looked around, holding the knife by his hip. Lifted the blade to his eyes, checked it. The point was as smooth as before. He used the blade as a mirror, and turned it so it reflected the jungle gym. Someone was standing there, someone who had not been there a moment before. A blurry contour against the clean steel. He lowered the knife and looked directly at the jungle gym. Yes. But it wasn't the Vällingby killer. It was a child.

There was enough light for him to determine that it was a girl he had never seen before. Oskar took a step towards the jungle gym. The girl didn't move, just stood there looking at him.

He took another step and suddenly he grew scared. Of what? Of himself. He was moving towards the girl with his hand tightly closed around the knife, on his way to stab her with it. No, that wasn't true. But that was how he had felt, for a moment. Wasn't she scared?

He stopped, pushed the knife back in its holder and put it back inside his jacket.

'Hi.'

The girl didn't answer. Oskar was so close now that he could see she had dark hair, a small face, big eyes. Eyes wide open, calmly looking at him. Her white hands were resting on the railing.

'I said hi.'

'I heard you.'

'Why didn't you answer?'

The girl shrugged. Her voice was not as high as he would have expected. Sounded like someone his own age.

There was something strange about her. Shoulder-length black hair. Round face, small nose. Like one of those paper dolls in the *Family Journal*. Very…pretty. But there was something else. She had no hat, and no jacket. Only a thin pink sweater even though it was cold.

The girl nodded in the direction of the tree that Oskar had cut.

'What are you doing?'

Oskar blushed, but she probably couldn't tell in the dark.

'Practising.'

'For what?'

'For if the murderer comes along.'

'What murderer?'

'The one in Vällingby. The one who killed that guy.'

The girl sighed, looked up at the moon. Then she leaned forward again.

'Are you scared?'

'No, but a murderer, that's like…it's good if you can—defend yourself. Do you live here?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'Over there,' the girl gestured to the front door next to Oskar's. 'Next door to you.'

'How do you know where I live?'

'I've seen you in the window before.'

Oskar's cheeks grew hot. While he was trying to think of something to say the girl jumped down from the top of the jungle gym and landed in front of him. A drop of over two metres.

She must do gymnastics or something like that.

She was almost as tall as he was, but much thinner. The pink sweater fit tight across her chest, which was still completely flat

without a hint of breasts. Her eyes were black, enormous in her pale little face. She held one hand up in the air in front of him as if she were warding something off that was coming towards her. Her fingers were long and slender as twigs.

'I can't be friends with you. Just so you know.'

Oskar folded his hands over his chest. He could feel the contours of the knife through his jacket.

'What?'

One corner of the girl's mouth pulled up in a half-smile.

'Do you need a reason? I'm just telling you how it is. So you know.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

The girl turned and walked away from Oskar, towards her front door. After a couple of steps Oskar said, 'What makes you think I'd *want* to be friends with you? You must be pretty stupid.'

The girl stopped. Stood still for a moment. Then she turned and walked back to Oskar, stopped in front of him. Interlaced her fingers and let her arms drop.

'What did you say?'

Oskar wrapped his arms more tightly around him, pressed one hand against his knife and stared down into the ground.

'You must be stupid…to say something like that.'

'Oh, I am, am I?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry. But that's just how it is.'

They stood still, about half a metre between them. Oskar continued staring into the ground. A strange smell was emanating from the girl.

About a year ago his dog Bobby had gotten an infection in one paw and in the end they had to have him put down. The last day Oskar had stayed home from school, lain next to the sick dog for several hours, and said goodbye. Bobby had smelled like the girl did. Oskar screwed up his nose.

'Is that strange smell coming from you?'

'I guess so.'

Oskar looked up at her. He regretted having said that. She looked so…fragile in her pink top. He unfolded his arms and made a gesture in her direction.

'Aren't you cold?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

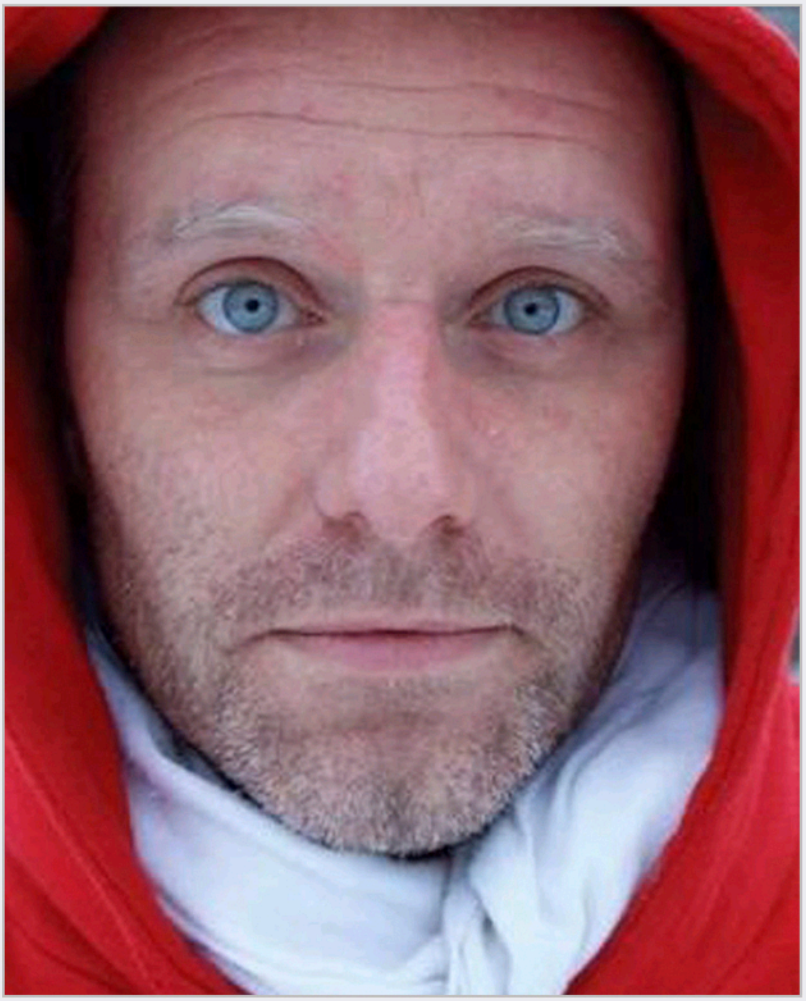
The girl frowned, wrinkling up her face and for a moment she looked much much older than she was. Like an old woman about to cry.

'I guess I've forgotten how to.'

The girl quickly turned around and walked back to her door. Oskar remained where he was looking at her. When she reached the heavy front door he expected that she would need to use both hands to pull it open. Instead she grasped the door handle with one hand and pulled it open so hard it banged into the wall stop, bounced and then closed behind her.

He pushed his hands into his pockets and felt sad. Thought about Bobby and how he had looked in the makeshift coffin Dad had made for him. Thought about the cross he had made in woodshop that had snapped in two as they hammered it into the frozen ground.

He ought to make a new one.



John Ajvide Lindqvist is a Swedish author, born in 1968, who grew up in Blackeberg, a suburb of Stockholm. He came in second in the Nordic card trick championship, before working as a stand-up comedian for twelve years. His four novels, Let the Right One In, Handling the Undead, Harbour and Little Star have been translated into English and published by Quercus.

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