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A DARKER SHADE

17 Swedish Stories of Murder,
Mystery & Suspense

EDITED AND TRANSLATED
BY JOHN-HENRI HOLMBERG



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SHE STEPS OUT OF HER CAR AND SLOWLY WALKS DOWN TOWARDS THE lake. It draws her. The paved walkway disappears between a couple of birches and becomes a path. A dizzying feeling of time rushing off, back to then.

Its black waters.

It is the same lake, the same time of summer as it was then. Just before midsummer, before the heat has permeated the ground and the greenery is still tender and young. The water as dark and tempting as in the nightmares she has had ever since. Not always, to be fair. There have been weeks, even years, when she has managed to sleep calmly, as when Lisette was just a baby.

“Ohmygaawd, it’s been so long! Marina! Piiiaaaa!!”

“Aggel!”

Two other cars have driven up and parked next to hers. The women yell loud enough to make the famous birdlife flutter up from lake pastures and reeds, take cover deeper into the woods.

She forces a smile and turns to meet them.

“Jojjo, is it really you?” Marina takes the last few steps at a run and hugs her. Watches her face, pushes back a strand of hair. “Shit, you look just the same. You haven’t changed a bit.” She turns

to the others, who are unloading baskets and bags full of food from their cars. "Have you seen who's here already? Johanna!"

They laugh and shout and soon she is wrapped in everyone's arms, they hug and agree that all are just as they were.

And it's fabulous to meet again! After thirty years! And you don't look a day over twenty-five! Well, neither do you! They laugh at absolutely everything. And as they tumble into the tiny scout's cottage she thinks, how great that I decided to come after all. That I didn't give in to that feeling of just wanting to hide. There is a warmth between them she had forgotten. They have known each other since such an early age that those thirty years are shed in just a moment. Or so it feels at that particular moment when they are jokingly chattering about who slept in the upper beds that time.

Johanna watches them and wonders which one of them actually came up with the idea of a reunion. She has just assumed that Marina did. Her parents had some kind of connection to the scout organization that owns the cottages. Marina, her hair almost black, though by now she surely must dye it—there are only slight touches of gray that paradoxically make her look younger. Almost more beautiful than she remembers her.

"Didn't you bring a sleeping bag, Jojjo?" Agge asks when the others are throwing their overnight things on the bunk beds.

"No, I'm not sure if I can . . ." She feels all of their eyes. It was a long time since anyone called her Jojjo. "I have to get up early and . . ."

"What are you saying, aren't you going to stay the night? Wasn't that the whole thing?" Agge's deep voice, always sounding as if something was self-evident. She has put on at least sixty pounds and it's still impossible to disagree with her. "I've got blankets in my car," she says, "it'll be all right."

Johanna nods and smiles. Why did she agree to this? Her first reaction on seeing the invitation was a ringing NO. And yet. Just that someone invited her, remembered her. Pia already has the coffee-maker going. Just as back then she slides in without saying much but still ends up at the center, the prettiest of them all. Tiny, attractive wrinkles around her eyes when she laughs.

"What the hell," Agge says, "let's have some champagne."
And the cork bounces against the ceiling.

The fire is burning, a genuine campfire. Their faces glow. The mid-summer dusk is blue and transparent. They pull their sleeping bags around themselves. She knows that she is drinking too fast and too much.

Marina's idea: that they toast each other, all round. They have toasted Marina's new executive position at the staffing company and Pia's new lover who has proposed, third time lucky! They have toasted that Marina has run the women's six-mile race and that Agge has retrained as a gardener; at last she is living her dream! Here's to our dreams! Marina has been married for eighteen years and still loves her husband—*skål!*—and Pia has gotten new tits after her pregnancies—*skål* to them!—and to all their kids who are all doing so well in school—*skål! skål! skål!*—and particularly to Agge's eldest who has been picked for the junior national swim team.

"And what about you, Jojjo, out with it!"

She knows it was a mistake to come here. Her life is nothing you hold up for inspection at reunions. She manages a toast to her daughter, Lisette, getting a job after graduating high school, then slips away, saying that she has to take a trip into the forest.

Nowadays there are toilets behind the cabins, but she does it the way they did back then. Squats down behind a spruce.

A little urine squirts on one of her shoes. Between branches she sees the fire die down to embers and the silhouettes of the middle-aged women around it.

What else could she toast? That she's divorced and has been unable to find someone new? That her apartment is mute now that Lisette has moved out? She can't even do Internet dating, since it makes her feel like the last passenger on the late-night bus going home from town, where everyone is desperately grabbing whatever is offered. And she knows that thousands of people are finding love on those sites, so of course it's all her fault. Like missing the last night bus and being left standing outside in the cold. A toast to that! She sleeps badly, because there will be more cutbacks and nobody knows

who will be laid off. And here's to the body going downhill while time runs out, *skål*!

As she is pulling her pants up she hears a sound. Branches creaking. Somewhere down by the lake. She breathes silently and stands immobile, her hand on her zipper. Seems to see a shadow between the spruces, a shift in the weak light.

A voice. And everything within her is suddenly cold as ice.

"Have you saved me anything to eat?"

Someone is standing where the spruce forest ends and the shoreline begins. Thin and short. Her hair a flowing blonde tangle. Her green sweater.

"What is it?" Lillis says, laughing. Her face is unnaturally pale. As it was already back when they were playing with death. "Didn't you think I'd show up?"

I'm dreaming, Johanna thinks, I'm more drunk than I think. It can't be the same sweater!

"Don't you want to talk to me?" The figure steps closer to her, head a little askance. "And I always thought we were friends."

Johanna steps back. "I'm going back to the others," she says, half running through the forest, a branch scratching her face.

She doesn't turn round until she is sitting by the fire again. Then she stares at the forest, so long that the others also have to turn around.

"But what the hell . . ." Marina stands. "Lilian! I didn't even know . . . who managed to get hold of Lillis? Why haven't you said anything?"

Johanna doesn't even realize that the question is put to her. She sees the woman come closer. A smile animating her face. Now all the others are standing. Johanna feels that she has to stand as well.

Lillis' body is cool and thin in her arms. A quick hug. A darkness sweeping in from the lake and night has fallen.

"God, how great to see you."

"Where did you go? Didn't you disappear even before we started our senior year?"

Distantly she hears them toast Lillis, as if inside a glass jar. Now, for the first time, she actually sees the others. They aren't at

all as unchanged as they fancied; they have aged. Their skin has lost its grip and is hanging loosely from their chins; the years have dug furrows even in Marina's once-perfect face. You can tell that they all dye their hair. Only Lillis is still young, entirely smooth and as dangerously and strangely beautiful as she was then. That tiny little squint.

"My God, you haven't aged a day!" Agge yells. "*Skål* to that!"

Johanna sees their mouths move and laugh. Lillis' face is so white that it shines, despite the embers having gone out and everything is cold.

Can't they see that it's wrong?

Lillis, who for a short while was her closest friend. The unreachable whom she incomprehensibly reached, the great happiness of being seen and being allowed in. Lillis, who was an adventurer and a center, one of those around whom the moon and the earth and the boys revolved, while Johanna was a vapid planet at the rim of the solar system. Vaguely she had understood that Lillis needed her, or someone, anyone, by her side. Johanna had never entered the competition, just followed. The first cigarette, the first high on beer and aspirin, the play in the hut where Johanna mostly waited outside while Lillis was making out inside, but anyway. Afterward she was allowed to share her secrets.

Johanna feels the scream grow inside of her, it wants to burst and escape, but she can't, it isn't possible. The silence is too huge. It has lasted for thirty years.

Wants to tell the others: But can't you see, don't you get it?

She pinches her arm, hard, and it hurts. It's no nightmare, it's happening. She has to project it when she looks into Lillis' pale-blue and slightly squinting eyes. Project her words, silently, across the dead fire that is now all ashes.

You don't exist. You're dead.

And then she can't stay there any longer, because she is sucked into the pale blur and it makes her shiver. She has to rise and walk down to the lake.

There is a story about the Upper Lake. Have you ever heard it?

It is Lillis' voice, but is it then or now? They have walked along the water's edge, away from the others, because Lillis is tired of the endless competition between Marina and Pia. Johanna is thinking that Lillis is also competing, but she never says it out loud. They are sixteen years old and will sleep in the cabin all the weekend and tomorrow—Marina has asked some boys—they'll have a party.

Come on, let's swim. Aw, come on, now! We'll have to see if it's true what they say about the Upper Lake. That somewhere out there, there's a bottomless spot. Where those who have drowned live. They say that if you go down deep enough you can be caught in their trailing hair. Down there are those who died willingly, the suicides, and they're all women, unhappy and full of despair. Men shoot themselves, but women drown themselves, that's how it's always been. It's their hair you can feel under your feet, if only you dare swim out there.

Lillis throws her clothes into the high beach grass and starts wading out in the lake. Johanna has to do the same. Everything they share becomes meaningful and the more dangerous it feels, the more alive they become. Lillis has taught her that. They often play with death, strangle themselves with scarves until they pass out. It's become an addiction to them, an obsession, they have to do it every day. Johanna is panicky as she pulls the noose tight, yet she pulls it until all air is gone, her temples start throbbing and it feels as if her eyes were forced out of her skull. She sees pinpoints of light and outside sounds disappear and then everything goes black. There's no danger as long as you don't make a knot in your scarf, Lillis has promised her, since it loosens when you pass out. Before you die.

There is a moment in every person's life when you decide whether to walk with the living or with the dead. That time is now, before we go rigid. After, it is too late.

She can see that Lillis has started swimming out there and is pulling away. They are closing in on the middle of the lake. The

cool water caressing her skin, so present and naked. She thinks that some boy may be standing somewhere on the beach, watching them, and it feels exciting, and then just a little bit shameful as she thinks about Lillis naked under the water maybe thirty feet ahead of her, her strokes powerful even though she is so thin and so cute, but it's not like that. Nothing sexual, that is, between them, or that's what she constantly tells herself even though it sometimes feels that way when Lillis snuggles into her arms on the couch or wherever. Like a puppy, sort of. But that's how Lillis is, without any boundaries against what is dangerous.

And they're alone under the sky, in the night, and they don't give a rat's ass for anyone else.

We have to know something about death to be able to choose, right? Otherwise, we'll just be victims.

She doesn't perceive it when it happens. Just sees that the surface of the water is suddenly smooth. You're kidding, Johanna thinks, and swims to the spot where Lillis' blonde head was just visible, swims around in circles, where the hell are you? She dives under to look, but it's dark and impenetrable. All she sees is water and you can't see water and she loses her sense of direction, of what is up or down, and she panics. That's when she feels it. Something moving down by her feet, slithering around her legs. Fear overwhelms her and she has to get up right now, up to the surface. She kicks and hits something below, there really is something down there, and in her head she sees all the images of the dead, of eels slithering out of eye sockets, and that thing that is tangled around her feet is still there, pulling at her, and she kicks wildly and brandishes her arms, up, up, and she has no air left, must get away from there. She doesn't breathe until she is at the shore. Doesn't think until she has stood up. The lake is glittering and black. She shakes so hard that it takes forever to get her clothes back on. Next to her are Lillis' clothes, spread out on the grass.

Time just passed, or perhaps it stopped. Finally she had to rise and walk back.

"Have you been out swimming? Where's Lillis?"

Johanna doesn't know where the lie came from. She had meant to tell them what happened, that Lillis swam out and disappeared. But then she would have to lie about the rest. About her being out there herself. About the dead in the water and her own panic, how do you tell someone something like that? About the sensation under her foot when it hit something soft and at the same time hard, and what she hadn't even dared to think through: that it was Lillis' face. Lillis, who just intended to scare her, that it had all been part of a plan, the stories about the dead and their silly hair. Lillis, who always trained to be able to swim farther underwater than anyone else in the public baths.

"She just split, I don't know. Maybe she got upset about something."

In the morning she had gone back to that place and picked up Lillis' clothes, buried them. Cried and dug. It was too late for the truth. It was the summer when everything changed. In the fall they all disappeared in different directions, knots being untied. Marina would attend high school in town, the others started different courses. Johanna quit after a single semester, then graduated from a folk high school up north in Ångermanland. Lillis' father was a heavy drinker and there never was any serious investigation. The police had appeared once to put their questions, and Johanna had described how Lillis was dressed when she disappeared: the sea-green angora sweater (stolen from H&M). They believed she had run away from home. She probably had reasons to.

The tree growing more or less alone at the edge of a grove. Johanna believes she recognizes the place and starts digging on the lake side of the trunk. Is it possible that fabric and angora wool are still there after thirty years in the ground, or do they decay? Sneakers? She digs, and there is nothing. Is it the wrong spot? Perhaps the wrong stretch of beach, new trees grown up, she has no idea of how much a forest can change over thirty years. Lillis is standing at the edge of the

woods, looking at her. Johanna doesn't dare turn, but she can feel her presence as something cold in her neck.

We had a deal. A deal about secrets and betrayal, have you forgotten that, Johanna?

She has dirt under her nails, reaching far up to her elbows.

That's why she walks down to the water and kicks off her shoes, she tells herself. When she bends down to wash off the dirt she sees herself in a brief reflex, her adult self. She has never stopped being sixteen—it's just new ages added, like layers in a cake. Then the moon disappears behind a cloud and she is gone. No, not gone, there she is: pretty far out in the water already, where it's deep. She swims, still fully dressed, towards the middle of the lake, because she must. Closes her eyes and swims on, tries to find the power within her body, but there is only the awkwardness of her wet clothes and the fat that has lined her stomach; she can feel her own weight. At the middle of the lake she stops, treads water, looks around. It was here, just here. And she dives down, as deep as she can, looks and sees nothing, fumbles around and gets a grip. Something trailing soft, and she seems to hear it whisper and sing. *There is a moment . . . to walk with the living or with the dead . . .* Now it is all around her, entangling her in its threads until she is caught and dragged down into the whispering darkness where no light will be and no dread to wake up to, just a quiet song, is that how death really is? She lets herself sink. Let me go, she wants to scream, I don't want to die. *Do you call that life*, it whispers, *that thing you believe yourself to be living?* Now she has no air left, and she sees dots of light all around. Is it Lillis' face she can see down below? Or someone else's?

No, she sees herself, and she is young again, and will do anything to be allowed to belong. No, she wants to scream, NO, I DON'T WANT TO ANY LONGER, but she has no air and there are no sounds in the water. She kicks, grabs the hair entangling her legs, tears it loose and rises towards the surface, and there is air, cold and clear.

Deep into her lungs she pulls life and power and a sense of reality. What the hell is she doing out here in the lake? She swims as well as she can manage, breathless and exhausted, towards land. Untangles her fingers from something in her hand.

Lisette, she thinks. *She needs me, even if she doesn't want to admit it.*

"Are you out of your mind—have you been swimming fully dressed?"

Pia is removing her makeup. Rubbing her face with expensive creams. Agge is snoring in her upper bed. Johanna looks around in the small scout cottage. No sea-green sweater.

"I was thinking about Lillis," she says, guardedly. "I thought I saw her out there."

"You must have drunk a lot. I didn't think anyone had any contact with her since she got out of here. And come to think of it, I never understood why you hung out with her. Want some tea?"

Johanna finds her scarf and dries her hair with it, it's still dripping. They sit down, each with her mug of tea. She has taken her wet clothes off and borrowed dry ones from the others. Seaweed, she thinks, the only thing out there is seaweed or some other kind of water plant. She is grateful her head is no longer spinning.

"What do you mean, why I hung out with Lillis?"

"You were cool, you were smart," Pia says. "You never needed to pretend or act. I was always so impressed by you. And then you let yourself be used by her."

Johanna stares at them, one at a time. A quick sensation of being visible, as if she suddenly was more clearly delineated. Was that really how they perceived her?

She gets one of Agge's blankets and wraps it around herself.

"You know, before, when we were sitting around the fire—" she starts. "I didn't think I had anything to contribute . . . I mean, my life is . . . it's okay, but I guess no more than that."

"Isn't that enough?"

"*Skål*," Marina says, raising her teacup.

That's when the tears come, burning and overflowing. She rubs them away, sniveling, but they keep flowing. Suddenly she can't

remember what's so wrong about her life. And she thinks that all of it was just nightly imaginings, nightmares; she knows drinking too much makes her feel unwell.

Pia puts her arm around her and the crying abates. While light is growing outside, Marina starts talking about her uncertainties: that feeling that they'll discover what a failure she is as an executive, and Pia tells them that deep down she really isn't sure of loving this new guy. Finally they fall asleep, each in her own bed.

The next morning they say good-bye, outside the cabin.

"Thanks for setting this up," Johanna says, hugging Marina. The ghosts of the past night certainly seem childish in the morning light, the sun already high.

"What are you talking about? You were the one inviting us."

Marina exchanges glances with the others.

"We were pretty uncertain all of us, but then we thought, what the hell, get away from hubbies and kids for a weekend, why not?"

A few strands of mist have remained since night and are dissolving on the lake. Marina holds up her cell.

"It says here for anyone to see that you created this page. Is anything wrong with you?"

Johanna grabs the phone from her hand.

She recognizes the Facebook page. "Return to Upper Lake." At the top it clearly says that the group was created by Johanna.

She feels a taste of lake water in her mouth. A stinging sensation in her cheeks, a swaying unreality.

She hadn't even logged in to Facebook in half a year. Doesn't know why she's on it at all, but on the other hand she doesn't want to be left out. When the message arrived in her mailbox, nobody had contacted her in more than six months.

When she returns the cell phone her hand feels numb.

"We've got to do this again," Agge says. "Same time next year?"

"Sure."

She remains standing there for a while after the others have left. Remembers a strand of hair entangled in her hand. The lake has