



VINTAGE

ITALIAN SHOES

HENNING MANKELL

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About the Book

Surgeon Frederick Welin has lived alone on a deserted island, in self-imposed exile, since he was disgraced for trying to cover up a mistake on the operating table. Then, one morning, he sees a figure struggling across the ice and realises that his past is about to catch up with him.

The figure approaching him is Harriet, the only woman he ever loved, the woman he abandoned forty years ago in order to study in America. Now Harriet has tracked him down to ask him to honour a promise made many years ago: to take her to a beautiful lake, hidden deep in the forests of northern Sweden. But Welin soon discovers that Harriet has left his biggest surprise until last.

About the Author

Henning Mankell is the prize-winning and internationally acclaimed author of the Inspector Wallander mysteries, now dominating bestseller lists throughout Europe. He devotes much of his free time to working with Aids charities in Africa, where he is director of the Teatro Avenida in Maputo.

ALSO BY HENNING MANKELL

Kurt Wallander Series

Faceless Killers
The Dogs of Riga
The White Lioness
The Man Who Smiled
Sidetracked
The Fifth Woman
One Step Behind
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Depths
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The Eye of the Leopard
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I Die, But the Memory Lives On

Young Adult Fiction

A Bridge to the Stars
Shadows in the Twilight
When the Snow Fell
The Journey to the End of the World

Children's Fiction

The Cat Who Liked Rain

HENNING MANKELL

Italian Shoes

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY

Laurie Thompson

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

When the shoe fits, you don't think about the foot.

Chuang Chou

There are two sorts of truth: trivialities, where the opposite is obviously impossible, and deep truths, which are characterised by their opposite also being a deep truth.

Niels Bohr

Love is a gentle hand which slowly pushes fate to one side.

Sigfrid Siwertz

ICE

CHAPTER 1

I ALWAYS FEEL more lonely when it's cold.

The cold outside my window reminds me of the cold emanating from my own body. I'm being attacked from two directions. But I'm constantly resisting. That's why I cut a hole in the ice every morning. If anyone were to stand with a telescope on the ice in the frozen bay and saw what I was doing, he would think that I was crazy and was about to arrange my own death. A naked man in the freezing cold, with an axe in his hand, opening up a hole in the ice?

I suppose, really, that I hope there will be somebody out there one of these days, a black shadow against all the white – somebody who sees me and wonders if he'd be able to stop me before it was too late. But it's not necessary to stop me because I have no intention of committing suicide.

Earlier in my life, in connection with the big catastrophe, my fury and despair were sometimes so overwhelming that I did consider doing away with myself. But I never actually tried. Cowardice has been a faithful companion throughout my life. Like now, I thought then that life is all about never losing your grip. Life is a flimsy branch over an abyss. I'm hanging on to it for as long as I have the strength. Eventually I shall fall, like everybody else, and I don't know what will lie in store. Is there somebody down there to catch me? Or will there be nothing but cold, harsh blackness rushing towards me?

The ice is here to stay.

It's a hard winter this year, at the beginning of the new millennium. This morning, when I woke up in the December

darkness, I thought I could hear the ice singing. I don't know where I've got the idea from that ice can sing. Perhaps my grandfather, who was born here on this little island, told me about it when I was a small boy.

But I was woken up this morning, while it was still dark, by a sound. It wasn't the cat or the dog. I have two pets who sleep more soundly than I do. My cat is old and stiff, and my dog is stone deaf in his right ear and can't hear much in his left. I can creep past him without him knowing.

But that noise?

I tried to get my bearings in the darkness. It was some time before I realised that it must be the ice moving, although it's a foot or more deep here in the bay. Last week, one day when I was more troubled than usual, I walked out towards the edge of the ice, where it meets the open sea, now stretching for a mile beyond the outermost skerry. That means that the ice here in the bay ought not to have been moving at all. But, in fact, it was rising and falling, creaking and singing.

I listened to this sound, and it occurred to me that my life has passed very fast. Now I'm here. A man aged sixty-six, financially independent, burdened with a memory that plagues me constantly. I grew up in desperate circumstances that are impossible to imagine nowadays in Sweden. My father was a browbeaten and overweight waiter, and my mother spent all her time trying to make ends meet. I succeeded in clambering out of that pit of poverty. As a child, I used to play out here in the archipelago every summer, and had no concept of time passing. In those days my grandfather and grandmother were still active, they hadn't yet aged to a point where they were unable to move and merely waited for death. He smelled of fish, and she had no teeth left. Although she was always kind to me, there was something frightening about her smile, the way her mouth opened to reveal a black hole.

It seems not so long ago since I was in the first act. Now the epilogue has already started.

The ice was singing out there in the darkness, and I wondered if I was about to suffer a heart attack. I got up and took my blood pressure. There was nothing wrong with me, the reading was 155/90, my pulse was normal at 64 beats per minute. I felt to see if I had a pain anywhere. My left leg ached slightly, but it always does and it's not something I worry about. But the sound of the ice out there was influencing my mood. Like an eerie choir made up of strange voices. I sat down in the kitchen and waited for dawn. The timbers of the cottage were creaking and squeaking. Either the cold was causing the timber to contract, or perhaps a mouse was scurrying along one of its secret passages.

The thermometer attached to the outside of the kitchen window indicated minus nineteen degrees Celsius.

I decide that today I shall do exactly what I do every other winter day. I put on my dressing gown, thrust my feet into a pair of cut-down wellington boots, collect my axe and walk down to the jetty. It doesn't take long to open up my hole in the ice - the area I usually chip away hasn't had time to freeze hard again. Then I undress and jump into the slushy water. It hurts, but when I clamber out, it feels as if the cold has been transformed into intensive heat.

Every day I jump down into my black hole in order to get the feeling that I'm still alive. Afterwards, it's as if my loneliness slowly fades away. One day, perhaps, I shall die of the shock from plunging into freezing cold water. As my feet reach the bottom I can stand up in the water; I shan't disappear under the ice. I shall remain standing there as the ice quickly freezes up again. That's where Jansson, the man who delivers post to the islands in the archipelago, will find me.

No matter how long he lives, he will never understand what happened.

But I don't worry about that. I've arranged my home out here on the little island I inherited as an impregnable fortress. When I climb the hill behind my house, I can see directly out to sea. There's nothing there but tiny islands and rocks, their low backs just about visible over the surface of the water, or the ice. If I look in the other direction, I can see the more substantial and less inhospitable islands of the inner archipelago. But nowhere is there any other dwelling to be seen.

Needless to say, this isn't how I'd envisaged it.

This house was going to be my summer cottage. Not my final redoubt. Every morning, when I've cut my hole in the ice or lowered myself down into the warm waters of summer, I am again amazed by what has happened to my life.

I made a mistake. And I refused to accept the consequences. If I'd known then what I know now, what would I have done? I'm not sure. But I know I wouldn't have needed to spend my life out here like a prisoner, on a deserted island at the edge of the open sea.

I should have followed my plan.

I made up my mind to become a doctor on my fifteenth birthday. To my amazement my father had taken me out for a meal. He worked as a waiter, but in a stubborn attempt to preserve his dignity he worked only during the day, never in the evening. If he was instructed to work evenings, he would resign. I can still recall my mother's tears when he came home and announced that he had resigned again. But now, out of the blue, he was going to take me to a restaurant for a meal. I had heard my parents quarrelling about whether or not I should be given this 'present', and it ended with my mother locking herself away in the bedroom.

That was normal when something went against her wishes. Those were especially difficult periods when she spent most of her time locked away in the bedroom. The room always smelled of lavender and tears. I always slept on the kitchen sofa, and my father would sigh deeply as he made his bed on a mattress on the floor.

In my life I have come across many people who weep. During my years as a doctor, I frequently met people who were dying, and others who had been forced to accept that a loved one was dying. But their tears never emitted a perfume reminiscent of my mother's. On the way to the restaurant, my father explained to me that she was oversensitive. I still can't recall what my response was. What could I say? My earliest memories are of my mother crying hour after hour lamenting the shortage of money, the poverty that undermined our lives. My father didn't seem to hear her weeping. If she was in a good mood when he came home, all was well. If she was in bed, surrounded by the scent of lavender, that was also good. My father used to devote his evenings to sorting out his large collection of tin soldiers, and reconstructing famous battles. Before I fell asleep, he would often lie down beside me on my bed, stroke my head, and express his regret at the fact that my mother was so sensitive that, unfortunately, it was not possible to present me with any brothers or sisters.

I grew up in a no-man's-land between tears and tin soldiers. And with a father who insisted that, as with an opera singer, a waiter required decent shoes if he was to be able to do his job properly.

It turned out in accordance with his wish. We went to the restaurant. A waiter came to take our order. My father asked all kinds of complicated and detailed questions about the veal he eventually ordered. I had plumped for herring. My summers spent in the archipelago had taught me to appreciate fish. The waiter left us in peace.

This was the first time I had ever drunk a glass of wine. I was intoxicated almost with the first sip. After the meal, my father smiled and asked me what career I intended to take up.

I didn't know. He'd invested a lot of money enabling me to stay on at school. The depressing atmosphere and shabbily dressed teachers patrolling the evil-smelling corridors had not inspired me to think about the future. It was a matter of surviving from day to day, preferably avoiding being exposed as one of those who hadn't done their homework, and not collecting a black mark. Each day was always very pressing, and it was impossible to envisage a horizon beyond the end of term. Even today, I can't remember a single occasion when I spoke to my classmates about the future.

'You're fifteen now,' my father said. 'It's time for you to think about what you're going to do in life. Are you interested in the culinary trade? When you've passed your exams you could earn enough washing dishes to fund a passage to America. It's a good idea to see the world. Just make sure that you have a decent pair of shoes.'

'I don't want to be a waiter.'

I was very firm about that. I wasn't sure if my father was disappointed or relieved. He took a sip of wine, stroked his nose, then asked if I had any definite plans for my life.

'No.'

'But you must have had a thought or two. What's your favourite subject?'

'Music.'

'Can you sing? That would be news to me.'

'No, I can't sing.'

'Have you learned to play an instrument, without my knowing?'

'No.'

'Then why do you like music best?'

‘Because Ramberg, the music teacher, pays no attention to me.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘He’s only interested in pupils who can sing. He doesn’t even know the rest of us are there.’

‘So your favourite subject is the one that you don’t really attend, is that it?’

‘Chemistry’s good as well.’

My father was obviously surprised by this. For a brief moment he seemed to be searching through his memory for his own inadequate schooldays, and wondering if there had even been a subject called chemistry. As I looked at him, he seemed bewitched. He was transformed before my very eyes. Until now the only things about him that had changed over the years were his clothes, his shoes and the colour of his hair (which had become greyer and greyer). But now something unexpected was happening. He seemed to be afflicted by a sort of helplessness that I’d never noticed before. Although he’d often sat on the edge of my bed or swum with me out here in the bay, he was always distant. Now, when he was exhibiting his helplessness, he seemed to come much closer to me. I was stronger than the man sitting opposite me, on the other side of the white tablecloth, in a restaurant where an ensemble was playing music that nobody listened to, where cigarette smoke mixed with pungent perfumes, and the wine was ebbing away from his glass.

That was when I made up my mind what I would say. That was the very moment at which I discovered, or perhaps devised, my future. My father fixed me with his greyish-blue eyes. He seemed to have recovered from the feeling of helplessness that had overcome him. But I had seen it, and would never forget it.

‘You say you think that chemistry is good. Why?’

‘Because I’m going to be a doctor. So you have to know a bit about chemical substances. I want to do operations.’

He looked at me with obvious disgust.

'You mean you want to cut people up?'

'Yes.'

'But you can't be a doctor unless you stay on at school longer.'

'That's what I intend doing.'

'So that you can poke your fingers around people's insides?'

'I want to be a surgeon.'

I'd never thought about the possibility of becoming a doctor. I didn't faint at the sight of blood, or when I had an injection; but I'd never thought about life in hospital wards and operating theatres. As we walked home that April evening, my father a bit tipsy and me a fifteen-year-old suffering from his first taste of wine, I realised that I hadn't only answered my father's questions. I'd given myself something to live up to.

I was going to become a doctor. I was going to spend my life cutting into people's bodies.

CHAPTER 2

THERE WAS NO post today.

There was no post yesterday either. But Jansson, the postman, does come to my island. He doesn't bring me junk mail. I've forbidden him to do so. Twelve years ago I told him not to bother making the journey if he was only bringing junk mail. I was tired of all the special offers on computers and knuckles of pork. I told him I didn't need it – people who were trying to control my life by pestering me with special offers. Life is not about cut prices, I tried to explain to him. Life is basically about something more important. I don't know what exactly but, nevertheless, one must *believe* that it is important, and that the hidden meaning is something more substantial than discount coupons and scratch cards.

We quarrelled. It was not the last time. I sometimes think it is our anger that binds us together. But he never came with junk mail after that. The last time he had a letter for me, it was a communication from the local council. That was over seven years ago, an autumn day with a fresh gale blowing from the north-east, and low tide. The letter informed me that I had been allocated a plot in the cemetery. Jansson claimed that all local residents had received a similar letter. It was a new service: all tax-paying residents should know the location of their eventual grave, in case they wished to go to the cemetery and find out who they would have as neighbours.

It was the only real letter I have received in the last twelve years, apart from dreary pension documents, tax forms and bank statements. Jansson always appears at around two in the afternoon. I suspect he has to come out this far in order

to be able to claim full travel expenses from the Post Office for his boat or his hydrocopter. I've tried to ask him about that, but he never answers. It could even be that I'm the one who makes it practical for him to continue as postman. That the authorities would have cancelled deliveries altogether but for the fact that he heaves to at my jetty three times a week in the winter months, and five times a week in the summer.

Fifteen years ago there were about fifty permanent residents out here in the archipelago. There was a boat ferrying four youngsters to and from the village school. This year there are only seven of us left, and only one is under the age of sixty. That's Jansson. As the youngest, he is dependent on the rest of us keeping going, and insisting on living out here on the remote islands. Otherwise there'll be no job for him.

But that's irrelevant to me. I don't like Jansson. He's one of the most difficult patients I've ever had. He belongs to a group of extremely recalcitrant hypochondriacs. On one occasion a few years ago, when I'd examined his throat and checked his blood pressure, he suddenly said he thought he had a brain tumour that was affecting his eyesight. I said I didn't have time to listen to his imaginings. But he insisted. Something was happening inside his brain. I asked him why he thought that. Did he have headaches? Did he have dizzy spells? Any other symptoms? He didn't give up until I'd dragged him into the boathouse, where it was darker, and shone my special torch into his pupils, and told him that everything seemed to be normal.

I'm convinced that Jansson is basically as sound as a bell. His father is ninety-seven and lives in a care home, but his mind is clear. Jansson and his father fell out in 1970, and then Jansson stopped helping his father to fish for eels and went to work at a sawmill in Småland instead. I've never understood why he chose a sawmill. Naturally, I can understand his failing to put up with his tyrannical father

any longer. But a sawmill? I really have no idea. However, since that trouble in 1970, they've not spoken to each other. Jansson didn't return from Småland until his father was so old that he'd been taken into a home.

Jansson has an older sister called Linnea who lives on the mainland. She was married and used to run a cafe in the summer – but then her husband died. He collapsed on the hill down to the Co-op, whereupon she closed the cafe and found Jesus. She acts as messenger between father and son.

Jansson's mother died many years ago. I met her once. She was already on her way into the shadows of senility, and was convinced I was her father, who had died in the 1920s. It was a horrible experience.

I wouldn't have reacted so strongly now, but I was different in those days.

I don't really know anything more about Jansson, apart from the fact that his first name is Ture and he's a postman. I don't know him, and he doesn't know me. But whenever he sails round the headland, I'm generally standing on the jetty, waiting for him. I stand there wondering why, but I know I'll never get an answer.

It's like waiting for God, or for Godot; but instead, it's Jansson who comes.

I sit down at the kitchen table and open the logbook I've been keeping for the past twelve years. I have nothing to say, and there's nobody who might one day be interested in anything I write. But I write even so. Every day, all the year round, just a few lines. About the weather, the number of birds in the trees outside my window, my health. Nothing else. If I want, I can look up a particular date ten years ago and establish that there was a blue tit or an oystercatcher on the jetty when I went down there to wait for Jansson.

I keep a diary of a life that has lost its way.

The morning had passed.

It was time to pull my fur hat down over my ears, venture out into the bitter cold, stand on the jetty and wait for the arrival of Jansson. He must be frozen stiff in his hydrocopter when the weather's as cold as this. I sometimes think I can detect a whiff of strong drink when he clambers on to the jetty. I don't blame him.

When I stood up from the kitchen table, the animals came to life. The cat was the first to the door, the dog a long way behind. I let them out, put on an old, moth-eaten fur coat that belonged to my grand father, wrapped a scarf round my neck and reached for the thick fur hat with earflaps that dated back to military service during the Second World War. Then I set off for the jetty. It really was extremely cold. There was still not a sound to be heard. No birds, not even Jansson's hydrocopter.

I could just picture him. He always looked as if he were driving an old-fashioned tram in the days when the driver had to stand outside at the mercy of the elements. His winter clothes were almost beyond description. Coats, overcoats, the ragged remains of a fur coat, even an old dressing gown, layer upon layer, on days as cold as this. I would ask him why he didn't buy one of those special winter overalls I'd seen in a shop on the mainland. He'd say he didn't trust them. The real reason was that he was too mean. He wore a fur hat similar to mine. His face was covered by a balaclava that made him look like a bank robber, and he wore an old pair of motorcycle goggles.

I often asked him if it wasn't the Post Office's responsibility to equip him with warm winter clothing. He mumbled something incomprehensible. Jansson wanted as little to do with the Post Office as possible, despite the fact that they were his employers.

There was a seagull frozen into the ice next to the jetty. Its wings were folded, its stiff legs sticking up straight out of the ice. Its eyes were like two glittering crystals. I released it and laid it on a stone on the shore. As I did so, I heard the

sound of the hydrocopter's engine. I didn't need to check my watch, Jansson was on time. His previous stop would have been at Vesselsö. An old lady by the name of Asta Karolina Åkerblom lives there. She is eighty-eight years of age, has severe pains in her arms, but stubbornly refuses to move away from the island on which she was born. Jansson tells me her eyesight is poor, but even so she still knits jumpers and socks for her many grandchildren scattered all over the country. I wondered what the jumpers looked like. Is it really possible to knit and follow various patterns if one is half blind?

The hydrocopter came into view as it rounded the headland reaching out towards Lindsholmen. It is a remarkable sight as the insect-like vessel approaches and you can make out the muffled-up man at the wheel. Jansson switched off the engine, the big propeller fell silent, and he glided in towards the jetty, pulling off his goggles and balaclava. His face was red and sweaty.

'I've got toothache,' he said as he hauled himself up on to the jetty with considerable difficulty.

'What am I supposed to do about that?'

'You're a doctor, aren't you?'

'I'm not a dentist.'

'The pain is down here to the left.'

Jansson opened his mouth wide, as if he'd just caught sight of something horrific behind my back. My own teeth are in relatively good shape. I don't normally need to visit the dentist more than once a year.

'I can't do anything. You need to see a dentist.'

'You could take a look at least.'

Jansson was not going to give up. I went into the boathouse and fetched a torch and a spatula.

'Open your mouth!'

'It is open.'

'Open wider.'

'I can't.'

'I can't see a thing. Turn your face this way!'

I shone the torch into Jansson's mouth, and poked his tongue out of the way. His teeth were yellow and covered in tartar. He had a lot of fillings. But his gums seemed healthy, and I couldn't see any holes.

'I can't see anything wrong.'

'But it hurts.'

'You'll have to go to a dentist. Take a painkiller!'

'I've run out.'

I produced a pack of painkillers from my medicine chest. He put it in his pocket. As usual, it never occurred to him to ask what he owed me. Neither for the consultation nor the painkillers. He takes my generosity for granted. That's probably why I dislike him. It's not easy when your closest friend is somebody you dislike.

'I've got a parcel for you. It's a present from the Post Office.'

'Since when have they started giving away presents?'

'It's a Christmas present. Everybody's getting a parcel from the Post Office.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't want it.'

Jansson dug down into one of his sacks and handed over a thin little packet. A label wished me *A Merry Christmas from the Chief Executive Officer of the Post Office*.

'It's free. Throw it away if you don't want it.'

'You're not going to convince me that anybody gets anything free from the Post Office.'

'I'm not trying to convince you of anything at all. Everybody gets the same parcel. And it's free.'

Jansson's intractability sometimes gets the better of me. I didn't have the strength to stand in the bitter cold and argue with him. I ripped open the parcel. It contained two reflectors and a message: *Be careful on the roads! Christmas greetings from the Post Office*.

‘What the hell do I need reflectors for? There are no cars here, and I’m the only pedestrian.’

‘One of these days you might get fed up with living out here. Then you might find a couple of reflectors useful. Can you give me a glass of water? I need to take a tablet.’

I have never allowed Jansson to set foot in my house, and I had no intention of doing so now.

‘I’ll give you a mug and you can melt some snow by placing it next to the engine.’

I went back into the boathouse and found the cap of an old Thermos flask that doubled as a mug, filled it with snow and handed it over. Jansson added one of his tablets. While the snow melted next to the hot engine, we stood and waited in silence. He emptied the mug.

‘I’ll be back on Friday. Then it’s the Christmas holidays.’

‘I know.’

‘How are you going to celebrate Christmas?’

‘I’m not going to celebrate Christmas.’

Jansson gestured towards my red house. I was afraid that all the clothes he was wearing might make him fall over, like a defeated knight wearing armour that was far too heavy for him.

‘You ought to hang some fairy lights around your house. It would liven things up.’

‘No thank you. I prefer it to be dark.’

‘Why can’t you make your surroundings a bit more pleasant?’

‘This is exactly how I want it.’

I turned my back on him and started walking up the slope towards the house. I threw the reflectors into the snow. As I reached the woodshed, I heard the roar as the hydrocopter engine sprang into life. It sounded like an animal in extreme pain. The dog was sitting on the steps, waiting for me. He could think himself lucky that he’s deaf. The cat was lurking around the apple tree, eyeing the waxwings pecking at the bacon rind I’d hung up.

I sometimes miss not having anybody to talk to. Banter with Jansson can't really be called conversation. Just gossip. Local gossip. He goes on about things I have no interest in. He asks me to diagnose his imagined illnesses. My jetty and boathouse have become a sort of private clinic for just him. Over the years I have transferred into the boathouse – in among the old fishing nets and other equipment – blood pressure cuffs and instruments for removing earwax. My stethoscope hangs from a wooden hook together with a decoy eider my grandfather made a very long time ago. I have a special drawer in which I keep medicines that Jansson might well need. The bench on the jetty, where my grandfather used to sit and smoke his pipe after gutting the flounders he'd caught, is now used as an examination couch when Jansson needs to lie down. As blizzards raged, I have kneaded his abdomen when he suspected he had stomach cancer, and I have examined his legs when he was convinced he was suffering from some insidious muscle problem. I have often thought about the fact that my hands, once used in complicated operations, are now used exclusively to frisk Jansson's enviably healthy body.

But conversation? No.

Every day I examine my own boat which has been beached. It's now three years since I took it out of the water in order to make it seaworthy again. But I never got round to it. It's a splendid old clinker-built wooden boat that is now being destroyed by a combination of weather and neglect. That shouldn't be allowed to happen. This spring I shall get down to sorting it out.

But I wonder if I really will.

I went back indoors and returned to my jigsaw puzzle. The theme is one of Rembrandt's paintings, *Night Watch*. I won it a long time ago in a raffle organised by the hospital in Luleå in the far north of Sweden, where I was a newly appointed surgeon who concealed his insecurity behind a large dose of self-satisfaction. As the painting is dark, the puzzle is very

difficult to solve; I only managed to place one single piece today. I prepared the evening meal and listened to the radio as I ate. The thermometer was now showing minus twenty-one degrees. The sky was cloudless, and the forecast was that it would become even colder before dawn. It looked as if records for low temperatures were about to be broken. Had it ever been as cold as this here? During one of the war years, perhaps? I decided to ask Jansson about that – he usually knows about such things.

Something was nagging at me.

I tried lying down on the bed and reading. A book about how the potato came to Sweden. I had read it several times before. Presumably because it didn't raise any questions. I could turn page after page and know that I wasn't going to be faced with something unpleasant and unexpected. I switched off the light at midnight. My two animals had already gone to sleep. The wooden walls crackled and creaked.

I tried to come to a decision. Should I continue to man the defences of my island fortress? Or should I accept defeat, and try to make something of the life that was left to me?

I could not decide. I stared out into the darkness, and suspected that my life would continue as it had done hitherto. There would be no significant change.

It was the winter solstice. The longest night and the shortest day. Looking back, it would become clear to me that it had a significance I had never suspected.

It had been an ordinary day. It had been very cold, and in the snow around my frozen-in jetty were a couple of reflectors from the Post Office, and a dead seagull.

CHAPTER 3

CHRISTMAS CAME AND went. New Year came and went.

On 3 January a snowstorm blew in over the archipelago from the Gulf of Finland. I stood on the hill behind my house, watching the black clouds piling up on the horizon. Almost two feet of snow fell in eleven hours, and I was obliged to climb out of the kitchen window in order to shovel snow away from the front door.

When the snowstorm drifted away, I noted in my logbook: 'Waxwings vanished. The bacon rind deserted. Minus six degrees Celsius.'

Fifty-eight letters and three full stops. Why did I do it?

It was time for me to open up the hole in the ice and take a dip. The wind cut into my body as I trudged down to the jetty. I hacked away the thin covering of ice and stepped into the water. The cold felt like burning.

Just as I had clambered out and was about to return to the house, the wind fell momentarily. Something made me feel afraid and I held my breath. I turned round.

There was somebody standing out on the ice.

A black figure, a silhouette, outlined against all the white. The sun was only just over the horizon. I squinted in the glare, and tried to make out who it was. It was a woman. It looked as if she was leaning on a bicycle. Then I saw that it was in fact a wheeled walker, a Zimmer frame with wheels. I was shuddering with cold. Whoever it was, I couldn't just stand here by my hole in the ice, naked. I hurried up to the house, and wondered if I'd had a vision.

I dressed and walked up the hill with my binoculars.

I hadn't been imagining things.

The woman was still there. Her hands were resting on the handles of the walker. She had a handbag over one arm, and had wrapped a scarf round her fur hat, which was pulled down over her forehead. I had difficulty in making out her face through the binoculars. Where had she come from? Who was she?

I tried to think. Unless she was lost, it must be me she'd come to visit. There is nobody else here but me.

I hoped she had lost her way. I didn't want any visitors.

She was still standing there motionless, her hands on the walker's handles. I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. There was something familiar about that woman out there on the ice.

How had she managed to make her way over here, through a snowstorm, pushing a Zimmer frame? It was three nautical miles to the mainland. It seemed incredible that she could have walked that far without freezing to death.

I stood watching her through the binoculars for over ten minutes. Just as I was about to put them away, she slowly turned her head and looked in my direction.

It was one of those moments in life when time doesn't merely stand still, it ceases to exist.

The binoculars brought her closer towards me, and I saw that it was Harriet.

Although it was in spring almost forty years ago that I last saw her, I knew it was her. Harriet Hörnfeldt, whom I had loved more than any other woman.

I had been a doctor for a few years, to my waiter father's endless surprise and my mother's almost fanatical pride. I had managed to break out of poverty. I was living in Stockholm then, the spring of 1966 was outstandingly beautiful and the city seemed to be bubbling over with life. Something was happening, my generation had burst through the floodgates, torn open the doors of society and demanded change. Harriet and I used to walk through Stockholm as dusk fell.

Harriet was a few years older than I was, and had never had any ambition to continue her studies. She worked as an assistant in a shoe shop. She said she loved me, and I said I loved her, and every time I went home with her to her little bedsit in Hornsgatan, we made love on a sofa bed that constantly threatened to fall to pieces.

Our love was like a raging fire, it would be fair to say. And yet I let her down. I had been given a scholarship by the Karolinska Institute to do postgraduate work in the USA. On 23 May I would be leaving for Arkansas, and would be away for a year. Or at least, that's what I told Harriet. In fact, the flight was due to leave for New York via Amsterdam on the 22nd.

I didn't even say goodbye to her. I simply disappeared.

During my year in the USA I made no attempt to contact her. I knew nothing about her life, nor did I want to know. I sometimes woke up out of dreams in which she committed suicide. I had a guilty conscience, but always managed to silence it.

She gradually faded away from my consciousness.

I returned to Sweden and started work at a hospital in the north, in Luleå. Other women entered my life. Sometimes, especially when I was on my own and had drunk too much, I would wonder what had become of her. Then I would call directory enquiries and ask about Harriet Kristina Hörnfeldt. But I always hung up before the operator had tracked her down. I didn't dare to meet Harriet again. I didn't dare to discover what had happened.

Now she was standing out there on the ice, with a wheeled walker.

It was exactly thirty-seven years since I had vanished without explanation. I was sixty-six years old. Which meant she must be sixty-nine, going on seventy. I wanted to run into the house and slam the door shut behind me. And then, when I eventually stepped outside again, she would have gone. She would no longer exist. Whatever it was she