



BRUNO GMÜNDER

**MY
BROTHER
AND HIS
BROTHER**

Håkan Lindquist

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Håkan Lindquist was born in Oskarshamn, a small harbor town on the southeast coast of Sweden; it is the setting for his debut novel, the critically acclaimed “*My Brother and His Brother.*” The book received a literary award – “*Prix Littéraire de la Bordelaise de Lunetterie*” – in 2002, when it was first published in France. Lindquist has written five novels, several short stories and one opera libretto. His novels and short stories have been translated and published in several European countries. “*My Brother and His Brother*” is the first of his novels to appear in English.

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MY BROTHER AND HIS BROTHER

a novel by
Håkan Lindquist

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BRUNO GMÜNDER VERLAG



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“Eternity is in love with the productions of time.”

— *William Blake*
“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”

To the memory of my beloved brother Arne

Håkan Lindquist

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There are five hundred and two days between the last day of your life and the first day of mine. Still, you have always been present, more or less.

My first true image of you was the school photograph that used to stand on top of the television in the living room. You are a thirteen-year-old boy who looks like my mother. Your hair is rather long, well groomed and dark. Just like Mother's. You don't smile in the picture. You don't look at me. Instead, your eyes are focused on something far beyond the camera and the schoolmates. I am an almost three-year-old boy standing in front of the television set looking up at your picture. The balcony door by my side is open. Flakes of snow find their way into the warmth. They whirl around your picture before they reach the floor and melt.

"Who's that?" I ask my parents.

"It's your brother," Mother replies, closing the balcony door. "It's your brother Paul."

"He died before you were born," Father explains.

But I'm cold and much too small to understand.

I am looking at your picture. Sometimes, if I'm sad, it seems you are sad too. When I'm happy, I believe I can see a secret smile on your lips.

I was standing there looking at the picture of you. I couldn't comprehend that you were my brother and that you were dead. It was a thought much too abstract for me. My family meant Mother, Father, and myself. You were still just a thought. Or, maybe, a wish.

When I grew older—this must have been when I started to school—I began to ask my parents about you. I wanted to know who you were,

what you had done, with whom you had played. For you must have played, Paul, you were just a child when you died.

“Paul was so nice,” Mother told me. And she was using the voice she’d use when she told me stories. “He was so clever. He liked painting and drawing. Everybody liked him. The teachers at school, the schoolmates, the kids on the street. They all liked him. And they were all so sad when he died, so very sad.”

“Did all his classmates come to the funeral?” I asked.

“No. Not all. Just some of his closest friends. They’d had some ceremony at school already—I believe it was the day before the funeral—but the church was still full.”

“Why did he die?”

“You know why,” she said slowly. “I’ve told you a hundred times.”

“But still,” I begged. “I want you to tell me just once more. I want to hear it.”

“He was hit by the train and died instantly. It was all very sudden.”

“No,” I said. “Not like that. Tell me like you used to tell me.”

“Paul liked to go to the forest. He loved watching the animals and the flowers and trees. He was always hoping he’d meet some wild creature—”

“Did he ever meet fox cubs?” I interrupted.

Mother smiled. “Yes, one morning when he was up very early. Stefan and I had just waked up when Paul got home. He was laughing and yelling when he came through the door. ‘Wake up! Wake up!’ he yelled and entered our bedroom. He sat down on the side of the bed and began telling us about the fox cubs.”

“How old was he then?”

“Eleven or twelve, I guess. And he told us about his walk in the forest. He had sat down on some old fallen tree-trunk when suddenly he heard a whining sound. At first he got scared, he told us, but he was so curious. So Paul climbed up on a big rock so that he could see better, and so that he would be safe, I guess. And right there, just below the big rock, he saw the three little fox cubs playing outside their burrow.”

“That must have made him happy, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Mother, sounding a bit sad. “It made him very happy.

“The day he died he was also out in the forest. In the morning, at breakfast, he told us he’d go for a long walk. He hoped he would see something new, something he’d never seen before. I made him a sandwich and gave him a thermos with something to drink. And before he left I reminded him of the compass. In case he got lost. ‘Cause the forest at the other side of the road is very large, you see.”

“What happened next?”

“Then ... then Paul did something very dangerous, something you must never do. Remember that. You see, he got up on the railroad track, and when the train came he was thinking of something else. Maybe he had spotted an animal or something. And so he didn’t hear the train, and he was hit, and died.”

“Did it hurt?” I asked.

Mother shook her head. “I don’t think it did. It was so sudden. And then, you don’t have time to feel any pain.”

After a while she continued, but now her voice was different.

“It was the twenty-first of July the year before you were born,” she said, but it sounded as if she were talking to herself. “It was, by the way, the first day man walked on the moon. I remember feeling distressed in the early afternoon. Uneasy, in some way. Stefan was out in the kitchen washing the dishes. He had the radio on, and he was singing along with a song they played quite often that summer. *‘It’s the time of the season, when your love runs high ...’* And then the doorbell rang. I opened the door, and two policemen were standing there. They asked to come in.

“I didn’t understand why they had come until we all stood in the kitchen. ‘Has something happened to Paul?’ I asked. One of the officers looked down at the floor. The other one nodded and said, ‘Your son has been involved in a very serious accident.’ But I still couldn’t understand what he’d said. The radio was on. He told us Paul was dead. I yelled out: ‘Turn off the bloody radio!’ Then suddenly it was all so quiet, so horribly quiet. All I could hear was Stefan sobbing.”

After Mother’s story the apartment wasn’t quite the same. It felt different. Almost unreal.

Imagine this, I've had a brother who has lived here, in this place we call our home. A brother who has moved around in this apartment, who has laughed and played here. A brother who has talked with my mother and my father, and spent a great deal of time with them.

Imagine this, I've had a brother who once lived in the room I call my own.

When I was still a child I used to take Paul's picture down from the television set. I looked at it carefully, held it close to my eyes, trying to see something new, something I had never seen before. Sometimes I took the picture with me into my room so that *he* could see, so that he could recognize himself. Because I had inherited not only Paul's room, but also his furniture, his toys and books, and even some of his clothes.

When I learned to read and write, I used to write about my brother on small pieces of paper. Here and there I can still find small notes with awkward letters and numbers.

Paul to Jonas—502 days. Or: There are 12,048 hours between you and me.

In the margin of my seventh-grade book in English I have written: *You are seventeen months away.*

I don't remember all my childhood thoughts of Paul, I only remember I thought of him often and that he felt very present most of the time. Sometimes we melded and became one and the same. And it felt as if I was he even then, even during his lifetime. It was as if it were I who—in a dream or some distant time—had seen the fox cubs outside their burrow that early morning. It was I who had been all too occupied with looking into the large forest on the other side of the road to notice the onrushing train. It was I who had died. It was I who was born again—almost resurrected—seventeen months later. And yet, it was also you, Paul. All the time.

Sometimes I wish I had kept a diary when I was younger, but I never did. That is why the written evidences of my brother's presence to me during my childhood are nothing but scraps of paper with notes about the time that divides our lives.

When I was born 722,880 minutes had passed ...

When I stopped writing notes about Paul, I still thought of him a lot, but he didn't feel very close anymore. It was as if he were fading away. Then something happened, and he was once again coming closer.

It was a few days before my sports holiday in the eighth grade. I had applied for a table-tennis tournament in the school gym, but only some days before my first game I happened to smash my paddle.

"Damn!" I grumbled, looking at the broken handle. "I can't afford a new one. Damn!"

Father was tired and irritated when I got home. He was sitting in the living room reading one of his fishing magazines. I showed him my paddle and told him what had happened.

"You're so clumsy," he said peevishly. "You always break things."

"I do not. Why do you say that?"

"Quiet now. Can't you see I'm reading?"

"But Dad," I begged, trying not to sound sullen, "I'm having this tournament at school. I just have to have a paddle to play with, don't I?"

"You should have thought of that before."

"How could I have thought of it before? It was an accident. Can't I have a new one?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's too expensive. If you want a new paddle, you will have to save your money. I won't pay for your clumsiness."

I was just about to finish the conversation in anger when my mother called. I turned and went into the kitchen.

"Listen, Jonas," she said calmly, "it'll be all right. Just wait and see."

"How?" I asked sulkily.

"There's a paddle or two up in the attic," she said, hugging me. "If you're lucky, they'll be good enough to play with. At least you can use

them until you can get a new one.”

“In the attic? Whose paddles?”

She reached out for the attic key hanging behind the kitchen door.

“They were Paul’s,” she said. “He was quite good. He and Daniel used to play. Daniel had a table in his basement.”

“Has Daniel got a table-tennis table? I didn’t know that.”

“Well, he used to have one. I don’t know if he still does. He wouldn’t be able to use it now, would he?”

“Why not?”

She laughed, then looked at me in a questioning way.

“What’s the matter with you, Jonas? Haven’t you noticed that Daniel’s been walking with a cane for the last two or three years?”

I blushed and shook my head.

“I just didn’t think of it.”

Daniel was one of my mother’s childhood friends. He used to baby-sit for me when I was small. It had surprised me a lot when he began to walk with a cane. He was one year younger than my mother, and he looked even younger. And I was even more astonished when I heard of the reason for his disability. My father—who sometimes got tired of Daniel’s closeness to me and my mother—told me the fine blood-vessels in Daniel’s legs had been destroyed by too much alcohol, so that now he had to use a cane. “He’s really a pitiful figure,” my father said. And my mother—with her more humble approach to people in general, and Daniel in particular—couldn’t explain it in any other way, although her words were different. It *was* the drinking that had ruined Daniel’s legs, and forced him to use a cane years before he even turned fifty.

“I’ll show you the paddles,” Mother said. Then: “No, I can’t. I’m going to see Else. It’s almost three. You’ll have to look for yourself. I believe they’re in the wine-colored suitcase. I’ll help you when I get back, if you can’t find them.”

I opened the door to the attic. I had never been there on my own before. I found the light switch and went in to the corridor of chicken-wire-clad cages.