

# Demons in the Spring



stories  
Joe Meno

with illustrations by twenty artists including  
Charles Burns, Geoff McFetridge, Ivan Brunetti, kozyndian, and Anders Nilsen

\*Finalist for the **2008 Story Prize**

\***Kirkus Reviews** Best Books of 2008

\***Time Out Chicago** Best Books of 2008

“An inspired collection of twenty stories, brilliant in its command of tone and narrative perspective . . . Creativity and empathy mark the collection . . . Illustrations enhance the already vivid storytelling.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**, \*starred review

“The strongest stories in this collection (with accompanying illustrations by different artists) don’t try too hard to dazzle with formal virtuosity but let Meno slowly pull his characters out from their own peculiar inner worlds into the one we recognize, for better or for worse, as the ‘real’ world. Loss seems to be the lingua franca that unites these souls; Meno’s sympathy for them is acute, and he never lets fictional pyrotechnics blind him, or us, to their humanity.”

—**New York Times Book Review**

“Meno knows just how to press a variety of emotional buttons ranging from giddy delight to not-quite-hopeless despair. Highly recommended for all public and academic libraries.”

—**Library Journal**

“Mr. Meno’s fiction pops with the energy of youth, its purity and heart . . . Mr. Meno has a finely tuned grasp of the fumbblings—romantic, existential and otherwise, that make up the first twenty-five years of our lives.”

—**New York Observer**

“These playful, postmodern stories find the Chicago author’s artistry reinforced by illustrators who provide divergent perspectives on his prose . . . The range of illustrations adds to the volume’s appeal but Meno’s writing is strong enough to stand on its own . . . There’s a profound empathy in Meno’s work that makes it more than just a stylistic exercise.”

—**Time Out New York**

“Meno shows his mastery of the short form with his twenty latest tales of whimsy and loss. Meno’s best stories fuse together postmodern ideas with subjects that have concerned literature through the ages, such as love, heartbreak, death, and malaise . . . Intriguing and eccentric, Meno’s stories never distract with their surreal flights of fancy but instead draw the reader in deeper to their magical reconfiguration of the modern world. Twenty different graphic artists provide idiosyncratic illustrations that perfectly complement this daring collection.”

—**Booklist**

“Nothing like getting inventive. Local author Joe Meno continues to push the limits of traditional lit with each of his releases . . . Meno’s tales are funny, heartbreaking and in-sightful, most of the time and at once—he’s getting better with age.”

—**Newcity (Chicago)**

“*Demons* is a beautifully crafted collection and benefits greatly from the illustrations of twenty diverse and well-matched artists from around the world. Consider also that a portion of the book’s proceeds are being donated to 826CHICAGO, a nonprofit tutoring center in the Windy City, and you’ve got a great book that’s giving to a good cause.”

—*Philadelphia City Paper*

“In Joe Meno’s newest collection, even the table of contents reads like a story, each title an evocative verbal starburst [and] the stories don’t disappoint. They pop and bristle with the tender, with the weird, and with great appreciation for the limitless resources of storytelling.”

—*Time Out Chicago*

“The twenty clever and sometimes surreal stories in Joe Meno’s new collection, *Demons in the Spring*, reveal the workings of a curious and inventive mind. The pieces are diverse in style and setting, but for the most part their characters are all trying to navigate a world that’s at best indifferent and more often bewildering or downright cruel.”

—*Chicago Reader*

“These tales have the feel of whole novels distilled into tone poems and lyric fragments of natural dialogue, lucid dream states, and pure, all-too-human existential ludicrousness.”

—*ELLE*

“The first enticing element about *Demons in the Spring* is the sheer beauty of the book ... The volume itself has the irresistible charm of a bygone charm. The stories are thoroughly modern—at once quirky and accessible.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Prolific South Sider Meno is the closest thing we’ve got to a literary ambassador ... No one has captured the odd blend of grit and fantasy, community and danger, that comes with an urban upbringing quite like Meno.”

—*G*

# Demons in the Spring

stories

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Joe Meno



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Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications, where these stories first appeared: “Frances the Ghost” in *TriQuarterly*; “Stockholm 1973” and “People Are Becoming Clouds” in *McSweeney’s*; “An Apple Could Make You Laugh” in *Ninth Letter*; “Animals in the Zoo” and “The Boy Who Was a Chirping Oriole” in *THE2NDHAND*; “Architecture of the Moon” in *Mule Magazine*; “Ghost Plane” in *The Art of Friction*; “Miniature Elephants Are Popular” in *Demo*; “What a Schoolgirl You Are” and “I Want the Quiet Moments of a Party Girl” in *Other Voices*; “Art School Is Boring So” in *Verbicide*; “Oceanland” in *Swink*; “Airports of Light” in *LIT*; “Clara” in *Other Voices*; and “Children Are the Only Ones Who Blush” in *One Story*.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, as well as events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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**Also by Joe Meno**

*The Great Perhaps*

*The Boy Detective Fails*

*Bluebirds Used to Croon in the Choir: Short Stories*

*Hairstyles of the Damned*

*How the Hula Girl Sings*

*Tender As Hellfire*



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Some of the author's proceeds from this book will be donated to 826CHICAGO, a nonprofit tutoring center, part of a national organization with branches in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, and Seattle. Founded by Dave Eggers, best-selling author and the creator of *McSweeney's* and the *Believer* magazines, 826 is an organization dedicated to supporting children ages six to eighteen with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. From 826's mission statement:

*Our services are structured around the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. With this in mind, we provide drop-in tutoring, after-school workshops, in-schools tutoring, help for English language learners, and assistance with student publications. All of our programs are challenging and enjoyable, and ultimately strengthen each student's power to express ideas effectively, creatively, confidently, and in his or her individual voice.*

For more information on 826CHICAGO and what you can do to contribute, please visit [826CHI.org](http://826CHI.org)



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## Demons in the Spring

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# FRANCES THE GHOST

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illustration by  
Charles Burns

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Frances the ghost is going to school: She is dressed in a white sheet with two holes for her eyes and that makes the people who see her riding in the passenger seat of her mother's station wagon smirk. Of course, Frances becomes a ghost whenever her mother does not know what else to do. Today was too much already so her mother decided, fine, fine, if she was going to behave like this, fine. The phone would not stop ringing and the baby was colicky again and Frances was pretending she could not buckle her shoes, so Janet, her mother, began to shout, and Frances threw herself on the ground and would not get up. She started holding her breath and crying and the only way to get her to calm down was to pretend she was a ghost again, draping the white sheet over her face and humming, Jane placing her soft lips against the fabric where Frances's forehead was crinkled up, and slowly, slowly, the tears began to stop. Too many minutes later they are all piled in the front seat of the brown station wagon, the muffler dragging as they drive, and Janet suddenly remembers the baby's car seat is once again unbuckled.

\* \* \*

An ice cream truck has collided with a van at the intersection up ahead. The station wagon slows to a crawl as Frances sits up and stares at the damage. The vehicle is white and green and lying on its side. All over the road are melting popsicles, Dilly Bars, and Nutty Buddies, growing softer by the moment in the April heat: every kid's best dream. A hundred bumblebees, excited by the prospect of so many melting sweets, hang above the ice cream truck in a glittering cloud. From beneath the white bed sheet and from behind the two small holes her mother has cut so she can see, the little girl stares at the mass of bees suspiciously. Frances does not like bees. She thinks they are her enemy. One day last summer she was stung inside her mouth when she surprised a bumblebee hiding under the rim of her soda pop can. Frances places her hand against the outside of the sheet just above her lip remembering. She watches the truck grow smaller and smaller until it is just another strange, uncertain memory.

*Oh, oh, oh. Come and see:  
See the girl. See the boy. See the pony.  
Come and see:*

Beneath the ghostly white sheet, Frances is very pretty. She has soft brown eyes and a face shaped like a dandelion: Her hair is blond and curly. For some five months now, Frances has refused to speak. She is reading her school book which is all about horses. In the book, a black mare nestles with a small white pony. The baby, in the car seat behind her, is blowing spit bubbles and smiling at her. While he

mother is fooling with the radio, Frances turns and pinches the baby for absolutely no reason.

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In the station wagon, in front of the school, Janet turns to face her daughter. Slowly, making sure Frances can read her lips, she says, "Okay, honey, it's time to take off the sheet."

The ghost does not move.

"Frances."

The ghost is silent.



"Frances, I want you to take off that sheet right now."

The ghost makes a small move and Janet can see that Frances has folded her arms in front of her chest, pouting.

"It's time for school and it's time for you to take off that blanket."

The ghost shakes its head.

"Frances, right now."

The ghost shakes its head again.

"Frances, take off that blanket or you're going to be on punishment."

The ghost does not move. Janet quickly makes a grab for the flimsy fabric, but Frances, small, ruthless, quick, is already gripping it too tightly.

Janet is exhausted and it is not even 8:00 a.m.



pictures of horses on her worksheets or for leaving her seat without permission.

~~Up and down. Up and down. Go up, up, up. Come down, down, down, Miss Dove is saying.~~

Frances, once again in trouble, sits in the corner of the room. She sits on a small wooden stool. There is a great silver spiderweb hidden in the silent angles of the classroom where Frances finds two dead flies. She names one Fritz and one Ferdinand. She decides they are soldiers. She decides they are her dear friends, but unhappy at war, and far, far away from their homes. What adventures the two of them will soon have. Look: Fritz has found a motorcycle with a sidecar. Ferdinand does not want to ride in the sidecar; he is afraid of riding in it. Ferdinand is afraid of everything. Fritz and Ferdinand are now arguing. They better hurry. The enemy is drawing near. The enemy's evil feathered helmets are getting dangerously close. They fire their muskets in the air, and Ferdinand, suddenly finding the courage, hops into the motorcycle's sidecar, and the two brave soldiers speed off. The duchess has been kidnapped! Fritz has decided they will rescue her and become heroes. Fritz is the brave one. Ferdinand likes looking at flowers and is not so brave.

Before work, Janet drops off the baby at her mother's. Her mother is watching a TV game show and puts the baby in his crib, answering the question the game show host has asked. "Jayne Mansfield," is all her mother says to her that morning.

Parking behind the VA hospital, Janet digs her hand beneath the driver's seat and searches for a small cigarette case, which contains four tightly wound joints and a small roach, which she lights and inhales from deeply. She checks herself in the rearview mirror, decides she has somehow become her mother overnight, squeezes some eye drops into her eyes, and straightens her nurse's uniform once she is standing.

Janet is falling in love with a patient named Private Dan. He is a vet from the first Gulf War, around thirty-five, and is missing most of his left leg. He is handsome in a dull way, like an unpolished stone or the sheer face of a cliff. He suffers from PTSD and may have a Gulf War illness. He is in and out of her wing of the VA like a celebrity. He served four years in the reserves and was discharged as a private, which does not say much for him.

Today Private Dan is complaining about a rash. And chronic diarrhea.

"You have to wait like everybody else," is what Janet tells him, though when he frowns, pretending to pout, he makes her heart feel small and quivery.

If you look, you can see Frances dressed as a ghost, sitting alone on her grandma's front porch: The bus has dropped her off early and Grandma, not expecting her so soon, has gone to the store to get diapers for the baby. Frances is sitting on the top step of the porch, waving to you as you ride past in the backseat of your parents' minivan. It is only a glimpse of a girl dressed as a small white phantom. You smile and wave but already she is a blur; already she has disappeared. Frances picks up her pink bicycle from the driveway and rides as close to the curb as she can without crossing into the street. The front wheel dangles dangerously close to the gray concrete edge and Frances imagines crossing the road while no one is looking. She has been warned never to ride her bike in the street. She edges the front wheel on the black pavement but does not go any farther. She slowly turns and sees her grandmother arriving home now, the old blue car teetering up the road from the other direction. Frances hops off her bike. She pulls the white sheet from her head and waves hello. Grandma kisses her cheek, almost forgetting the baby who is still buckled in the car seat. Frances points across the street and Grandma nods after checking for traffic. Frances hurries across to go play with a neighbor girl named Allie. Allie is not really Frances's friend: She's three years older and likes to think she is something of a mother to the small, strange girl. Allie is weak-shouldered and skinny, with stringy

blond hair and yellow teeth. She will try to carry Frances around like a baby, but Frances will fight, biting the older girl's shoulder if she does not put her down quickly.

Allie has decided they will go into the woods and throw rocks at a beehive she has recently discovered. Frances does not think this is a good idea. She hates bees. She is completely terrified of them. She stops walking and holds her hand to her mouth at the spot where she had been stung. She decides she is not going into the woods. She is going to head back to Grandma's and sit and watch TV. Allie stares at Frances and calls her a baby, then walks off toward the woods by herself. Frances decides she does not like being called a baby. She decides she is not a baby and so she hurries to follow Allie. The two small girls gather all the stones they can find and begin pelting the side of the papery brown honeycomb. Allie laughs. Frances thinks maybe there is nothing to be scared of, all there are is dumb bees anyway. Frances throws another rock, then one more. Almost immediately, a string of glittering bees descends, stinging Frances on her face and hands. Allie, a little older but not much brighter, turns and runs away, leaving her small charge to fend for herself. Frances tries to cover her face but they are on her now, the whole hive, stinging her through her blue dress and pink tights.

At the VA, Private Dan insists on a physical exam. Janet draws the curtain as Dan unbuttons his blue shirt.

"How's your husband?" he has the gall to ask.

*Doesn't he know the way I look at him? Is this his way of letting me off the hook?* "I get e-mails from him every few days," Janet says. The e-mails are sometimes single lines like:

*—Found a kid hiding an explosive device under a Humvey.*

*—Ate candy all day.*

*—Think our children will no longer recognize me.*

"I'm sure he's fine," Private Dan says. "Six months over there and I never fired a round. It was a different war, though," he mutters.

"So tell me about the rash," Janet says, trying to establish some decorum.

"Here," Dan says, pointing to a red mark on his chest. "It really burns."

Janet pulls on a latex glove and carefully pokes the vet's chest. *Still in shape*, Janet thinks. *Which is why he took his shirt off. The showboat.*

"What do you think?" Dan asks.

"I'm not a doctor," is Janet's reply.

"So?"

"So you'll have to wait to see Dr. Grant."

"Is it serious?"

"I don't know," she says.

"You don't know? You just wanted to see me with my shirt off then?" Dan smiles. He has a big toothy grin that makes Janet laugh.

"The doctor will be right in."

"Nurse?"

"Yes?"

“If you ever want to talk, I mean, I know it can be pretty lonely, waiting for somebody.”

“I have to go,” she says.

“Nurse?”

“Yes?”

Private Dan winks, then, before Janet can turn in mock disgust, he blows her a kiss. It hits her, the invisible kiss, it is as real as a real kiss, and exiting from the exam room and rushing back to the nurses’ station, Janet knows she is blushing.

Grandma is looking for Frances, holding the baby in her soft, flabby arms. She sees Allie sitting alone on the other side of the street and calls out, “Have you seen Frances?”

Allie, alarmed, looks up and shakes her head. *No* is what her head is saying, but Grandma has raised three kids and knows damn well when they are lying.

In the parking lot of the VA, Janet sits in her station wagon beside Private Dan. They do not touch. They do not talk. They light up one of her joints and watch the front seat fill with smoke. Finally, Private Dan begins to speak.

“I can feel my toes wiggling when I get high sometimes.”

“Hmmm?”

“On the missing leg. I can feel them wiggling when I get high sometimes.”

“Oh, that’s weird.”

“It’s okay.”

The pair is quiet for a while. Then Private Dan speaks again.

“I would sure like to kiss you, Nurse Janet.”

“I’ve got a guy,”

she says.

“I know.”

Janet is pleased with herself suddenly. She feels like an adult, like a television actress on a soap opera, like someone’s real wife. She begins smiling, thinking of Mickey the Jerk on the other side of world and the way he looks when he is on the couch sleeping.

“I should head back in,” she says.

Meredith, the other nurse from the same wing, comes hurrying out into the parking lot, looking panicked.

“It’s the phone. Your mom. Something’s happened.”

Okay, first of all, Frances is okay. She is as swollen as a newborn, but she’ll live. Janet looks at Frances’s face and arms and hands and counts nine stings. Grandma has, as usual, completely gone overboard. Frances is lying on the corduroy sofa and every visible part of her is coated in pink calamine. Frances has arranged her small hands over her waist like a photograph of someone beautiful lying in a casket.

“What happened?” Janet asks, but knows her mother has no answer. She turns to face Frances, who is pretending to be asleep. She pats Frances’s hands and asks Grandma where the baby is.

“Oh, I almost forgot! I left him with Allie across the street.” Grandma gets up and moves briskly through the front screen door.

At home now, Frances wears the white ghost sheet at the table. It is dappled with dots of pink calamine lotion from all of her stings. Janet looks up from the TV dinner, unsure what kind of wet

brown meat she is eating. She wipes her mouth on the paper napkin and stares directly at Frances.

“Frances, we are going to have a talk.”

Frances blinks, becoming suddenly still.

“Frances, that sheet of yours has got to go.”

Frances does not move.

“Frances. Do you want to be a big girl like Mommy or a baby like the baby?”

Janet cannot see the expression Frances is making beneath the white blanket.

“Do you want to be a big girl? Big girls don’t carry their blankets around with them.”

Frances does not move.

“You can keep it in your bedroom. But no more wearing it to school. Or at the table. Today is the last day.”

Small dots of gray begin to form around the ghost’s eyes: Frances has begun to cry. Janet can already hear it, the soft gumming of her teeth, the tightening of her small lips.

Janet gets up from her chair and puts Frances in her lap. She places her mouth right beside her daughter’s ear and begins to sing: “*Frances / Frances / please don’t cry / please don’t cry ...*”

Of course, it is true: If you cover your ears, a whisper does not feel the same as a kiss. A laugh does not make the small hairs around your neck startled the way it does when someone is shouting. When someone cries, it feels like you are waiting for the rain. When someone sings, it feels like the shape of a heart is being traced along the center of your chest.

Frances lays her head against her mother’s neck and slowly stops crying.

By the time the baby is asleep, Frances is ready for bed too. Janet sits beside her and reads her a story that has a horse and a princess and a castle in it. She dabs calamine at the sting above Frances’s left eye and then switches on the nightlight. She goes downstairs and waits a half hour, flipping through the channels. When she thinks Frances is asleep, she climbs back upstairs and sneaks into her room, carefully, oh so carefully, tugging the white sheet from beneath her daughter’s head. She does not know what she is going to do with it, and sits on the couch composing another imaginary letter to her husband:

*I did a bad thing tonight, one of the most terrible things ever: I waited for her to fall asleep, then I stole the sheet from under her head. I am missing you or maybe just the idea of you. I have begun seriously thinking about other men. I am afraid I am not strong enough or tough enough for this. I am afraid all the time. I have not slept well in months. When are you coming back, you jerk? We are all trying to be brave without you and doing a real crummy job of it. I do not want to have to be brave anymore without you.*

Janet holds the white sheet against her face and feels like crying, but she doesn’t. She pulls it over her head and sighs, sitting on the couch like that for a while, a ghost staring through the small eyeholes at the TV. Then she carries the sheet downstairs and hides it with the rest of the laundry, once again afraid she is not doing the right thing.

The morning begins with the phone ringing nonstop. First it’s her mother, then Meredith at the VA asking about Frances, then some annoying guy from the military selling life insurance. By the time Frances is awake, the baby has already been fed. Soon Janet has everyone in the station wagon. She turns the key, adjusts the rearview mirror, and throws the vehicle in reverse. Frances immediately begins

fussing. She has forgotten something. She has forgotten her white sheet. She kicks her legs and begins sobbing. Janet puts the station wagon in park and takes a breath, then turns to her daughter, lowering her chin so Frances can read her lips.

“Frances, I need your help. I need you to help me get through this today.”

Her daughter’s face is stony-white. Small beads of tears hang at the tips of her black eyelashes.

“Frances, we are going to try to get through the day without the sheet. If we make it, we will have ice cream sundaes after dinner. But if you throw a tantrum, I think I am going to quit right now, honey. I think I am going to go back inside and never get out of bed again.”

The station wagon sounds like it is going to die. Janet stares at her daughter, ready to cry herself waiting for her daughter to begin screaming. But Frances turns, still pouting, staring straight ahead. She is mad, she is angry, but she does not cry. Janet decides this is okay, this is fine. Angry she can handle. Angry sounds great.

# STOCKHOLM

## 1973

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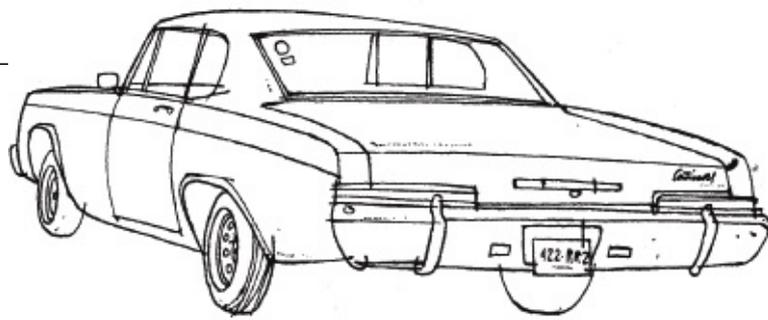
[illustration by](#)  
[Evan Hecox](#)

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Out on parole, Jan Olsson walks into the Kreditbanken at Norrmalmstorg, located within the central banking district of Stockholm, Sweden; he has a small pistol in the pocket of his jacket. He does not think the pistol actually works as it has been stolen out of the glove compartment of a stranger's car. Since the car was a rusted-out American model with a broken windshield, Jan instinctively believes the pistol will be unlucky. Jan has recently taken a large dose of amphetamines; because of this, he mistakenly thinks he can see things other people can't see.

Within the revolving glass doors of the Kreditbanken, Jan Olsson decides now is as good a time as any and pulls the pistol from his pocket, raising it above his head, his dark eyes wide and menacing. He sees his bearded face and unwashed hair reflected in the glass of the revolving door and is terrified. He looks like a character from a children's book, someone who has sold his soul to the devil and has become a wolf. He begins shouting even before he has exited the revolving door: This is the beginning of a long series of amateurish mistakes. Bank patrons watch the young man in the dark leather jacket waving the small pistol above his head and immediately start to panic. A woman in a black dress and white furs sees the weapon and faints, falling stiffly to the marble floor. A black toy poodle, coddled within its owner's arm, begins to bark. A child holding her mother's hand wails loudly. Her tiny lungs collapse and expand with such terrific urgency that her screams become more frightening than Jan's shouts.

*At this moment, I am making a terrible mistake,* Jan thinks, though it is already too late. He declares, *We are having a bank robbery,* but his words are muffled by the revolving door's thick glass. By the time Jan finally enters the marbled anteroom of the bank, a security guard with a brown mustache and thick sideburns has telephoned the police. The security guard, at this moment, holds the telephone in his right hand: It is bright yellow and as obvious as a screeching alarm. Jan sees the yellow phone and thinks of a bird lying in a cage shrieking, its tiny reptilian feet having been pulled off. He thinks of a large fish being torn apart by silver hooks, its innards milky-yellow, struggling to breathe through red gills that no longer work. He thinks of a yellow hive full of bees, crashing together and stinging one another angrily; the buzz of their death rattle mimics the sound he now makes, grinding his teeth nervously. Already two policemen are charging through the glass doors of the bank—one is short and brave-looking, the other is taller and seems quite frightened. Jan Olsson raises his pistol and fires one shot, which hits the first policeman in his right hip, knocking him to the polished floor, though the gunshot does not mortally wound him.



Jan does not know what to do about the other policeman: The bank is intolerably silent now, even with the child crying and the dog barking and the wounded policeman moaning. All of the bank customers have fallen to their knees and are praying quietly. The noise of their whispers is frightful; they sound like sorrowful, disembodied spirits. Jan commands the second policeman to drop his weapon, which the patrolman does, thankfully, his large hands shaking with sweat. Dreading the sounds of these terrified prayers, Jan asks the unarmed policeman to please sing something.

—Sing something? the policeman asks. His eyes are wide and trembling.

—Sing something, anything, Jan says plaintively.

—But I have a very terrible singing voice.

—It's no matter, please sing something for us.

The nervous policeman, staring at his injured partner who lies there entirely prone on the black-and-gray marble floor, closes his eyes and begins to sing. He does not recognize the words even as he begins to shout them. To him, they are only sounds, the anxious catch and pause of his alarmed breath. The echo his mouth makes is the exact beat of his heart in time with his wounded partner's fading pulse. Moment by moment, everyone's hope is now disappearing. Everyone's heart has become an anvil, a boulder, everyone feels as if they are now drowning.

Jan faces the singing policeman. The man's face is young and thin; he is handsome with hazel eyes and a contemptuous-looking mouth. By staring at the policeman's face like this, Jan can see that the officer has a wife he thinks fondly of, as well as two kids—a boy who loves to ski and a girl who writes poems about sad horses. Jan knows this as surely as he knows the song the policeman has chosen to sing. It is "Lonesome Cowboy" by Elvis Presley.

Jan Olsson looks around. The bank patrons are all lying on the ground now, weeping. Their trembling hands cover their oily heads. Even with the policeman singing, he can still hear their prayers. He can still hear the child crying and the tiny dog barking. Just then a telephone—the yellow one sitting beside the security guard's desk—begins to ring.

—Do you want me to answer it? the security guard asks.

—Please do, Jan says.

The security guard speaks into the yellow phone for a few moments and says, It is the police. They would like to know your demands.

Jan looks around the disrupted bank. Everything is now still. Even the tiny dog seems to be listening.

—I would like ... Jan mutters. I would like my best friend, Clark Olofsson, brought here.

—What? the security guard asks.

—I would like my best friend, Clark Olofsson, brought here.

—That is your first demand? the guard asks.

—It is, Jan says. He is my best friend. He will know what to do.

The security guard repeats this demand into the yellow phone, which quivers in his large white hand.

—Anything else? the security guard asks.

—Yes. I would also like three million kronor.

The security guard adds this, his teeth chattering as he speaks.

—I would also like two guns. The best guns they can find.

—What kind of guns? the security guard asks.

—Any kind. As long as they are loaded.

The security guard relays this, his words whispered and weak.



*Kreditbanken,  
Stockholm*

—I would also like two bulletproof vests. And two helmets. One for me, one for my best friend, Clark. And also a very fast car.

The security guard mumbles each of these requests.

—What kind of car would you like? the security guard asks.

Jan Olsson turns, staring out the immense glass windows. It is just past 1 in the afternoon. The afternoon itself has no idea what is happening: Automobiles hurry past, shoppers shift their bags from hand to hand, a girl on a bicycle pedals along, her skirt yellow and flimsy, flirting with the breeze.

—I don't care what kind of car it is as long as it's fast. And as long as it's not yellow. Jan says this and then waits for the security guard to transmit the information.

The guard mumbles this final demand and then looks up.

—They said they will do their best. They said they will call back when they've gotten everything.

—Good.

Jan looks around the bank, suddenly very pleased with himself.

—What do you want us to do until then? the security guard asks.

—Jan has no idea what the answer to that question might be. He thinks for a few moments and then has an idea.

—You will all stay here. I am going to take a hostage now.

—A hostage? Don't be ridiculous! the wounded policeman shouts. There is no need to involve anybody else in this.

Jan peers at the customers lying there, scattered across the marble floor. They all appear sad and white and pasty, like animals who have been skinned, then turned into rugs. Behind the large glass and marble counter, there are four bank tellers, each of them women, each young and bright and pretty. In colorful turtlenecks and blouses and skirts, they look like far-off planets Jan would like to visit.

—The four of you will come with me, he says, pointing his gun at the tellers. You will stay with me until my partner arrives.

—What about the rest of us? the security guard asks.

—The rest of you are free to go, Jan says.

He points his pistol at the first teller, Kristin Ehnemark, a thin blond girl with a striking pair of blue eyes.

—Where is the best place to hide? Jan asks the girl, pressing the muzzle of the pistol against her fluffy orange sweater.

—The main vault.

—We will go to the vault to wait for my friend Clark to arrive. Does anyone have a transistor radio with them?

—I do, one of the bank tellers, Elizabeth Gullberg, whispers, meekly raising her tiny right hand.

—Perfect. Bring it with you and we will see if any of you can dance.

Jan marches behind the four tellers, his pistol aimed at Kristin's back: There is Kristin, blond, with stunning good looks; the mousy but charming Elizabeth; and two identical twin sisters, Sandra and Diane Ekelund, who have dark eyes and straight brown hair. The four young women walk in single file, silently disappearing down the long white corridor while the rest of the bank's patrons pull themselves to their feet and rush through the front glass doors, screaming.

The tall policeman stops singing and lifts his partner to his feet, dragging him as best as he can through the revolving glass door. A dark smear of blood follows the wounded police officer out, his rubber-soled shoes squeaking against the floor. Within a few moments, the bank lobby has become entirely empty, a still life of despair and quiet.

In the main bank vault, which is dark and rectangular, filled with tiny shelves and silver deposit boxes, Jan commands Elizabeth to turn on the radio. There is not much on besides disco and the reception inside the vault is quite terrible.

—Who among you can dance? Jan asks.

—I can dance pretty well, Kristin says.

—Anyone else?

The other three girls all shake their heads.

—Okay, then you dance.

Kristin nods and begins to dance, very slowly at first, moving her feet and hips from the right side to the left. Jan points at the radio with his pistol and asks Elizabeth to please turn up the music. Kristin closes her eyes; she pretends that she is all alone, back in her tiny apartment. She pretends it is Saturday night and she is waiting for her date to telephone her.

Jan finds the light switch and begins to flick it on and off: light effects. The two sisters, Diane

and Sandra, smile at the exact same moment, surprised by the bank robber's strange sense of humor.

—What about you? Jan asks the twins.

Together, they shrug their shoulders and begin to dance, mirror reflections of one another's stiff movements. Even their long dark hair seems to flip and swish at the same time.

—Good, Jan says. Okay, now we are getting somewhere.

Before the long disco track ends, Jan can hear the police shouting at him through a megaphone outside. He motions to Elizabeth with the pistol; she quickly shuts off the radio, looking worried once again.

—*Jan Olsson!* comes the amplified voice. *We have located your friend, Clark Olofsson! He is now going to enter the bank!*

Jan points the pistol at Kristin and says, No monkey business, then leads her back toward the bank lobby. Before he crosses into the afternoon's blank sunlight, he pauses. He suddenly imagines a police sniper depositing a single bullet into the front of his brain. He begins to tremble a little. He holds onto Kristin for support. Then he takes another two amphetamine capsules, offering one to Kristin first. Kristin kindly refuses. Together, they slowly step into the sunlit lobby. Through the glass doors and windows, Jan can see a battalion of blue police uniforms, of drawn weapons, of blue helmets, of black bulletproof vests, of police cars and vans, of flashing blue lights.

—I did not want this to happen the way it is, Jan says sadly. I really did not. From behind the police barricade, Jan spots his best friend, Clark Olofsson. Clark is wearing a tan leather jacket, a loud flowered shirt, and bell-bottoms. He looks as if he has been rousted from a discothèque. Jan slowly raises his hand to Clark, who, behind his dark brown beard, smiles, rolling his eyes, as if to say, *What a crazy mess is all this, my friend?*

—He is my best friend in all of the world, Jan confides, whispering the words into Kristin's neck. He will know what to do.

Clark walks across the tiny avenue, then opens one of the bank's heavy glass doors. Jan stares at his friend's wide face, and from the shape of his dark eyes and the unruliness of his shaggy beard, he at once knows the entire story of Clark's troubled life. Even though he can see that his best friend Clark is one equally destructive mess, that he will be arrested over and over again, that nothing good will ever come of their friendship, Jan still begins to weep with gratitude. Clark has two bulletproof vests with him as well as two formidable-looking assault rifles.

—You came, Jan whispers.

—Of course, Clark says with a wide grin.

They hurry back into the safety of the bank's long corridor, Jan gently placing the pistol against Kristin's ribs, leading his friend toward the main bank vault. He stops suddenly, his eyebrows raised in worry.

—What about the helmets? Jan asks. Where are the helmets?

—We don't need them. We have hostages, Clark says. The police assured me they would not try and open fire as long as we didn't hurt the bank tellers.

—What about the fast car?

—It's parked around the corner.

—What color is it?

—Yellow.

—See! Jan shouts. See, they are fucking with me!

—We can ask for another car, Clark says.

—Of course. I'm sorry I lost my temper, Jan says.

Clark steps inside the bank vault and smiles. He has the smile of a television spokesman, of an insurance salesman, of your favorite dentist. ~~You trust it though you know you should not.~~ He grins at brown-eyed Elizabeth and the two sisters.

—If I may please ask a question: Is anyone in this bank vault worried about anything? Clark asks. The four women are silent, unsure how to answer.

—Because you can tell me. I would really like to know, Clark adds. It will be helpful for us to know your fears. You, he says, singling out shy Elizabeth. What are you afraid of?

—Certain snakes. And spiders. All kinds of spiders, I guess.

—Good. Anything else?

—Stories about witches.

—Okay, that is what I'm talking about. It's important that we are open with each other. That is how we are going to get through this.

Clark itches his beard knowingly, then nods at the twins.

—What about you two, what are you afraid of?

—We are afraid to be alone, they both say in unison.

—Of course, like anybody. And you, what is your name? Clark asks, motioning toward Kristin. Kristin blinks at him bravely. She thinks she may have danced with him once at some disco downtown, or maybe not. Maybe it's just his eyes, or his wiry beard. Maybe he looks exactly like every young man she has ever fallen in love with only to have her heart broken later. The boy who bought her a kitten for Christmas, with a red bow around its neck, who then slept with her best friend Monica. Or the boy who made her a painting—a scene of them happily living on the moon together—and then asked for it back so that he could sell it. Or the other boy who named each freckle on her body, only to disappear a month later. This man has the same kind of charm, the kind that suggests weakness, the kind that indicates how sad he will always make her feel. There is something dependable, unfailing in this sort of sadness. Kristin immediately finds herself taken with him.

—Go on, what's your name? Clark shouts.

—Kristin Ehnemark.

—Okay, Kristin Ehnemark, what frightens you?

—I am afraid of nuclear war.

—Good. Anything else?

—And fireworks. I don't like loud noises.

—Good. Anything more?

—I am also afraid of the police.

—Wonderful. I'm afraid of the police too. Why are you afraid of them?

—I'm afraid they will try to storm the bank. I'm afraid they will accidentally kill us all.

—It's as if you could read my mind, Clark says, winking. That is exactly what I most fear right now. We must make sure that does not happen.

—In 1999, you will be arrested in Denmark on drug charges, Jan suddenly blurts out.

Clark stares at his friend. Jan is slimmer than he is, with a longer nose and an untrustworthy face. Clark pats his friend on the shoulder and whispers, Please try and relax, Jan.

—I think we need to leave, Jan says. We need to leave as soon as possible. Or we will all die here. They will send things to harm us through the electricity.

—Listen to me. There is a car waiting for us, Clark whispers. The problem is that they said we could not take the hostages with us.

—Then they will shoot us! I told you we needed helmets. If we had helmets, we could escape!

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