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MIND'S EYE



HAKAN NESSER



Mind's Eye

AN INSPECTOR VAN VEETEREN MYSTERY

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Translated from the Swedish by Laurie Thompson



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Contents

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Epigraph*](#)

[I Saturday, October 3–Friday, November 20](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[II Friday, November 20–Sunday, November 29](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[III Sunday, November 29–Thursday, December 3](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[*A Note About the Author*](#)

[*A Note About the Translator*](#)

[*Also by Håkan Nesser*](#)

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When we finally find what we have been looking for in the darkness, we nearly always discover that it was exactly that.

Darkness.

—C. G. Reinhart, police officer

I

Saturday, October 3–Friday, November 20

1

He woke up and was unable to remember his name.

His pains were legion. Shafts of fire whirled around in his head and throat, his stomach and chest. He tried to swallow, but it remained an attempt. His tongue was glued to his palate. Burning and smoldering.

His eyes were throbbing. Threatening to grow out of their sockets.

It's like being born, he thought. I'm not a person. Merely a mass of suffering.

The room was in darkness. He groped around with his free hand, the one that was not numb and tingling underneath him.

Yes, there was a bedside table. A telephone and a glass. A newspaper. An alarm clock.

He picked it up, but halfway it slipped through his fingers and fell onto the floor. He fumbled around, took hold of it again, and held it up, close to his face.

The hands were slightly luminous. He recognized them.

Twenty past eight. Presumably in the morning.

He still had no idea who he was.

. . .

He didn't think this had happened before. He had certainly woken up and not known where he was. Or what day it was. But his name...had he ever forgotten his name?

John? Janos?

No, but something like that.

It was there, somewhere in the background, not only his name but everything.... Life and lifestyle and extenuating circumstances. Lying there waiting for him. Behind a thin membrane that would have to be pierced, something that had not woken up yet. But he was not really worried. He would know

soon enough.

Perhaps it was not something to look forward to.

The pain behind his eyes suddenly got worse. Possibly the strain of thinking had caused it; but it was there, whatever. White hot and excruciating. A scream of flesh.

Nothing else mattered.

The kitchen was to the left and seemed familiar. He found the pills without difficulty; he was becoming increasingly sure that this was his home. No doubt everything would become clear at any moment.

He went back into the hall. Kicked against a bottle standing in the shadow cast by a bookcase. It rolled away over the parquet floor and ended up under the radiator. He shuffled to the bathroom door. Pressed down the handle.

It was locked.

He leaned awkwardly forward. Put his hands on his knees to support himself, and checked the red indicator on the door.

Red. As he'd thought. It was occupied.

He could feel the bile rising.

"Open..." he tried to shout, but could produce no more than a croak. He leaned his forehead against the cool wood of the door.

"Open up!" he tried again, and this time managed to produce the right sounds, almost. To stress the seriousness of his situation he banged several times with his clenched fists.

No response. Not a sound. Whoever was in there obviously had no intention of letting him in.

There was a sudden surge from his stomach. Or possibly from even lower down...It was obviously a matter of seconds now. He staggered back along the hall. Into the kitchen.

This time it seemed more familiar than ever.

This is definitely my home, he thought as he vomited into the sink.

With the aid of a screwdriver he succeeded in unlocking the bathroom door. He had a distinct feeling that it was not the first time he'd done this.

“I’m sorry, but I really had to...”

He entered the room and just as he switched on the light, he became quite clear about who he was.

He could also identify the woman lying in the bathtub.

Her name was Eva Ringmar and she was his wife of three months.

Her body was strangely twisted. Her right arm hung over the edge at an unnatural angle. The well-manicured fingernails reached right down to the floor. Her dark hair was floating on the water. Her head was facedown, and as the tub was full to the brim, there could be no doubt that she was dead.

His own name was Mitter. Janek Mattias Mitter. A teacher of history and philosophy at the Bung High School in Maardam.

Known informally as J.M.

After these insights he vomited again, this time into the lavatory. Whereupon he took two more tablets out of the bottle and telephoned the police.

The cell was L-shaped and green. The same shade all over—walls, floor, and ceiling. A hint of daylight seeped in through a small window high up on one wall. At night he could see a star.

There was an ablutions corner with a handbasin and WC. A bed fixed to the wall. A rickety table with two chairs. A ceiling light. A bedside lamp.

For the rest, noises and silence. The only smell was from his own body.

The lawyer's name was Rüger. He was tall and lopsided, limping on his left leg. As far as Mitter could judge he was in his fifties; a few years older than himself. He might have come across the man's son at school. He may even have taught him. A pale youth with a spotty face, and not the brightest of pupils academically, if he remembered rightly. Some eight or ten years ago.

Rüger shook hands. Squeezed Mitter's proffered hand tightly and lengthily, and looked serious but also benevolently disposed. It was obvious to Mitter that he had attended courses on lawyer-client relations.

"Janek Mitter?"

Mitter nodded.

"A nasty business."

He wriggled out of his overcoat. Shook water off it and hung it on the hook by the door. The ward double-locked before going away down the corridor.

"It's raining out there. Much pleasanter in here, to be honest."

"Have you got a cigarette?"

Rüger produced a pack from his jacket pocket.

"Take as many as you like. I don't understand why they won't even let you smoke."

He sat down at the table. Put his thin leather briefcase in front of him. Mitter lit a cigarette, but remained standing.

"Aren't you going to sit down?"

“No thank you.”

“Up to you.”

He opened a brown folder. Took out some typewritten pages and a notepad. Removed and replaced the cap of a ballpoint pen a few times, resting his elbows on the table.

“A nasty business, as I said. I want to make it clear to you how things stand, right from the start.”

Mitter waited.

“There are a lot of things going against you. That’s why it’s important for you to be honest with me. If we don’t have complete trust in each other, I won’t be able to defend you as successfully as... Well, are you with me?”

“Yes.”

“I assume you won’t hesitate to make your views known....”

“Views?”

“On how we should go about things. Naturally, I shall work out the strategies, but you are the one at the sharp end. As far as I can make out, you are an intelligent man.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Would you like to tell me about it, or would you prefer me to ask questions?”

Mitter stubbed out his cigarette in the washbasin, and sat down at the table. The nicotine had made him a bit dizzy, and he was suddenly overcome by a feeling of weariness.

He felt tired of life. Of this hunchbacked lawyer, of the incredibly ugly cell, of the nasty taste in his mouth, and of all the inevitable questions and answers in store for him.

Extreme weariness.

“I’ve already been through everything with the police. I’ve spent two days doing nothing else.”

“I know, but I have to ask you to do it again. It’s an essential part of the game, as I’m sure you can realize.”

Mitter shrugged. Shook another cigarette out of the pack.

“I think it would be best if you asked questions.”

The lawyer leaned back. Rocked back on his chair and adjusted the notepad on his knee.

“Most lawyers use a tape recorder, but I prefer to make notes,” he explained. “I think it’s less

stressful for the client....”

Mitter nodded.

“Besides, I have access to the police tapes, if I should need them. Anyway, before we start going into details, I have to ask you the obligatory question. You will probably be charged with the murder or at the very least manslaughter, of your wife, Eva Maria Ringmar. How do you intend to plead? Guilty or not guilty?”

“Not guilty.”

“Good. There should be no doubt on that point. Neither on your side, nor mine.”

He paused and rolled the pen between his fingers.

“Is there any doubt?”

Mitter sighed.

“I have to ask you to answer my question. Are you absolutely certain that you didn’t kill your wife?”

Mitter paused for a few seconds before answering. Tried to catch the lawyer’s eye in an attempt to deduce what he really thought, but in vain. Rürger’s face was as inscrutable as a potato.

“No, of course I’m not certain. You know that full well.”

The lawyer made a note.

“Mr. Mitter, I must ask you to disregard the fact that I have read the transcript of your interrogation. You must try to pretend that you are now telling your story for the first time. Put yourself in that situation.”

“I don’t remember.”

“No, I have grasped the fact that you don’t remember what happened: that is precisely why we have to be meticulous about starting again from scratch. Your memory will not wake up if you don’t try to go back to that night. Totally without prejudice. Don’t you agree?”

“What do you think I spend my time doing? What do you imagine I think about in this cell?”

He was starting to get angry. The lawyer avoided looking him in the eye and made a note on his pad.

“What are you writing?”

“Sorry.” He shook his head to indicate that was not something he was prepared to reveal. Took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose loudly. “Bloody awful weather,” he explained.

Mitter nodded.

“I just want you to understand,” said Ruger, “what a precarious situation you find yourself in. You maintain that you are not guilty, but you don’t remember. That is rather an insecure foundation on which to build a case for your defense, as I’m sure you realize.”

“It’s the prosecutor’s job to prove that I’m guilty. It’s not up to me to prove the opposite, isn’t that right?”

“Of course. That’s the law, but...”

“But?”

“If you don’t remember, you don’t remember. But it could be rather difficult to convince a jury. Will you undertake to inform me the moment anything comes back to you?”

“Of course.”

“No matter what it is?”

“Naturally.”

“Let’s go on. How long had you known Eva Ringmar?”

“Two years. Slightly more than two years. Ever since she started working at our school.”

“Where you teach what?”

“History and philosophy. Mainly history. Most pupils don’t choose to study philosophy.”

“How long have you been in post there?”

“Twenty years, roughly. Maybe nineteen.”

“And your wife?”

“Modern languages. For two years, as I said.”

“When did you start your relationship?”

“Six months ago. We got married last summer, at the beginning of July.”

“Was she pregnant?”

“No. Why...”

“Do you have any children, Mr. Mitter?”

“Yes. A son and a daughter.”

“How old?”

“Twenty and sixteen. They live with their mother in Chadow.”

“When were you divorced from your former wife?”

“In 1980. Jürg lived with me until he started at university. I don’t see what this has to do with—”

“Background. I need some kind of background. Even a lawyer has to solve puzzles, as I’m sure you’ll agree. What kind of a relationship do you have with your ex-wife?”

“None at all.”

There was a pause. Rürger blew his nose again. He was obviously dissatisfied about something, but Mitter had no desire to pander to him. Irene had nothing to do with this. Nor did Jürg and Inga. He was grateful for the fact that all three had the good sense not to become involved. They’d been in touch, of course, but only that first day. Since then they’d been quiet. He’d received a letter from Inga that very morning, but only a couple of lines. To express support for him.

We are with you. Inga and Jürg.

He wondered if the same applied to Irene as well. Was she with him? Perhaps it didn’t matter.

“What sort of a relationship did you have?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your marriage with Eva Ringmar. What was it like?”

“Like marriages are.”

“What does that mean?”

“...”

“Was it a happy marriage, or did you fight?”

“...”

“After all, you’d been married for only three months.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And then you found your wife dead in the bath. Surely you understand that we have to find an explanation?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you also understand that it’s no good your not saying anything about this matter? Your silence would be taken as indicating that you were concealing something. It would be used against you.”

“I expect it would.”

“Did you love your wife?”

“Yes.”

“Did you fight?”

“Occasionally.”

Rüger made a note.

“The prosecutor will claim that she was killed. He will be supported by evidence from medical and technical specialists. We shan’t be able to prove that she died a natural death. The question is whether she could have taken her own life.”

“Yes, I assume so.”

“You assume what?”

“That it depends on that. If she could have taken her own life.”

“Perhaps. Anyway, that evening—how much did you drink?”

“Quite a lot.”

“Meaning what?”

“I can’t say for sure...”

“How much do you need to drink before losing your memory, Mr. Mitter?”

He was obviously irritated now. Mitter pushed his chair back. Stood up and walked over to the door. Put his hands in his pockets and contemplated the lawyer’s hunched back. Waited. But Rüger said nothing.

“I don’t know,” Mitter said eventually. “I’ve tried to work it out. Empty bottles and so on, you know. Presumably six or seven bottles.”

“Red wine?”

“Yes, red wine. Nothing else.”

“Six or seven bottles between two people? Were you alone all evening?”

“Yes, as far as I recall.”

“Do you have an alcohol problem, Mr. Mitter?”

“No.”

“Would you be surprised if other people took a different view?”

“Yes.”

“What about your wife?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it not true to say that she was admitted”—he pored over his papers and leafed through them—“admitted to an institution for what is commonly known as drying out? In Rejmershus? I have the details here.”

“Why are you asking, then? It’s six years ago. She lost a child, and her marriage broke down.”

“I know, I know. Forgive me, Mr. Mitter, but I have to ask these questions, no matter how unpleasant they may seem. It will be much worse at your trial, I can assure you of that. You might as well get used to it.”

“Thank you, I’m already used to it.”

“Can we go on?”

“Of course.”

“What is your last clear memory from that night? That you can be absolutely certain about?”

“That casserole...We had a Mexican casserole. I’ve told the police about it.”

“Say it again!”

“We had this Mexican casserole. In the kitchen.”

“Yes?”

“We started to make love.”

“Did you tell the police that?”

“Yes.”

“Go on!”

“What do you want to know? The details?”

“Everything you can remember.”

Mitter returned to the table. Lit a cigarette and leaned toward the lawyer. Might as well give it him good and proper, this hunchbacked pencil pusher.

“Eva was wearing a kimono. Nothing underneath. As we were eating, I started caressing her. We drank as well, of course, and she undressed me. Partly, at least. Eventually I lifted her up onto the table...”

He paused briefly. The lawyer had stopped making notes.

“I lifted her onto the table, pulled off her kimono, and screwed her. I think she screamed—no, because it hurt, but from sensual bliss, of course: she used to do that when we made love. I think we kept going for quite a long time. Continued eating and drinking as well. I know I poured wine over her pussy and then licked it off.”

“Wine on her pussy?”

Rüger’s voice was suddenly muted.

“Yes. Was there anything else you’d like to know?”

“Is that the last thing you can remember?”

“I think so.”

Rüger cleared his throat. Took out his handkerchief and blew his nose again.

“What time do you think that would have been?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Not even roughly?”

“No. It could have been any time between nine and two. I never looked at the clock.”

“I understand. Why should you?”

Rüger started gathering together his papers.

“Might I suggest that you refrain from going into too much detail of the, er, lovemaking, if the matter is raised in court. I think it could be misinterpreted.”

“No doubt.”

“Incidentally, there was no trace of sperm.... Er, I expect you are aware that rather detailed examinations are made...”

“Yes, the chief inspector explained that. No, I never came. I suppose that’s one of the effects of the wine. Or advantages perhaps, depending on how you look at it. Isn’t that so, Mr. Ruger?”

“Hmm. I take it you know that the time has been established?”

“What time?”

“The time of death. Not precisely, of course, that’s virtually never possible. But sometime between four and half past five.”

“I got up at twenty past eight.”

“We know that.”

He stood up. Adjusted his tie and buttoned up his jacket.

“I think that will be enough for today. Thank you very much. I’ll be back tomorrow with some more questions. I hope you will be cooperative.”

“Haven’t I been cooperative today?”

“Yes, very.”

“Can I keep the cigarettes?”

“Please do. May I ask one final question, which might be a little bit, er, uncomfortable?”

“Of course.”

“I think it’s important. I don’t want you to be casual about your answer.”

“No?”

“If you don’t want to say anything, I shall understand completely. But I think it’s important that you are honest with yourself. Anyway, are you quite sure that you really do want to remember what happened, or would you prefer not to know?”

Mitter did not answer. Ruger avoided looking at him.

“I’m shoulder to shoulder with you. I hope you realize that.”

Mitter nodded. Ruger rang the bell, and a few seconds later the warder appeared and let him out. Ruger hesitated in the doorway. Seemed to be unsure of himself.

“My son asked me to pass on greetings. Edwin. Edwin Ruger. You taught him history ten years ago.”

I don't know if you remember him. In any case, he liked you. You were an interesting teacher.”

“Interesting?”

“Yes, that's the word he used.”

Mitter nodded again.

“I remember him. Please pass on greetings, and thank him.” They shook hands, and then he went alone.

An insect crawled up his bare right arm. A persistent little bug only a few millimeters long; he watched it, wondering where it was headed.

For the light, perhaps. He had left the bedside lamp on, even though it was the middle of the night. He found it difficult to cope with darkness, for whatever reason. This was not like him. Darkness had never been a threat as far as he was concerned, not even when he was a child. He could recall several occasions when he had attracted more admiration for daring and courage than he deserved, simply because he was not afraid of the dark. Mankel and Li had been especially impressed.

Mankel was dead now. He had no idea what had become of Li.... It was odd that he should think of them now: he hadn't given them a thought for years and years. There were so many other things he ought to think of instead—but who can control the capricious mechanisms of memory?

He checked the clock. Half past three. Had he been dreaming?

He'd slept restlessly, in any case. Perhaps something had come to him in his slumbers? In recent days he had become more and more convinced that everything would come back to him in his dreams. Nothing at all happened while he was awake; after more than a week, that night was just as much of a blank as it had been the morning after. The developer used in the darkroom was faulty; no images, not even a hint of an outline materialized on the paper. It was as if he hadn't even been there, as if nothing at all had happened after their wild lovemaking. The last images were clear enough: Eva's thighs opening and closing around his penis, her back arched extravagantly at the moment of ecstasy, her breasts bouncing and her nails digging into his skin.... There was more to it than he had described to Rüger, but it was of no significance. After the embrace in the kitchen there was nothing. It was a blank as a mirror.

Like newly formed ice over dark water.

Had he simply fallen asleep? Passed out? He had been naked in bed when he woke up the next morning, dammit.

What in hell's name had happened?

Eva? He had heard her voice several times in his dreams, he was sure of that, but never any words. Never any message, just her voice. Deep, puckish, somehow alluring. He'd always been fascinated by her voice.

The apartment had looked relatively tidy. Apart from the leftovers in the kitchen and the clothes on the floor, there had been no sign of untoward goings-on. A couple of full ashtrays, some half-empty glasses, the bottle in the hall. He'd cleared away what few things there were before the police arrived.

The same questions. Again and again. Over and over again. Reflecting themselves in the mirror. Bouncing like a fistful of gravel over the ice. But nothing came back to him. Nothing at all.

And even if anything had come back to him in his sleep, how the devil could he be expected to hang on to it? And not to lose track of it, as he always did?

His sleep was more irregular than ever. Never longer than an hour, often only fifteen or twenty minutes. He'd smoked the last of the cigarettes from Rürger at about two o'clock. He'd have paid a fortune for a puff now: there was a tingling in his body that he couldn't get rid of, a sort of itch deep down under his skin that was inaccessible.

And weariness.

Weariness that came and went, and that might well have been a blessing in disguise, as it fended off other things that might have been even worse.

What was it that Rürger had wondered about?

Did he really want to know? Did he...?

He felt a slight prick on his shoulder. The insect had bitten him. He hesitated for a moment before taking it between his finger and thumb and squashing it.

When he swallowed it, it felt like no more than an unchewed crumb of bread.

He turned over to face the wall. Lay there with his face pressed against the concrete, listening for sounds. All he could hear was the monotonous breathing of the ventilation system.

The whole of my world is going to collapse even more catastrophically, he thought. It's only a matter of time.

When the breakfast cart arrived shortly after seven, he was still lying there in the same position. But he hadn't slept a wink.

Rüger's cold was no better.

"I ought to have a cognac and go to bed, but I must have a few words with you first. Have you slept well?"

Mitter shook his head.

"Have you slept at all?"

"Not a lot."

"No, you look as if you haven't. Have you had any tablets? Some kind of tranquilizer?"

"No."

"I'll fix that for you. We mustn't let them grind you down. I take it you don't believe that this long wait before the trial is a coincidence?"

He paused and blew his nose.

"Ah yes, the cigarettes."

He tossed an unopened packet onto the table. Mitter tore off the cellophane and noticed that he wasn't in full control of his hands. The first puffs made everything go black before his eyes.

"Van Veeteren will come to interrogate you again this afternoon. I'd like to be present, but I'm afraid that won't be possible. But my advice is to say as little as possible. I take it you know you have a right to be silent from start to finish?"

"I thought you had advised me not to do that?"

"At the trial, yes. But not when the police question you. Just keep quiet, let them ask as many questions as they like. Or at least, just tell them that you don't remember. Okay?"

Mitter nodded. He was starting to feel a degree of trust in Rüger, whether he liked it or not. He wondered if it was due to his lack of sleep, or the lawyer's increasingly bad cold.

"The stupidest thing you could possibly do is to jump to conclusions, guess things, speculate, and then be forced to retract. Every single word you utter during the interrogations will be used against you at the trial. If, for example, you suggest the chief inspector ought to kiss his own ass, you can bet your life he'll tell the jury—as an example of the kind of character you are. Would you like a cup of

coffee?"

Mitter shook his head.

"Okay. I'd like to talk to you about the morning."

"The morning?"

"Yes, when you found her. There are several points that need clarification."

"Such as?"

"Your...conduct after you'd phoned the police."

"Oh?"

"You cleaned up the flat while your wife was lying dead in the bath, is that right?"

"I just tidied up a few things, that's all."

"Don't you think that's rather odd?"

"No."

"What exactly did you do?"

"I put some glasses away, emptied an ashtray, picked up some clothes..."

"Why?"

"I...I don't really know. I suppose I must have been a bit shocked. I didn't want to go back to the bathroom, that's for sure."

"How long was it before the police arrived?"

"A quarter of an hour. Maybe twenty minutes."

"Yes, that's about right. Your phone call was recorded at 8:27, and according to the report the police arrived at 8:46. Nineteen minutes. What did you do with the clothes?"

"I put them in the washing machine."

"All of them?"

"Yes. There weren't that many."

"Where's the washing machine?"

"In the kitchen."

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