

The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed
Out of the Window and Disappeared

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‘Things are what they are, and whatever will be will be.’

Chapter I

Monday, 2nd May 2005

You might think he could have made up his mind earlier, and been man enough to tell the others of his decision. But Allan Karlsson had never been given to pondering things too long.

So the idea had barely taken hold in the old man's head before he opened the window of his room on the ground floor of the Old People's Home in the town of Malmköping, and stepped out – into the flowerbed.

This manoeuvre required a bit of effort, since Allan was one hundred years old. On this very day in fact. There was less than an hour to go before his birthday party would begin in the lounge of the Old People's Home. The mayor would be there. And the local paper. And all the other old people. And the entire staff, led by bad-tempered Director Alice.

It was only the Birthday Boy himself who didn't intend to turn up.

Chapter 2

Monday, 2nd May 2005

Allan Karlsson hesitated as he stood in the flowerbed that ran along one side of the Old People's Home. He was wearing a brown jacket with brown trousers and on his feet he had a pair of brown indoor slippers. He was not a trendsetter; people rarely are at that age. He was on the run from his own birthday party, another unusual thing for a hundred-year-old, not least because even being one hundred is pretty rare.

Allan thought about whether he should make the effort to crawl back in through the window to get his hat and shoes, but when he felt his wallet in his inside pocket, he decided that that would suffice. Besides, Director Alice had repeatedly shown that she had a sixth sense (wherever he hid his vodka, she found it), and she might be nosing around in his room even now, suspicious that something fishy was going on.

Better to be on his way while he could, Allan thought, as he stepped out of the flowerbed on creaking knees. In his wallet, as far as he could remember, he had a few hundred-crown notes saved – a good thing since he'd need some cash if he was going into hiding.

He turned to take one last look at the Old People's Home that – until a few moments ago – he had thought would be his last residence on Earth, and then he told himself that he could die some other time, in some other place.

The hundred-year-old man set off in his pee-slippers (so called because men of an advanced age rarely pee further than their shoes), first through a park and then alongside an open field where a market was occasionally held in the otherwise quiet provincial town. After a few hundred metres, Allan went around the back of the district's medieval church and sat down

on a bench next to some gravestones to rest his aching knees. It wasn't such a religious town that Allan worried about being disturbed in the churchyard. He noted an ironic coincidence. He was born the same year as a Henning Algotsson who lay beneath the stone just across from his bench. But there was an important difference – Henning had given up the ghost sixty-one years earlier. If Allan had been more curious he might have wondered what Henning had died of, at the age of thirty-nine. But Allan left other people to themselves, dead or alive. He always had and he always would.

Instead, he thought that he had probably been mistaken all those years when he'd sat in the Old People's Home, feeling that he might as well die and leave it all. However many aches and pains he suffered, it had to be much more interesting and instructive to be on the run from Director Alice than to be lying rigid six feet under.

Upon which thought the Birthday Boy, despite his complaining knees, got up and said goodbye to Henning Algotsson and continued on his badly planned flight.

Allan cut across the churchyard to the south, until a stone wall appeared in his path. It wasn't more than a metre high, but Allan was a centenarian, not a high jumper. On the other side was Malmköping's bus station and the old man suddenly realised that his rickety legs were taking him towards a building that could be very useful. Once, many years earlier, Allan had crossed the Himalayas. That was no picnic. Allan thought about that experience now, as he stood before the last hurdle between himself and the station. He considered the matter so intently that the stone wall seemed to shrink before his eyes. And when it was at its very lowest, Allan crept over it, age and knees be damned.

Malmköping is not what you'd call a bustling town, and this sunny weekday morning was no exception. Allan hadn't seen

a living soul since he had suddenly decided not to show up at his own hundredth birthday party. The station waiting room was almost empty when Allan shuffled in. Almost. On the right were two ticket windows, one closed. Behind the other sat a little man with small, round glasses, thin hair combed to one side, and a uniform waistcoat. The man gave him an irritated look as he raised his eyes from his computer screen. Perhaps he felt the waiting room was becoming too crowded, because over in the corner there was already another person, a young man of slight build, with long greasy blond hair, a scraggly beard and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back.

It seemed as if the young man might not be able to read, since he was pulling the door of the handicapped toilet, even though there was a sign saying ‘Out of order’.

After a moment, he moved to the other toilet, but there he faced a different problem. Evidently he didn’t want to be parted from his big grey suitcase on wheels, but the cubicle was simply too small for the two of them. It seemed to Allan that the young man would either have to leave the suitcase outside while he relieved himself, or allow the suitcase to occupy the cubicle while he himself remained outside.

But Allan had more pressing concerns. Making an effort to move his legs in the right sequence, he shuffled with small steps up to the little man in the open ticket window and enquired as to the possibility of public transport in some direction, any at all would do, within the next few minutes, and if so, what would it cost?

The little man looked tired. He had probably lost track of things halfway through Allan’s enquiry, because after a few seconds, he said:

‘And where is it you want to go?’

Allan took a deep breath, and reminded the little man that he had already stated that the actual destination, and for that

matter the means of transport, were of less importance than a) the time of departure, and b) the cost.

The little man silently inspected his timetables and let Allan's words sink in.

'Bus number 202 departs for Strängnäs in three minutes. Would that work?'

Yes, Allan thought it would. The little man told him that the bus left from outside the terminal door and that it would be most convenient to buy a ticket directly from the driver.

Allan wondered what the little man did behind the window if he didn't sell tickets, but he didn't say anything. The little man possibly wondered the same thing. Allan thanked him for his help and tried to tip the hat he had in his haste not brought along.

The hundred-year-old man sat down on one of the two empty benches, alone with his thoughts. The wretched birthday party at the home would start at three o'clock, and that was in twelve minutes. At any moment they would be banging on the door to his room, and then all hell would break loose. He smiled at the thought.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Allan saw that somebody was approaching. It was the slightly built young man heading straight for Allan with his big suitcase trailing behind him on four small wheels. Allan realised that he might not be able to avoid engaging the long-haired youth in conversation. Perhaps that wasn't so bad. He might gain insight into what today's young people thought about this and that.

A conversation did take place, but without the depth of social analysis Allan had anticipated. The young man came to a halt a few yards away, seemed to study the old man for a moment, and then said:

'Hey.'

Allan replied in a friendly tone, saying that he wished him a good afternoon, and then asked him if there was some way he

could be of service. It turned out that there was. The young man wanted Allan to keep an eye on the suitcase while he relieved himself. Or as he expressed it:

‘I need to take a dump.’

Allan replied that, although he was old and decrepit, his eyesight was still in good repair and it did not sound like too arduous a task to keep an eye on the young man’s suitcase. He did recommend that the young man relieve himself with some urgency – without, of course, using the young man’s own terminology – as Allan had a bus to catch.

The young man did not hear the last bit. His urgent need drove him towards the toilet before Allan had finished speaking.

The hundred-year-old man had never let himself be irritated by people, even when there was a good reason to be, and he was not annoyed by the uncouth manner of this youth. But he couldn’t warm to him either, and that probably played some part in what happened next.

Bus number 202 rolled up outside the entrance to the terminal, just a few seconds after the young man had closed the toilet door behind him. Allan looked at the bus and then at the suitcase, then again at the bus and then again at the suitcase.

It has wheels, he said to himself. And there’s a strap to pull it by too.

And then Allan surprised himself by making what – you have to admit – was a decision to say ‘yes’ to life.

The bus driver was conscientious and polite. He stepped down and helped the very old man with the big suitcase to get on the bus.

Allan thanked him and pulled out his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket. The bus driver wondered if the gentleman was possibly going all the way to Strängnäs, while Allan counted out six hundred and fifty crowns in notes and a few

coins. But Allan thought it best to be frugal and so he held out a fifty-crown note and asked:

‘How far will this get me?’

The driver said jovially that he was used to people who knew where they wanted to go but not what it would cost, but this was quite the opposite. Then he looked in his schedule and replied that for forty-eight crowns you could travel on the bus to Byringe Station.

Allan thought that sounded fine. The driver put the newly stolen suitcase in the baggage area behind his seat, while Allan sat down in the first row on the right hand side. From there he could see through the window of the station’s waiting room. The toilet door was still closed when the bus rolled off. Allan hoped for the young man’s sake that he was having a pleasant time in there, bearing in mind the disappointment that awaited him.

The bus to Strängnäs was not exactly crowded that afternoon. In the back row there was a middle-aged woman, in the middle a young mother who had struggled on board with her two children, one of them in a pram, and at the very front an extremely old man.

This passenger was wondering why he had stolen a big grey suitcase on four wheels. Was it because he could and because the owner was a lout, or because the suitcase might contain a pair of shoes and even a hat? Or was it because the old man didn’t have anything to lose? Allan really couldn’t say why he did it. When life has gone into overtime it’s easy to take liberties, he thought, and he made himself comfortable in the seat.

So far, Allan was satisfied with the way the day had developed. Then he closed his eyes for his afternoon nap.

At that same moment, Director Alice knocked on the door to Room 1 at the Old People’s Home. She knocked again and again.

‘Stop fooling around, Allan. The mayor and everyone else have already arrived. Do you hear me? You haven’t been at the bottle again, have you? Come out this minute, Allan! Allan?’

At about the same time, the door opened to what was, for the time being, the only functioning toilet in Malmköping station. Out stepped a young man who was doubly relieved. He took a few steps towards the middle of the waiting room, tightening his belt with one hand and combing his hair with the fingers of the other hand. Then he stopped, stared at the two empty benches, and looked left and right. Upon which he exclaimed:

‘What the bloody damned hell...!’

Then words failed him, before he found his voice again:

‘You’re a dead man, you old bastard. Once I’ve found you.’

Chapter 3

Monday, 2nd May 2005

Just after three o'clock in the afternoon on 2nd May the calm of Malmköping was shattered. At first Director Alice at the Old People's Home was worried rather than angry, and pulled out her master key. Since Allan had not concealed his escape route, it was immediately obvious that the Birthday Boy had climbed out of the window. Judging by the tracks, he had then stood among the pansies in the flowerbed, before disappearing.

By virtue of his position, the mayor felt he should take command. He ordered the staff to search in pairs. Allan couldn't be far away; the searchers should concentrate on the immediate vicinity. One pair was dispatched to the park, one to the state-run liquor store (a place that Allan had occasionally frequented, Director Alice knew), one to the other shops on Main Street, and one to the Community Centre up on the hill. The mayor himself would stay at the Old People's Home to keep an eye on the residents who hadn't vanished into thin air and to ponder the next move. He told the searchers that they should be discreet; there was no need to generate unnecessary publicity about this affair. In the general confusion, the mayor forgot that one of the pairs of searchers he had just sent out consisted of a reporter from the local paper and her photographer.

The bus station was not included in the mayor's primary search area. In that location, however, a very angry, slightly built young man with long, greasy blond hair, a scraggly beard and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back had already searched every corner of the building. Since there was no trace of either a very old man or a suitcase, the young man took some decisive steps towards the little man behind the only open ticket window, to find out where either or both had gone.

Although the little man was generally bored with his work, he still had his professional pride. So he explained to the loud-mouthed young man that the passengers' privacy was not something that could be compromised, adding firmly that under no circumstances whatsoever would he give him any information of the type that he wished to obtain.

The young man stood in silence for a moment. He then moved five yards to the left, to the not very solid door to the ticket office. He didn't bother to check whether it was locked. Instead he took a step back and kicked the door in with his boot, sending splinters flying in every direction. The little man did not even have time to lift the telephone receiver to phone for help, before he was dangling in the air in front of the young man, who had grasped him firmly by the ears.

'I might not know anything about privacy, but I'm good at getting people to talk,' said the young man to the little ticket seller before he let him drop down with a bump onto his revolving office chair.

At which point the young man explained what he intended to do with the little man's genitals, with the help of a hammer and nails, if the little man did not comply with his wishes. The description was so realistic that the little man immediately decided to say what he thought, namely that the old man in question had presumably taken a bus in the direction of Strängnäs. Whether the man had taken a suitcase with him, he couldn't say, as he was not the sort of person who spied on his customers.

The ticket seller then stopped talking to ascertain how satisfied the young man was with what he had said, and immediately determined that it would be best for him to provide further information. So he said that on the journey between Malmköping and Strängnäs there were twelve stops and that the old man could of course get out at any one of those. The

person who would know was the bus driver, and according to the timetable he would be back in Malmköping at ten past seven that same evening, when the bus made its return journey to Flen.

The young man sat down beside the terrified little man with the throbbing ears.

‘Just need to think,’ he said.

So he thought. He thought that he should certainly be able to shake the bus driver’s mobile phone number out of the little man, and then call the driver and say that the old man’s suitcase was actually stolen property. But then of course there was a risk that the bus driver would involve the police and that was not something the young man wanted. Besides, it was probably not so urgent really, because the old man seemed dreadfully old and now that he had a suitcase to drag around, he would need to travel by train, bus or taxi if he wanted to continue his journey from the station in Strängnäs. He would thus leave new tracks behind him, and there would always be somebody who could be dangled by the ears to say where the old man was heading. The young man had confidence in his ability to persuade people to tell him what they knew.

When the youth had finished thinking, he decided to wait for the bus to return so he could interview the driver without undue politeness.

When he had decided, the young man got up again, and explained to the ticket seller what would happen to him, his wife, his children and his home if he told the police or anybody else what had just occurred.

The little man had neither wife nor children, but he was eager to keep his ears and genitals more or less intact. So he gave his word as an employee of the national railways that no one would get a peep out of him.

That was a promise he kept until the next day.

The two-man search groups came back to the Old People's Home and reported on what they had seen. Or rather hadn't seen. The mayor instinctively did not want to involve the police and he was desperately trying to think of alternatives, when the local newspaper reporter dared to ask:

'And what are you going to do now, Mr Mayor?'

The mayor was silent for a few moments; then he said:

'Call the police, of course.'

God, how he hated the free press!

Allan woke when the driver kindly nudged him and announced that they had now reached Byringe Station. Shortly afterwards, the driver manoeuvred the suitcase out of the front door of the bus, with Allan close behind.

The driver asked if he could now manage on his own, and Allan said that the driver had no need to worry in that respect. Then Allan thanked him for his help and waved goodbye as the bus rolled out onto the main road again.

Tall fir trees blocked the afternoon sun and Allan was starting to feel a bit chilly in his thin jacket and indoor slippers. He could see no sign of Byringe, let alone its station. There was just forest, forest and forest in all directions — and a little gravel road leading to the right.

Allan thought that perhaps there were warm clothes in the suitcase he had on impulse brought along with him. Unfortunately the suitcase was locked and without a screwdriver or some other tool it was surely hopeless to try to open it. There was no other option but to start moving, otherwise he would freeze to death.

The suitcase had a strap at the top and if you pulled it, the suitcase rolled along nicely on its small wheels. Allan followed the gravel road into the forest with short, shuffling steps. The suitcase followed just behind him, skidding on the gravel.

After a few hundred yards, Allan came to what must be Byringe Station – a closed-down building next to a most definitely and absolutely closed-down former railway line.

Allan was a prize specimen as far as centenarians went, but it was all getting to be a bit too much. He sat down on the suitcase to gather his thoughts and strength.

To Allan's left stood the shabby, yellow two-storey station. All the windows on the bottom floor were covered with planks. To his right you could follow the closed-down railway line into the distance, straight as an arrow even deeper into the forest. Nature had not yet succeeded in entirely eating up the tracks, but it was only a matter of time.

The wooden platform was evidently no longer safe to walk on. On the outermost planking you could still read a painted sign: Do not walk on the track. The track was certainly not dangerous to walk on, thought Allan. But who in his right mind would voluntarily walk on the platform?

That question was answered immediately, because at that very moment the shabby door of the station building was opened and a man in his seventies wearing a cap and solid boots stepped out of the house. He clearly trusted the planks not to give way and he was entirely focused on the old man in front of him. His initial attitude was hostile, but then he seemed to change his mind, possibly as a result of seeing the decrepitude of this trespasser.

Allan sat on the newly stolen suitcase, not knowing what to say and in any case lacking the energy to say it. But he looked steadily at the man, letting him make the first move.

'Who are you, and what are you doing in my station?' asked the man with the cap.

Allan didn't answer. He couldn't decide whether he was dealing with friend or foe. But then he decided that it would be wise not to argue with the only person around, someone who

might even let Allan inside before the evening chill set in. He decided to tell it like it was.

Allan told the man that his name was Allan, that he was exactly one hundred years old and spry for his age, so spry in fact that he was on the run from the Old People's Home. He had also had time to steal a suitcase from a young man who by now would certainly not be particularly happy about it; his knees were not for the moment at their best and he would very much like to give them a rest.

Allan then fell silent, awaiting the court's verdict.

'Is that so,' said the man in the cap and smiled. 'A thief!'

He jumped nimbly down from the platform and went over to the centenarian to have a closer look.

'Are you really one hundred years old?' he asked. 'In that case, you must be hungry.'

Allan couldn't follow the logic, but of course he was hungry. So he asked what was on the menu and if a nip of the hard stuff might be included.

The man with the cap stretched out his hand, introduced himself as Julius Jonsson and pulled the old man to his feet. He then announced that he would personally carry Allan's suitcase, and that roast elk was on the bill if that suited, and that there would absolutely be a nip of the hard stuff to go with it, or rather enough to take care of the knees and the rest of him too.

Julius Jonsson had not had anybody to talk to for several years, so he was pleased to meet the old man with the suitcase. A drop of the hard stuff first for one knee and then for the other, followed by a drop more for the back and neck, and then some to whet the appetite, all in all made for a convivial atmosphere. Allan asked what Julius did for a living, and got his whole story.

Julius was born in the north of Sweden, the only child of Anders and Elvina Jonsson. Julius worked as a labourer on the

family farm and was beaten every day by his father who was of the opinion that Julius was good for nothing. When Julius was twenty-five, his mother died of cancer – which Julius grieved over – and shortly afterwards his father was swallowed by the bog when he tried to rescue a heifer. Julius grieved over that too – because he was fond of the heifer.

Young Julius had no talent for the farming life (in this his father had essentially been right) nor did he have any desire for it. So he sold everything except a few acres of forest that he thought might come in handy in his old age. He went off to Stockholm and within two years had squandered all his money. He then returned to the forest.

With great enthusiasm, Julius put in a bid to supply 5,000 electricity poles to the Hudiksvall District Electrical Company. And since Julius didn't concern himself with such details as employment tax and VAT, he won the bid, and with the help of a dozen Hungarian refugees he managed to deliver the poles on time, and was paid more money than he knew existed.

So far, all was well. The problem was that Julius had been obliged to cheat a little. The trees were not yet fully grown, so the poles were a yard shorter than what had been ordered. This would probably have gone unnoticed if it hadn't been for the fact that virtually every farmer in the area had just acquired a combine harvester.

The Hudiksvall District Electrical Company stuck up the poles, with cables criss-crossing fields and meadows in the area, and when it was harvest time, on one single morning the cables were pulled down in twenty-six locations by twenty-two different newly bought combine harvesters. The entire region had no electricity for weeks, as harvests were lost, and milking machines stopped working. It was not long before the farmers' fury – at first directed against the Hudiksvall District Electrical Company – was turned against young Julius.

‘The town slogan “Happy Hudiksvall” was not on many people’s lips at that time, I can tell you,’ Julius said. ‘I had to hide at the Town Hotel in Sundsvall for seven months and then I ran out of money. Shall we have another swig of the hard stuff?’

Allan thought that they should. The elk had been washed down with beer too, and now Allan felt so comprehensively satisfied that he began to be almost afraid of dying.

Julius continued his story. After being nearly run down by a tractor in the centre of Sundsvall (driven by a farmer with a murderous look in his eyes), he realised that the locals weren’t going to forget his little mistake for the next hundred years. So he moved a long way south and ended up in Mariefred where he did a bit of small-time thieving for a while until he tired of town life and managed to acquire the former station building in Byringe for 25,000 crowns he happened to find one night in a safe at the Gripsholm Inn.

Here at the station, he now lived essentially via handouts from the state, poaching in his neighbour’s forest, small-scale production and sale of alcoholic spirits from his home-distilling apparatus, and resale of what goods he could get hold of from his neighbours. He wasn’t particularly popular in the neighbourhood, Julius went on, and between mouthfuls Allan answered that he could imagine as much.

When Julius suggested having one final snifter ‘for dessert’, Allan answered that he had always had a weakness for desserts of that kind, but that first of all he must seek out a toilet if there possibly happened to be one in the building. Julius got up, turned on the ceiling lamp since it was starting to get dark, and then pointed to the stairs saying that there was a functional lavatory on the right. He promised to have two newly poured drams ready and waiting when Allan returned.

Allan found the toilet where Julius had said it would be. He stood in position to pee, and as usual the last drops didn’t quite

make it to the bowl. Some of them landed softly on his pee slippers instead.

Halfway through the process, Allan heard a noise on the stairs. His first thought was that it was Julius, going off with his newly stolen suitcase. The noise got louder. Somebody was climbing the stairs.

Allan realised that there was a chance that the steps he heard outside the door belonged to a slightly built young man with long, greasy blond hair, scraggly beard and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back. And that, if it was him, then it probably wasn't going to be a pleasant encounter.

The bus returning from Strängnäs arrived at Malmköping station three minutes early. The bus carried no passengers and the driver had accelerated a little bit extra after the last bus stop to have time to catch his breath before continuing the journey to Flen.

But the driver had barely lit his cigarette before a slightly built youth with long, greasy blond hair, scraggly beard and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back, arrived.

'Are you going to Flen?' the driver asked a little hesitantly, because there was something about the young man that didn't feel right.

'I'm not going to Flen. And neither are you,' answered the young man.

Hanging around waiting for four hours for the bus to come back had been a bit too much for what little patience the youth could muster. Besides, after half that time he had realised that if instead he had immediately stolen a car, he could have caught up with the bus long before Strängnäs.

On top of it all, police cars had started to cruise around in the little town. At any time the police could stumble into the station, and start interrogating the little man behind the window in the

ticket office as to why he looked terrified and why the door to his office was hanging at an angle on one hinge.

The young man had no idea what the cops were doing there. His boss in *Never Again* had chosen Malmköping as the transaction venue for three reasons: first, it was close to Stockholm; second, it had relatively good transport options; and third – and most important – because the long arm of the law wasn't long enough to reach there. There were simply no cops in Malmköping.

Or, to be more precise: there shouldn't be, and yet the place was crawling with them. The young man had seen two cars and a total of four policemen; from his perspective that was a crowd.

At first, the young man thought that the police were after him. But that would assume that the little man had squawked, and the young man could categorically discount that possibility. While waiting for the bus to come, the young man hadn't had much to do other than keep an eye on the little man, smash his office phone to bits and patch up the office door as best he could.

When the bus eventually came and the young man noted that it had no passengers, he had immediately decided to kidnap both the driver and the bus.

It took all of twenty seconds to persuade the bus driver to turn the bus around and drive northwards again. Close to a personal record, the young man reflected as he sat down in the exact seat where the geriatric he was now chasing had been sitting earlier the same day.

The bus driver quivered with fear, but got through the worst of it with a calming cigarette. Smoking was, of course, forbidden on board the bus, but the only law the driver was subject to at that moment was sitting just diagonally behind him in the bus and was slightly built, had long, greasy blond hair, a scraggly beard and a denim jacket with the words *Never Again* on the back.

On the way, the young man asked where the elderly suitcase-thief had gone. The driver said that the old man had got off at Byringe Station and that was probably entirely random, explaining the backwards way the old man had gone about things, offering a fifty-crown note and asking how far he could get with that.

The driver didn't know much about Byringe Station, except that it was rare for anyone to get on or off there. Supposedly there was a closed-down railway station some way in the forest, and Byringe village was somewhere in the vicinity. The geriatric couldn't have got much further than that, the driver guessed. The man was very old and the suitcase was heavy, even though it had wheels.

The young man immediately calmed down. He had refrained from calling the boss in Stockholm, because the boss was one of the few people who could scare people more effectively than the young man himself. The young man shivered at the thought of what the boss would say about the suitcase going astray. Better to solve the problem first and tell him later. And seeing as how the old man hadn't gone all the way to Strängnäs or even beyond, the suitcase should be back in the hands of the young man quicker than he had feared.

'Here's the Byringe Station bus stop...'

The driver slowly rolled to the side of the road, and prepared to die.

But it turned out that his time had not come, although his mobile phone wasn't so lucky. It met with a rapid death under one of the young man's boots. And a whole stream of death threats directed at the driver's relatives spewed out of the young man's mouth, designed to avert any possible thought of the driver contacting the police instead of turning the bus around and continuing the journey to Flen.

Then the young man got off and let the driver and the bus escape. The poor driver was so terrified that he didn't dare turn

the bus round, but continued all the way to Strängnäs, parked in the middle of Trädgårds Street, walked in shock into the Delia Hotel where he rapidly downed four glasses of whisky. Then to the bartender's horror, he started to cry. After a further two glasses of whisky, the bartender offered him a telephone in case he wanted to phone somebody. The bus driver started to cry again – and called his girlfriend.

The young man thought he could make out tracks in the gravel on the road, tracks of a suitcase on wheels. This would be over in no time, which was a good thing, because it was getting dark.

Off and on, the young man wished that he had done a bit more planning. It struck him that he was standing in a rapidly darkening forest, and it would soon be pitch black. What would he do then?

These troubled thoughts ended abruptly when he first caught sight of a shabby, partly boarded-up, yellow building near the bottom of the hill. And when somebody turned on a light on the upper floor, the young man mumbled:

‘Now I’ve got you, old geezer.’

Allan quickly stopped peeing. Then he carefully opened the toilet door and tried to hear what was happening in the kitchen. Soon enough his worst fear was confirmed. Allan recognised the young man's voice, bellowing at Julius Jonsson to reveal where ‘the other old bastard’ was.

Allan snuck over to the kitchen door, silently because he was wearing bedroom slippers. The young man had grasped Julius by both ears, the same hold he had earlier practised on the little man at the station in Malmköping. While he shook poor Julius, he continued his interrogation. Allan thought the young man should have been satisfied with finding the suitcase which was standing right in the middle of the room. Julius grimaced but made no move to answer. Allan reflected that the old timber

merchant was quite a tough guy, and looked around for a suitable weapon. Amidst the junk he saw a small number of candidates: a crowbar, a plank, a container of insect spray and a packet of rat poison. Allan first settled on the rat poison but couldn't just then figure out a way to get a spoonful or two into the young man. The crowbar, on the other hand, was a bit too heavy for the centenarian to lift, and the insect spray... No, it would have to be the plank.

So Allan took a firm hold of his weapon and with four sensationally fast steps – for his age – he was right behind his intended victim.

The young man must have sensed that Allan was there, because just as the old man took aim the youth loosened his hold on Julius Jonsson and spun around.

He received the plank slap bang in the middle of his forehead, stood still where he was and stared for a second before he fell backwards and hit his head on the edge of the kitchen table.

No blood, no groaning, nothing. He just lay there, with his eyes closed.

‘Good one,’ said Julius.

‘Thanks,’ said Allan, ‘now where’s that dessert you promised?’

Allan and Julius sat down at the kitchen table, with the long-haired youth unconscious at their feet. Julius poured the brandy, gave one glass to Allan and raised his own in a toast. Allan raised his glass.

‘So,’ said Julius when they’d emptied their glasses. ‘I’m betting that’s the owner of the suitcase?’

Allan realised that it was time for him to explain a thing or two in more detail.

Not that there was so much to explain. Most of what had happened during the day was hard for Allan himself to understand. But he described the events – his defection from the

home, his spontaneous seizure of the suitcase at the station in Malmköping, and the fear at the back of his mind that the young man who now lay on the floor would probably quickly catch up with him. And he sincerely apologised for the fact that Julius now sat there with red and throbbing ears. But Julius said that Allan most certainly shouldn't be apologising for the fact that there was finally a bit of action in Julius Jonsson's life.

Julius was back in good form. He thought it was high time that they both had a look at what was in the suitcase. When Allan pointed out that it was locked, Julius told him not to be silly.

'Since when has a lock stopped Julius Jonsson?' asked Julius Jonsson.

But there is a time for everything, he went on. First there was the matter of the problem on the floor. It wouldn't do if the young man were to wake up and then carry on from where he left off when he passed out.

Allan suggested that they tie him to a tree outside the station building, but Julius objected that if the young man shouted loudly enough when he woke up he would be heard down in the village. There were only a handful of families still living there, but all had – with more or less good reason – a bit of a grudge against Julius and they would probably be on the young man's side if they got the chance.

Julius had a better idea. Off the kitchen was an insulated freezer-room where he stored his poached and butchered elks. For the time being the room contained no elks, and the fan was turned off. Julius didn't want to use the freezer unnecessarily because it used a hell of a lot of electricity. Julius had of course hot-wired it, and it was Gösta at Forest Cottage farm who unknowingly paid, but it was important to steal electricity in moderation if you wanted to keep taking advantage of the perk for a long time.

Allan inspected the turned-off freezer and found it to be an excellent cell, without any unnecessary amenities. The six by nine feet was perhaps more space than the youth deserved, but there was no need to make conditions unnecessarily harsh.

The old men dragged the young man into the freezer. He groaned when they put him on an upturned wooden chest in one corner and propped his body against the wall. He seemed about to wake up. Best to hurry out and lock the door properly!

No sooner said than done. Upon which Julius lifted the suitcase onto the kitchen table, looked at the lock, licked clean the fork he had just used for the evening's roast elk with potatoes, and picked the lock in a few seconds. Then he beckoned Allan over for the actual opening, on the grounds that it was Allan's booty after all.

'Everything of mine is yours too,' said Allan. 'We share and share alike, but if there is a pair of shoes in my size then I bags them.'

Upon which Allan opened the lock.

'What the hell,' said Allan.

'What the hell,' said Julius.

'Let me out!' could be heard from the freezer-room.