
Opening Extract from...

Stieg Larsson, My Friend

Written by Kurdo Baksi

Translated from the Swedish by Laurie Thompson

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The end and a beginning

Stieg Larsson's funeral took place on Friday, 10 December, 2004, in the Chapel of the Holy Cross at Forest Cemetery in southern Stockholm. The chapel was packed with relatives, friends and acquaintances. We filed past the coffin to pay our respects. Most of us whispered a final message as we walked slowly past the bier.

On the back of the order of service was a poem by Raymond Carver, "Late Fragment", from the collection he completed shortly before his death:

> And did you get what
> you wanted from this life, even so?
> I did.
> And what did you want?
> To call myself beloved, to feel myself
> beloved on the earth.

When Carver was asked how he wanted to be remembered, he replied, "I can think of nothing better than to have been called an author." Not many of the congregation in the chapel that afternoon would have realized that the same applied to Stieg. That he would be remembered as the author of one of the biggest, least expected publishing successes of modern times. For most of us he was a tireless hero in the fight against racism – there was no battle for democracy and equality that he was unwilling to take part in. He was aware that there was a high price attached to

doing so, but it was a price he was prepared to pay. The constant threats, the lack of financial resources and the sleepless nights. It was a struggle that shaped his whole life.

But Stieg became an author – thanks to the capriciousness of life and death – only when he was no longer with us.

That afternoon we attended an uplifting memorial ceremony at the Workers' Educational Association in Stockholm, a venue at which Stieg had been keen to lecture ever since the publication of his first book, *Extremhögern* (The Extreme Right), in the spring of 1991. Tributes came thick and fast, delivered by, among others, his father, Erland Larsson, his brother, Joakim Larsson, his partner, Eva Gabrielsson, the publisher of *Expo* magazine, Robert Aschberg, the publisher-in-chief at Norstedts, Svante Weyler, the historian Heléne Lööw, Graeme Atkinson from the British magazine *Searchlight* and Göran Eriksson, the head of the Swedish W.E.A. I was master of ceremonies.

After the memorial ceremony we repaired to Södra Teatern, the theatre in the Söder district of southern Stockholm, a favourite haunt of Stieg's in his last years, for a funeral feast. It was icy cold on the terrace; the December chill froze us through and through. We shared our grief – family, friends, acquaintances and the entire staff of *Expo*. It was late at night before we broke up. We trudged home, each of us with our own memories of Stieg etched indelibly on our minds.

That was when the really difficult part began. Mourning in private.

"Farewell" is a hard word to define. Who is saying farewell to whom? The one who leaves or the one who stays behind? I keep

coming back to that question over and over again. Of course I have lost a lot of friends and acquaintances over the years, but Stieg was my first really close friend to die. I set myself very high standards while grieving, but found myself groping around helplessly even so. I didn't know how to mourn with sufficient intensity.

After a while I realized that my memory was failing me. I forgot the names of people, lost my sense of direction, became anxious and depressed. But all the while the same message was pounding away at the back of my mind: I had to be strong. Stieg's partner, Eva, and the young members of the *Expo* staff needed me. I couldn't let them down now. I must not burst into tears in front of friends and acquaintances. I had learned a lesson from my time in the mountains of Kurdistan during the freedom struggle there: there is a time to weep, and a time to maintain a stiff upper lip and do whatever needs to be done.

I realized that I had to compromise. For a long time I avoided *Expo* and the places where Stieg and I used to meet: Il Caffè, Café Anna, Café Latte, the Indian restaurants on Kungsholmen and McDonald's in St Eriksgatan. Eventually I began to behave in exactly the opposite way. I wore black and made a point of going to the places I used to frequent with Stieg. It wasn't that I imagined we were sitting there together. It was rather a case of going there in order to come to terms with my own situation, irrespective of whether I actually wanted a meal.

Months passed. Eventually the day came when the first reviews of *Män som hatar kvinnor* (Men Who Hate Women, in English called *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) were published. I eagerly devoured every word and was overwhelmed by a strange feeling:

I took everything that was said about the book personally. I began to regard myself as a sort of stand-in for Stieg. The reviews were almost exclusively positive, which pleased and distressed me at the same time. I was pleased by the thought that the books were going to be read by a lot of people, distressed because Stieg wouldn't be able to experience this for himself.

Eventually the first anniversary of that awful day came round. Rain pelted remorselessly against the windowpanes during the night of 8 November. My flat was only a stone's throw from Stieg's house. I was overcome once more by a tidal wave of sorrow and longed to be able to talk to him. I wished I could tell him that I was in love with a woman I knew he had met at one of the parties we had attended together. But there was only silence. I sat there, staring at the black and white tie Stieg had worn the last day of his life, the one Eva had given me as a keepsake. He should be close by, I thought, but he felt so dreadfully far away.

Maybe that was the moment when it finally came home to me that he had left us for good. I would never see him again. That night I made up my mind to travel to Skelleftehamn, the town in northern Sweden where he had been born, and to Umeå, where he had grown up. I bought plane tickets and prepared for the journey, but when the departure day dawned I realized that there was no chance of my travelling. Perhaps I'd be able to cope later on, but not yet. In fact I turned down several assignments in places close to his home territory: I still wasn't up to it.

Stieg's success as a writer did more than continue; if anything, the second volume in the Millennium trilogy, *Flickan som lekte med elden* (*The Girl Who Played with Fire*), was even more of a triumph. People in the trade began to talk about the most

successful Swedish books of all time – and the third volume, *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*), hadn't even been published yet. Stieg's name appeared in the newspapers almost every day; people on buses and in the underground had their heads buried in his books. He was still a constant presence in my life.

It struck me how little I actually knew about Stieg's existence before we met. He hardly ever mentioned the first twenty years of his life during all the time we were good friends. I began to wonder if something had happened in his youth that made it difficult for him to be in the spotlight. He always refused to think of himself as important in any respect. On the other hand, he thought a lot of other people were important.

Who was Stieg?

I wrote that question down on a piece of paper and stared at the words. It suddenly occurred to me that the reason he worked himself to death might be hidden away in his past. The fact is that even if we try to persuade ourselves otherwise, no human being is capable of working like Stieg did. Did he do it in an attempt to achieve ambitious goals he had set himself, or was it some kind of escapism? It may sound odd, but I really do believe that Stieg often thought he could change the world single-handedly if he only worked hard enough at it. I sometimes used to feel guilty because I myself was in favour of gradual change, while he could only feel at ease when he was working flat out. I have never met anybody with such a compulsive drive to work, such strength and energy.

*

Once I had asked myself that question – who was Stieg? – I noticed how the journalist in me was slowly but surely aroused once more. I started researching his early life and scanning the local newspapers *Västerbottens Folkblad* and *Västerbottens Kuriren*. Every day I learned something new about him – his homes in Hagmarksvägen and Ersmarksgatan in the Sandbacka district of Umeå, his years at the Hagaskolan primary school, then the Dragonskolan grammar school. I searched for his name in driving-school records, even though I knew he didn't have a licence. Perhaps it was a decision he had made early on without realizing the implications: the first piece of advice the police give to an individual living under threat is not to own a car, because the easiest way to track someone down in Sweden is through the driver and vehicle licensing authority.

When I discovered that Stieg had worked as a dishwasher at Sävargården in Umeå, I telephoned the well-known restaurant; none of the current staff had been working there at the same time. I was astonished to learn that he had completed his two years of national service with the I20 infantry regiment in Umeå. It is almost impossible to imagine Stieg as an infantryman. More credible was a spell as a manager at the pulp mill in Hörnefors.

Slowly but surely I worked my way back in time; it was like fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Almost before I knew where I was, I found myself in Östra Valliden and Varuträsk, just outside Skellefteå. There I got to know about a boy whose father had died and so had found himself in a foster home. This was Stieg's maternal grandfather. His first job was as a farmhand; then, like so many of his contemporaries in the 1920s, he worked as a navvy, building roads, or as a lumberjack. In

his free time he hunted game in the forests or fished in the lakes around Bjursele.

His name was Severin Boström. It became obvious to me that in order to know Stieg Larsson, you needed to become acquainted with his maternal grandfather. People in Ursviken said of Severin that he was "a very passionate man". He had moved to Ursviken, between Skellefteå and Skelleftehamn, in order to run an engineering workshop. He repaired chainsaws, mopeds and bicycles. As soon as he could afford it he bought a car. During the Second World War, like so many people in those northern parts, he became a devout anti-Nazi. In his case, his convictions were so strong that they were a key influence on his notion of right and wrong.

One summer's day in 1953, at a dance in the People's Park in Skellefteå, Severin's daughter Vivianne met a man by the name of Erland Larsson, who was on a fortnight's leave from his military service. They fell in love, and a year later, on 15 August, 1954, the young pair had a son: Karl Stig-Erland Larsson.

It was far from easy for a young couple to make a living in those days. For a while Stieg's grandfather and father both worked at the Rönnskär sawmill, but before long Erland and Vivianne decided to seek their fortune in Stockholm, realizing that they would be forced to leave their one-year-old son with his maternal grandparents near Nordsjö.

It was 1962 before the family could be reunited. By then, Stieg had acquired a younger brother, Joakim, born in 1957. They all moved into a new home in Umeå, where Vivianne worked in a clothes shop and Erland was employed as an interior decorator for the clothes chain Berlins, which had

shops in central Umeå, Skellefteå, Piteå and Örnsköldsvik.

While I was tracing Stieg's past, I frequently felt a kind of kinship with him. I was also forced to move house frequently because of my father's political activities. I like to think that children who grow up in such conditions develop a blend of rootlessness and restlessness. Combine those qualities with curiosity and you have a mixture that can be extremely important for a journalist later in life; but when you are a child, you often feel very much alone in the world.

As a teenager I ended up in Tensta, in Greater Stockholm, in a new country and without any friends. Stieg had also moved there only a few years previously – for him it was the same country, of course, but coming from Västerbotten in the remote north no doubt caused him his fair share of culture shock.

When we first met, as adults, Stieg and I had one thing very much in common: we had very few close friends.

With hindsight I have often thought that the restlessness we shared was an important reason why we got on so well together. When you have few friends around you, you often develop interests that fit well with your situation. In Stieg's case, films and the night sky were of great importance. Erland had a job for a while as the caretaker of a cinema, so Stieg and his younger brother were often able to sneak in and watch films. Stieg loved to immerse himself in this make-believe world, entranced by the captivating happenings on the silver screen. The same thing applied to his star-gazing, the heavens a grand mystery of which an individual could never experience more than a tiny fraction.

When Stieg celebrated his twelfth birthday he was given a

Facit typewriter and a telescope. These were by no means cheap presents, probably costing a lot more than his parents could afford. For Stieg, it was the fulfilment of a dream. One of his diaries contains several entries like this one: "1/2.1968, P.S. We spent a quarter of an hour searching for Uranus, without success."

It was around this time that Stieg became interested in politics, despite still being so young. His mother had become increasingly involved in trade union work and was soon a member of the local housing committee, active on the Disability Council and one of the founders of the first local authority equality committee. It was at this time that Stieg met Eva Gabrielsson, who was to become his partner. The occasion was a 1972 rally of the National Liberation Front protesting against the Vietnam War.

A friend of his told me that Stieg was also a keen photographer as a teenager – but the pictures were not the usual family snaps: he took photographs "in order to record injustice in the world".

Umeå soon became too small for Stieg. He had big ambitions. At the age of seventeen he hitched a lift on a long-distance lorry to Stockholm, and from there set off for Algeria. He had raised the necessary money by taking temporary jobs as a newspaper delivery boy and a dishwasher. But he didn't get very far: he was mugged, lost all his travel money and had to return to Umeå. Nevertheless, being the stubborn mule that he was, he worked hard to raise the funds for another attempt. This was the beginning of a series of long journeys. He finally reached Algeria and sold his leather jacket in order to be able to prolong his stay. After a two-year gap to do his military service in Sweden, he set off on his travels once more – this time to Africa.

He was twenty-one when he landed in Khartoum, continuing

from there to Eritrea and Ethiopia. The innocent abroad who had lost all his money almost before he had even set off was by now a seasoned globetrotter. In northern Ethiopia Stieg was interrogated by M.I.6, the British security service. In addition to being scared stiff and angry, he fell seriously ill after staying in a cheap hotel in Addis Ababa. For some considerable time he had no opportunity to contact anyone in Sweden, and it was not until he arrived in Kenya in a bus convoy that he could send a message confirming that he was O.K. From Kenya he continued on to Uganda, where he was able to catch a flight to Moscow, and from there back home to Sweden.

It wasn't the actual travelling that attracted him, though. More relevant was the fact that this way of gathering knowledge would help him to become what he now knew he wanted to be: a journalist. He had already made up his mind to enrol on a course in Stockholm. As if to mark the fact that this signalled a new phase in his life, he changed his first name.

That was when he became Stieg Larsson.

As with so much else in his life, his name change was something he preferred not to talk about, and he never told me exactly why he did it. Perhaps he was afraid that people would find it a bit odd. If there was anything he avoided like the plague, it was seeming to pretend to be somebody special.

Yet again I found myself asking myself the same old question: Who was Stieg?

I think the only answer that holds water is that he was a combination of the people who influenced his life, not least his grandfather Severin, his grandmother Tekla, his mother, Vivianne, his father, Erland, and his partner, Eva. But there was also an element

of escapism. He was always aware of the need to keep pushing at the boundaries. He moved from Umeå to Stockholm. Took his typewriter and telescope with him. But he needed to keep pressing on. New goals, new challenges. The letter added to his first name fitted the pattern, because it also *hid* something. Stieg always kept something hidden, despite the fact that he invariably gave so much to everyone with whom he came into contact.

It suddenly occurs to me that it could well be this ability to hide things that made him unique as a writer of crime fiction. He had so many secrets – perhaps the most extreme example of that is the crime trilogy he wrote at night. Quite a lot of people knew that he was writing, and he also referred frequently to crime novels by other authors, claiming that he could write at least as well as they did. But that is not what I mean. The fact is that he wrote three thumping great novels before getting round to submitting them to a publisher. How common is that? Why did he do it? In so many ways, Stieg was and always will be an enigma. The bottom line is that part of his character was mysterious.

At the same time, few people are as generous in their relationships as Stieg was. He gave, and so many of us were keen to receive what he had to offer. I have no doubt at all how he would have responded to Raymond Carver's two momentous questions.

Did you get what you wanted from this life?

Yes.

And what did you want?

To be loved.