

from:

# Everything Turns to Nothing

**Martin Kellerman**

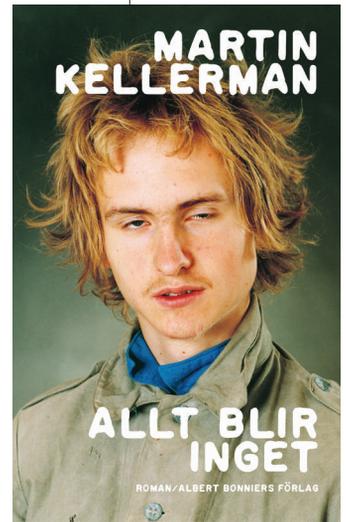
translated by

**Paul Goldsman**

Martin Kellerman is a cartoonist who has gained international success with the comic strip, *Rocky*, about a grumpy dog cartoonist living in Stockholm. In this extract from his first novel, we meet Florian, a disenchanted young man living in his grandmother's house on the island of Ragnarö in the Stockholm archipelago, his life an existence that revolves around collecting her pension and growing cannabis in her living room. A macabre story with more than a hint of humour unfolds.

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You can see hell from the earth. People call it the sun, but I know that it's hell, where we're all going to end up one day. It stuck its mug up over the lilac bush and broiled my face, which was hanging over the side of the sofa. I thought the phone had woken me up, so I raised my head and listened for more rings. But I only heard the wind in the trees and insects buzzing. I studied a spider painstakingly packing up a moth in a web ball under the armrest. The sofa had formerly been in the big house, but after one of its legs had come off, it had to stand outside the boathouse, summer and winter alike, and had become a popular haunt for the mice and bugs that thrived in the moist stuffing. I had happened to pour a bottle of diesel oil onto my bed in the shed, and in the morning the fumes had driven me out to the sofa. I would have preferred to sleep outside the whole night, but there were too many mosquitoes. Possibly because I haven't cut the grass, except in patches, ever since grandmother stopped paying me for it. Now it was far too late to cut it, and the old manual mower still lay, rusty and overgrown like an Inca temple in the jungle, in the spot where I had taken a break fourteen years earlier; occasionally I rediscovered it when I lumbered through the grass and ran my little toe into the cutting blades, or stumbled on the handle when I trudged through the snow in the winter. A scythe was probably the only thing that would be able to cut into the grass, but I hadn't seen anything like



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*Rocky fejsar demonerna* (Rocky Faces Up To the Demons), Kartago förlag, 2013, was reviewed by Željka Černok in SBR 2014:1.

that there in a very long time. The grass had certainly hidden that as well. The bushes must have concealed the hedge clippers, and the leaves had probably buried the rake. We do all that we can to improve our odds of survival. That was probably why I never found my lighter either. The lungs ordered the hands to put it in some place where the brain would not remember that I had left it. I rooted around in the grass in front of the sofa, with the morning cigarette dangling unlit between my lips. I found the hammer, which I had been meaning to use to fix the sofa, brown with rust and stuck fast in a clump of grass. When I wrenched it out I tore up the whole clump with the roots and a clod of dirt filled with angry ants landed in my lap. I chucked all that shit into a bush and brushed myself off.

*If I can just find the fucking lighter I'm going to burn the whole lawn*, I thought. What an incredibly cleansing feeling to burn up all the insects that had been allowed to multiply undisturbed for far too long, and had too many nooks and hiding places in the overgrown plot. Millions and billions of spider eggs being devoured by the flames – that was an attractive idea.

Half-blinded from the sunlight, I rooted around for a lighter in the darkness of the boathouse, and the rubbish around my mattress swarmed with white spots. Once my eyes adjusted, I went through the pockets of the clothes that lay strewn on the floor, but found only fluff. For the thousandth time, I decided to attach a lighter to a string so I could always find it. But in order to be tied it must first be found. I pulled out a drawer in the workbench that had once been intended for screws and nuts but nowadays was filled with grandmother's pills, carefully sorted by colour and function. The pink ones were my favourites, muscle-relaxing and calming. The white ones marked with a 'C' I also liked. If you took three at a time you felt a little sick, but also high, in an unusual way. The drugs for digestion and cataracts lay unopened in a pile next to the bench. I washed down two pinks and one green with a flat, warm Fanta from a plastic bottle, and was careful to close the drawer properly. I didn't want an ant army marching away with the tablets to the giant ant hill around the corner. I ought to have burned down the disgusting pile a long time ago, but it leaned against a tree that was too close to the house, so I had never dared. I once took a spade and tried to shovel it all out into the lake, but the hill was built over a rotten stump, so it was too difficult to get any large pieces loose. I had imagined that it would be like shovelling cornflakes, but you had to chop with the spade while you were standing in a sea of tremendously annoyed little soldiers, so I had been forced to retreat. After that time, the ants became even more aggressive and made it their miserable little life's mission to drive me out of the shed once and for all. Any food that was left out was attacked at once, and when I was sleeping I could hear them creeping around in the walls and little by little trying to eat up the shack, with the result that I would wake up one day on the bare slope and be forced to move up to the big house. If I had lived in a warmer country with more interesting wildlife I would have caught an anteater, chained it by the anthill, and let it eat until it died. But here there were only deer and grass snakes, and a remarkable bird that screamed in the forest at night like a lunatic. Anyway, I hope it was a bird.

But now I've got to have a light.

I was filled with a sudden rage, since that was the way my brain was programmed. It demanded that I suck in my tar as soon as I woke up.

Otherwise it warned me by pumping out adrenaline and testosterone that got the body to throw things around and kick rubbish out of the shed. An ashtray crashed to the floor in the turmoil, and spread an ash cloud that shone beautifully in the rays of the sun from the dirty window facing the lake. Besides that, there was no difference in the room. It was chaos without equal even before the outburst. Now I was dazed by the sudden exertion, and the cigarette hung broken at the corner of my mouth. The medicine began to kick in, and I felt a grateful calm wash over me, mostly from the knowledge of how nice it would be in a little while.

I shrugged off my sweaty clothes and tossed the twisted, balled-up clothing into the water barrel by the corner of the house, before I walked, squinting and naked, towards the dock. But I realized that my urge to smoke would be at its worst after my morning dip, so I stopped myself, scratched away a tick on my leg and set off up the hill to the big house. I could have left a lighter there when, for the hundredth time, I test-smoked some wilted leaves from the immature growth, to establish once again that it was ineffective.

The key under the pot, up with the lock, and into the pitch-black darkness where the heavy stink of cannabis struck the nostrils like old piss in a sauna. All the windows in the kitchen and living room were shuttered so that no one could peek in, but even so I didn't bother with the ceiling light, to avoid seeing how the kitchen looked. Instead I left the door open and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, before I fumbled my way over to the living room. When I opened the door it was like being met by an atomic explosion, because of the intense heat and light inside. The plants stood neatly lined up in big pots on benches and tables that were pushed together with narrow paths in between. It was far too hot, and I discovered to my horror that the fan in the outer wall which was supposed to let in fresh air from the outside had stopped. I had installed the fans so that the sticky hot air from the living room was blown out into the hallway instead of out of the house, because I was afraid that some confused visitor or the authorities on a routine visit would snoop around the house and be met by a gust of grass stench from the vent. The flash of genius had proved meaningless because the entire dump now stank to a distance of twenty meters. I tore the plastic hood off the wall fan over the window, whereupon a lighter that had lain on top of the hood since I celebrated the installation with a cigarette a few months earlier, tumbled down onto the floor. I rushed through the house to the kitchen entrance, once again blind in the darkness, and slammed my little toe on a kitchen chair which knocked over a paper bag full of empty cans that clattered out below the stairs to the upper floor.

A bird took off in a panic when I, like a pale, naked Indian, stormed down the hill towards the unsuspecting cigarettes in my trouser pockets. I jumped over the couch, which stood wedged in a hollow at the bottom of the hill, and plunged into the boathouse. Now I could not find the trousers. I stuck the lighter between my teeth and grubbed around among the heaps of clothing, until dripping with sweat and adrenaline I realized that they were lying at the bottom of the water barrel.

It was my last pack, but anyway I found the broken cigarette from this morning by the pillow. I even found a loose rolling paper that I emptied the tobacco into and rolled up into a functioning cigarette.



Put the cigarette and lighter together in a sock and carefully and solemnly went down to the dock, where I pushed the sock between the planks in the bench so that it would not blow into the water. After that I stepped slowly down the dock ladder and ceremoniously lowered my sweaty body into the cold water, in order to draw out the enjoyment. When everything except my head and arms was under the surface, I let go of the ladder and slid out into the reeds. A couple of strokes on my back, then I turned onto my stomach, lifted my white butt into the air and dived.

Reeds and other sticky lake plants beat against my closed eyes when I kicked myself further out and down. I emptied my lungs and took one last stroke downward, where I drove my face and chest into sludge and old dead clam shells on the bottom. I clung tightly to the slimy roots of some clumps of reeds, and pressed my body against the lakebed. Then I lay as still as a pike, with the whole weight of the lake on my back. I tried to feel like a clam, like a nothing, which just lay in wait, uninterested, until its instincts would tell it to open or close its mouth. My simple organism had room for no other thoughts. I was technically an animal, but really no more advanced than the water lily next to me. It could open and close itself too, but could not eat and shit so it had to content itself with being a plant. It didn't care. The clam didn't care either. I opened my mouth to let nutrients in, and when the air bubbled out my mouth was filled with silt. It tasted of iron and earth.

I burrowed my toes down into the mud, and emptied my bowels in one spasm. After having done what I needed for the day, I tried to return to thinking about nothing, but the air was finished and I began to swallow muddy water so I let go of the clump of reeds and slowly rose to the surface. Maybe clams are smarter than you think, because after they have crapped, they don't swim up to the surface where their shit is floating, and thus they avoid having to splash diarrhoea out of their hair.

I sat down on the bench to dry, careful not to wet the sock. I fished out the lighter and the cigarette and put it between my lips. The lighter flashed a few times before it lit, and the paper twist at the far end of the cigarette burned away. The relief when the nicotine reached my lungs quickly transformed into disappointment that it wasn't grass I was smoking. The first crop was long since finished, and the next was not yet ripe. But this time I wouldn't go and pinch off plants before they were ready, just because I was getting impatient. It was like smoking stinging nettles, but still difficult to



refrain. Finally, there was just a single plant left of the twelve I grew, because it was a bit hit-or-miss with the irrigation. So now it was a matter of discipline; no more than one bush for my own use and the rest for selling. Thirty-six plants, each plant worth around 10,000 kronor, according to what I'd picked up on various internet forums. 360,000 kronor, maybe even in a couple of weeks.

Then it'll be a water taxi to the mainland, taxi to the airport and never stop travelling and never ever come back to this spider's nest. Fly straight to Vietnam or Thailand. The money lasts longest there, I'd read. Live like a king for ten kronor a day. How long would the money last then? 36,000 days, how long is that? A hundred years. In that case I can afford to live like a sultan for twenty a day for fifty years instead.

'What happened to that shady guy who lived with his grandmother on Ragnarö?' they would say.

'He just left. Some say he's living like a sultan in Thailand now. He obviously did some damn smart business and now he's just chilling out under a palm tree with a drink and a lot of babes,' they would answer.

'Oh, shit.'

I breathed in the last centimetre of the cigarette in one long drag, then I flipped the filter out into the lake. Now I was sweating again, but since I was still seeing my lumps of poop bobbing in the reeds in front of the dock, I passed on a second dip. Little black fish snapped at the clumps which danced under the surface and floated up again when they let go.

Idiots.

I had always thought that the fish appreciated it when I tossed in bits of crust and other goodies, that it was a party for them after a dreary diet of insects and other disgusting things, but they seemed to be just as happy with the poop.

The morning dip was usually the high point of my summer days, but seeing that I would be without a smoke the whole day, I was mostly stressed at the thought of how tough that would be, and my legs jumped on the bench and made the dock sway. I couldn't go shopping yet, since grandmother's pension wouldn't come in until the next day. I decided that from now on I would buy two packs to keep in reserve over and above the three cartons I usually bought in order to get by until the next pension payment. I had obviously lost cigarette packs before, but never on the last day before getting supplies. You lose a pack in the middle of the month, you can put aside two a day for ten days, but if you lose the last pack in a water barrel the day before shopping, it is a mistake that cannot be remedied. There were of course neighbours, but relations with them were already poisoned in grandmother's time and had not really improved since I came to power. Going to bum cigarettes off an archipelago-Himmler on a four-wheeler didn't feel very tempting. I'd rather smoke navel lint. But just seeing the water barrel in the corner of my eye, I shivered in self-loathing.

*From now on, I won't keep the cigarettes in my trouser pockets, I thought. I'm going to have a special place where I keep my cigarettes, and a lighter on a string. And extra cigarettes in a locked cabinet that I can't open except in emergency situations like this one. With a key that'll be in a safe place that I'm not going to forget. Speaking of keys, I forgot to lock the big house. I ought to do it so that no one blunders in.*

People almost never came there, but it sometimes happened that someone from the municipality or a slurry truck or a neighbour came and hello-hello-ed and wondered if they could take elderberries from a tree that bordered the road or some other strange question. And getting no answer to the hello-hello-ing they began to peek through windows. And unable to peek in since the windows were shuttered, they tugged at the front door. If it was unlocked they went in and hello-hello-ed through the house and tugged at all the locked doors. It was highly annoying when that happened before, but now it simply must not happen.

I made a mighty effort and got up from the bench to walk back. I couldn't forget the fucking lighter. I stuffed it in my sock and threw it over my shoulder. Leapt over the stinging nettles by the dock footing and felt dizzy. The pills in combination with the sun made the blood rush from my head down to my feet, and I had to stand still a moment so as not to faint. I tried to focus my gaze on a fixed point, but there were hardly any fixed points in the dazzling garden jungle. Everywhere grass waved, bushes swayed, trees blew in the wind, and the air was chock-full of insects, pollen and sunspots that were still there when I closed my eyes. When I opened one eye a little, I saw how the grass reached for my face lightning fast, and I smiled because it was like the grass wanted to hug me, but behind the grass there was a hard wall of earth that overturned on me and everything went black.