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Opening extract from

The World's Best Karlson

Written by

Astrid Lindgren

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ASTRID LINDGREN



THE WORLD'S BEST KARLSON

Translated by Sarah Death • Illustrated by Tony Ross

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ANYBODY HAS THE RIGHT TO BE KARLSON

One morning Smidge—the youngest and smallest member of the Stevenson family—woke up to the sound of Mum and Dad talking to each other in the kitchen. It sounded almost as if they were cross or upset about something.

'That's torn it,' said Dad. 'Look what it says here in the paper. Here, read this!'

'Oh no, that's terrible,' said Mum, 'Absolutely terrible!'

Smidge leapt straight out of bed. He wanted to know what was so terrible.

Well, he soon found out. On the front page of the paper was the huge headline:

SPYPLANE OR UFO?

And underneath it said:

What is the unidentified flying object seen in the skies over Stockholm? Sightings are reported of a very small, barrel-shaped plane or something of the kind, with a loud, droning motor, flying over the rooftops of the Vasa district. The Board of Civil Aviation denies all knowledge of it and suspects some stealthy little spy is at work, flying around to scout for information. This must be investigated, and the airborne intruder must be captured. If it is a stealthy little spy, he must be handed over to the police without delay.

Who will solve the Stockholm UFO mystery? A reward of ten thousand kronor is on offer for the capture of the droning object, whatever it turns out to be. Anyone turning the thing in to the offices of this newspaper will be able to claim their reward on the spot.

'Poor Karlson on the Roof,' said Mum. 'They'll

give him no peace until they've hunted him down.'

Smidge felt scared and angry and upset, all at the same time.

'Why can't they leave Karlson alone?' he cried. 'He hasn't done any harm. He just lives in his house on the roof and flies around a bit. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?'

'No,' said Dad. 'There's nothing wrong with Karlson. It's just that he's a bit . . . er . . . unusual.'

And there certainly was something unusual about Karlson, even Smidge had to admit that. It *is* unusual to have little, motorized men with folding propellers, and starter buttons on their tummies, living up on the roof in special little houses. Karlson was one of those little men. And Karlson was Smidge's best friend. He was more of a best friend even than Kris and Jemima, who Smidge liked a lot and played with whenever Karlson had gone off somewhere or hadn't got time for him.

Karlson thought Kris and Jemima were a waste of space. Whenever Smidge mentioned their names, he just snorted.

'Don't see how you can talk about those puny shrimps and me in the same breath,' he would say. 'A handsome, thoroughly clever, perfectly plump man in his prime: how many silly little boys have got a best friend like that, eh?'

'Only me,' Smidge would answer, and every time he felt a heart-warming glow of happiness. How lucky he was that Karlson had decided to settle down on *his* roof! The whole Vasa district was full of those unsightly old four-storey blocks of flats like the one the Stevensons lived in, so what luck that Karlson had ended up on their roof and not anybody else's.

Mum and Dad, though, had not been particularly happy about Karlson to start with, and Smidge's brother Seb and sister Sally hadn't liked him at first, either. The whole family—apart from Smidge, of course—thought Karlson was the most dreadful, cheeky, spoilt, meddlesome mischief-maker you could ever imagine. But more recently they had started getting used to him. They almost liked Karlson now, and above all they had realized that Smidge needed him. After all, Seb and Sally

were so much older than Smidge, and having no brothers or sisters of about his own age meant he needed a best friend. Admittedly he had his very own dog now, a wonderful little puppy called Bumble, but even that wasn't enough—Smidge needed Karlson.

'And I think Karlson needs Smidge, too,' said Mum.

But right from the start, Mum and Dad had wanted to keep Karlson as secret as possible. They knew what a fuss there would be if the television people, for example, found out about him, or if the weekly magazines sent reporters round to write 'At Home with Karlson' articles.

'Ha ha, it would be hilarious,' Seb said once, 'if they put a photo on the cover of their magazine showing Karlson smelling a bunch of pink roses in his lounge.'

'Don't be stupid,' Smidge had said. 'Karlson hasn't got a lounge, only one crammed-full little room, and no roses either.'

Well, of course, Seb knew that. Once—but only once—he and Sally and Mum and Dad had been

wrong turning when I really meant to go for a fly round the city park, or because I could smell porridge? Start guessing!'

Smidge cheered up and his face brightened.

'Because you were missing me,' he suggested shyly.

'Wrong,' said Karlson. 'And I wasn't heading for the city park either, so don't bother guessing that.'

The city park, thought Smidge, oh no! Karlson simply mustn't go flying there, or anywhere else where there were loads of people to see him. Smidge would have to explain.

'Listen, Karlson,' he began, but then he stopped, because he suddenly noticed Karlson was looking very grumpy. He was pouting and giving Smidge a sullen stare.

'A person turns up starving hungry,' he said, 'but does anyone pull up a chair for them and fetch a bowl for them and tie a napkin under their chin and give them a big helping of porridge and tell them they've got to have a spoonful for Mummy and a spoonful for Daddy and a spoonful for Aunt Augusta . . . ?'

'Who's Aunt Augusta?' asked Smidge curiously.

'No idea,' said Karlson.

'Well, you don't need to have a spoonful for her then, do you!' laughed Smidge.

But Karlson wasn't laughing.

'Is that right? So a person's meant to starve to death, are they, just because they don't happen to know all the aunts in the world who might be sitting twiddling their thumbs in Tumbarumba or Timbuktu, or wherever they are?'

Smidge quickly got out another bowl and invited Karlson to help himself from the porridge saucepan. Still rather grumpy, Karlson poured some into his bowl. He poured and poured, and finished by running his finger round the pan to scrape it clean.

'Your mum's very nice,' said Karlson, 'but it's a shame she's so terribly stingy. I've seen a lot of porridge in my time, but never as little as this.'

He emptied the entire contents of the sugar basin over his porridge and tucked in. For several minutes the only sound in the kitchen was the sort of slurping you get when someone is eating porridge at high speed.

'I'm afraid there wasn't enough for a spoonful for Aunt Augusta,' said Karlson, wiping his mouth. 'But I see there are some buns! Easy now, take it easy, little Aunt Augusta, just you relax down there in Tumbarumba. I can always force down a couple of buns for you instead. Or even three . . . or four . . . or five!'

While Karlson wolfed down buns, Smidge sat brooding about how to warn him. Perhaps the best thing would be to let him read it for himself, thought Smidge, and timidly pushed the newspaper across to Karlson.

'Look at the front page,' he said grimly, and Karlson did. He looked at it with great interest, and then stabbed at the picture of the white steamer with a pudgy little finger.

'Dear dear, another boat's capsized,' he said. 'It's just one disaster after another!'

'No, you're just holding the paper upside down,' Smidge pointed out.

Smidge had suspected for some time that Karlson wasn't much good at reading. But he was a kindly little soul who didn't want to upset anybody, least of

all Karlson, so he didn't say: 'Ha ha, you can't read, can you?' but just turned the paper and the boat picture the right way up, so Karlson could see there hadn't been a disaster at sea.

'But there's plenty here about other disasters,' said Smidge. 'Listen to this!'

Then he read out the piece about the barrel-shaped spyplane and the stealthy little spy who had got to be captured and the reward and everything.

'All people have to do is turn the thing in to the offices of this newspaper, and they can claim their reward money on the spot,' he ended with a sigh.

But Karlson wasn't sighing, he was cheering.

'Whoop, whoop!' he shouted, with a couple of eager, joyous little jumps into the air. 'Whoop, whoop, the stealthy little spy is as good as caught. Ring the offices of this newspaper and tell them I'll be turning the thing in this very afternoon!'

'What do you mean?' asked Smidge in horror.

'The world's best spy catcher, guess who that is?' said Karlson, pointing proudly to himself.

'Yours truly, when I come dashing with my big butterfly net. If that stealthy little spy is flying around in this neighbourhood, I shall have him in my net before the day's out, you can be sure of that . . . by the way, have you got a rucksack or something, that I can fit ten thousand kronor in?'

Smidge sighed again. This was going to be even more difficult than he had thought. Karlson hadn't grasped the problem at all.

'Oh, Karlson, you must realize it's you who's the barrel-shaped spyplane; it's you they want to catch, don't you see?'

Karlson suddenly lost his bounce. He made a gurgling sound as if there was something caught in his throat, and glared at Smidge in fury.

'Barrel-shaped!' he shrieked. 'Are you calling me barrel-shaped? And we're supposed to be best friends. Huh, thank you *very* much!'

He stood up as straight as he could, to make himself taller, and pulled in his tummy as far as it would go.

'Perhaps you haven't noticed,' he said loftily,

'that I am a handsome and thoroughly clever and perfectly plump man in my prime. Perhaps you haven't noticed that, eh?'

'Of course I have, Karlson, of course I have,' stuttered Smidge. 'But I can't help what they write in the papers, can I? It's you they mean, I'm absolutely sure of it.'

Karlson was getting more and more worked up.

'All people have to do is turn the thing in to the offices of this newspaper,' he yelled bitterly. 'The thing,' he yelled. 'Anyone who calls me "the thing" will get a big enough biff between the eyes to send his nose flying.'

He made a couple of threatening little lunges at Smidge, but he shouldn't have done that, because it made Bumble leap up. Bumble had no intention of letting anyone come and shout at his master.

'Down, Bumble, leave Karlson alone,' said Smidge, and Bumble did as he was told. He just growled a bit to make sure Karlson understood he meant business.

Karlson flopped glumly down onto a stool in a bad fit of the sulks.



'You can count me out,' he said. 'You can count me out, if you're just going to be horrid all the time and call me "the thing" and set your bloodhounds on me.'

Smidge was quite shaken. He didn't know what to say or do.

'I honestly can't help what's in the paper, you know,' he mumbled. Then he stopped. Karlson wasn't saying anything either. He sat on his stool, sulking, and there was a depressing silence in the kitchen.

Then Karlson gave a sudden roar of laughter. He

leapt up from the stool and gave Smidge a playful little punch in the stomach.

'But if I'm a thing,' he said, 'at least I'm the world's best thing, worth ten thousand kronor, had you thought of that?'

Smidge started laughing, too, because it was great to see Karlson in a good mood again.

'Yes, so you are,' said Smidge happily, 'you're worth ten thousand kronor, and I'm sure not many people are.'

'Nobody in the whole wide world,' declared Karlson. 'A puny little thing like you, say, can't be worth more than a kronor twenty-five at most, I bet you.'

He turned his winder and rose jubilantly into the air, and then flew a lap of honour round the ceiling light, hooting with delight.

'Whoop, whoop,' he went, 'here comes Ten Thousand Kronor Karlson, whoop, whoop!'

Smidge decided not to worry about anything any more. Karlson really wasn't a spy, after all, and the police couldn't arrest him just for being Karlson. He suddenly realized that wasn't what Mum and Dad

were afraid of, either. They were only worried that they wouldn't be able to keep Karlson a secret any longer, if he was going to be hunted down with such a hue and cry. But surely nothing really bad could happen to him, Smidge thought.

'You needn't be frightened, Karlson,' he said consolingly. 'They can't do anything to you just for being you.'

'No, absolutely anybody has the right to be Karlson,' Karlson declared. 'Though so far there's only the one first-rate, perfectly plump specimen.'

They were back in Smidge's room by then, and Karlson was looking round hopefully.

'Have you got a steam engine we can explode or something else that goes off with a good bang? It's got to go bang and I've got to have fun, otherwise you can count me out,' he said, but at that moment he caught sight of the paper bag on Smidge's table, and pounced on it like a hawk. Mum had put it there the evening before. There was a lovely big peach inside, and that glossy peach was now in the grip of Karlson's pudgy fingers.

'We can share,' suggested Smidge quickly. He liked peaches too, you see, and he realized he'd need to be quick to get a taste of this one.

'By all means,' said Karlson. 'We'll share: I'll have the peach and you can have the bag. That means you get the best bit, because there's all sorts of fun you can have with a paper bag.'

'Ohnothanks,' gabbled Smidge, 'we'll share the peach, then you're welcome to have the bag.'

Karlson shook his head disapprovingly.

'Never seen such a greedy little boy,' he said. 'All right, whatever you like!'

They needed a knife to cut the peach in half, and Smidge ran off to the kitchen to get one. When he got back, there was no sign of Karlson. But then Smidge discovered him sitting under the table, almost out of sight, and heard an eager slurping, the sort you get when someone is eating a juicy peach at high speed.

'Hey, what are you doing?' asked Smidge anxiously.

'Sharing,' said Karlson. There was one last guzzling noise and then Karlson came crawling out with peach juice running down his chin. He held

out a podgy hand to Smidge and passed him a wrinkled brown peach stone.

'I always want you to have the best bit,' he said. 'If you plant this stone, you'll get a whole peach tree stuffed full of peaches. You've got to admit I'm the world's kindest Karlson, not making a fuss even though I only got one miserable little peach!'

Before Smidge could admit anything, Karlson had darted over to the window, where there was a pink geranium in a pot on the sill.

'And being kind like I am, I shall help you plant it as well,' he said.

'Stop!' yelled Smidge. But it was too late. Karlson had already uprooted the geranium from its pot, and before Smidge could stop him, he threw it out of the window.

'You're crazy,' began Smidge, but Karlson wasn't listening.

'A whole big peach tree! Think of that! At your fiftieth birthday party you'll be able to give every single guest a peach for dessert, won't that be nice?'

'Maybe, but it won't be so nice when Mum finds out you've pulled up her geranium,' said Smidge.

'And if it's fallen on the head of some old man down in the street, what do you think he's going to say?'

'Thank you kindly, Karlson, he'll say,' declared Karlson. 'Thank you kindly for pulling up the geranium and not throwing it out pot and all . . . which Smidge's daft mum thinks is a great idea.'

'Oh no she doesn't,' protested Smidge. 'And anyway, what do you mean?'

Karlson pushed the stone into the pot and eagerly heaped soil over it.

'Oh yes she does,' he assured Smidge. 'As long as the geranium's firmly in its pot, she's happy, your mum. She doesn't care that it's deadly dangerous for little old men down in the street. One old man more or less, that's a mere trifle, she says, as long as nobody pulls up my geranium.'

He fixed Smidge with a stare.

'But if I'd thrown out the flowerpot, too, where were you thinking we'd plant the peach stone, eh?'

Smidge hadn't thought anything at all, so he couldn't answer. It was hard making Karlson see

sense when Karlson was in this sort of mood. But luckily he was only in this sort of mood once every quarter of an hour or so, and all of a sudden he gave a contented chuckle.

'We've still got the bag,' he said. 'There's all sorts of fun you can have with a paper bag.'

Smidge had never noticed this.

'How?' he asked. 'What can you do with a paper bag?'

Karlson's eyes began to sparkle.

'Make the world's most enormous pop,' he said. 'Whoop, whoop, what a pop! And that's exactly what I'm going to do now!'

He picked up the bag and dashed off with it to the bathroom. Smidge followed him curiously. He very much wanted to know how you make the world's most enormous pop.

Karlson was bending over the bath, filling the bag with water from the tap.

'You're bonkers,' said Smidge. 'Filling a paper bag with water will never work, you must know that.'

'What's this, then?' asked Karlson, holding the

bulging bag under Smidge's nose. He kept it there for a moment to show Smidge that yes, you could fill a paper bag with water, but then he sprinted back to Smidge's room, clutching the bag.

Smidge dashed after him, suspecting the worst. And sure enough . . . Karlson was hanging out of the window, so all you could see was his round backside and his fat little legs.

'Whoop, whoop,' he shouted. 'Mind out below, because here comes the world's most enormous pop!'

'Stop!' yelled Smidge, and quickly leant out of the window himself. 'No, Karlson, no!' he cried anxiously. But it was too late. The bag was already on its way down. Smidge saw it falling like a bomb right at the feet of a poor woman who was on her way to the little shop next door, and she wasn't impressed by the world's most enormous pop, that was very clear.

'She's howling as if it was a flowerpot,' said Karlson. 'And it's only a drop of ordinary water.'

Smidge pulled the window shut sharply. He didn't want Karlson throwing anything else out.

'I don't think you should do things like that,' he said sternly. But that made Karlson roar with laughter. He flew a little circuit of the ceiling light and squinted down at Smidge, sniggering.

'I don't think you should do things like that,' he said, mimicking Smidge. 'How do you think I should do them, then? Fill the bag with rotten eggs, hm? Is that another one of your mum's weird ideas?'

He flew in to land with a thud at Smidge's feet.

'You really are the world's weirdest pair, you and your mum,' he said, and patted Smidge on the cheek. 'But I still like you, oddly enough.'

Smidge went pink with pleasure. After all, it was wonderful that Karlson liked him, and that he approved of Mum too, although it didn't always sound that way.



'Yes, I'm surprised at myself,' said Karlson. He carried on patting Smidge. He kept at it, gradually

patting harder and harder. In the end, Karlson gave Smidge a pat that felt more like a clip round the ear, and announced:

'Ooh, I'm so nice! I'm the world's nicest Karlson. So I think we'll play something really nice now, don't you?'

Smidge agreed, and he immediately started thinking: what nice games were there that you could play with Karlson?

'For example,' said Karlson, 'we could play that your table over there is our raft, for rescuing ourselves when the great flood comes . . . and here it comes now!'

He pointed to a trickle of water coming under the door.

Smidge gasped.

'Didn't you turn off the tap in the bath?' he asked, horrified.

Karlson put his head on one side and looked meekly at Smidge.

'Three guesses if I did or not.'

Smidge opened the door to the hall, and found Karlson was right. The great flood had started. The

water covering the hall and bathroom was deep enough to paddle in, if you wanted to.

And Karlson did. He took a delighted jump, feet together, right into the water.

'Whoop, whoop,' he said. 'Some days it's just one lot of fun after another.'

But Smidge, once he had turned off the tap and pulled the plug out of the overflowing bath, sank down on a chair in the hall and looked at the mess in despair.

'Oh dear,' he said, 'whatever will Mum say?'

Karlson stopped jumping, and looked indignantly at Smidge.

'Now wait a minute,' he said, 'how grumpy can she be, your mum? It's only a drop of ordinary water!'

He jumped again, sending water splashing over Smidge.

'Rather nice water, actually,' he said. 'Look, everyone gets a free footbath. Doesn't she like footbaths, your mum?'

He did another jump, spraying Smidge even more.

'Doesn't she *ever* wash her feet? Does she spend *all* her days chucking flowerpots, one after another?'

Smidge didn't answer. He had other things on his mind. Then he suddenly realized the urgency of the situation: help, they needed to mop up as quickly as possible, before Mum got home.

'Karlson, we'd better hurry . . . ' he said, leaping to his feet. He darted off to the kitchen and was soon back with a couple of floor cloths.

'Karlson, come and help . . . ' he began. There was no Karlson to be found. No Karlson in the bathroom, or the hall, or in Smidge's room either. But Smidge could hear the whirr of a motor outside. He ran to the window just in time to see something the shape of a fat sausage go whizzing past.

'Spyplane or UFO?' muttered Smidge.

Neither! Just Karlson on his way home to his green house on the roof.

But then Karlson caught sight of Smidge. He went into a steep dive and came swooping past the window with the wind whistling about his ears. Smidge waved frantically with the floor cloth and Karlson waved back with his podgy little hand.

'Whoop, whoop,' he yelled. 'Here comes Ten Thousand Kronor Karlson, whoop, whoop!'

And then he was gone. Smidge went back to the hall with a floor cloth in each hand, to start mopping up.

