



An Event in Autumn (Kurt Wallander Mystery)

By Henning Mankell

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After nearly thirty years in the same job, Inspector Kurt Wallander is tired, restless, and itching to make a change. He is taken with a certain old farmhouse, perfectly situated in a quiet countryside with a charming, overgrown garden. There he finds the skeletal hand of a corpse in a shallow grave. Wallander's investigation takes him deep into the history of the house and the land, until finally the shocking truth about a long-buried secret is brought to light.

INCLUDES AN AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Henning Mankell

“An arresting writer . . . [Mankell] understands and probes the underside of everyday living in an elegant and artful way. . . . The result is writing that walks a line between ephemeral and everlasting.”

—*The Washington Post*

“[Mankell’s] Swedish detective, Inspector Kurt Wallander, is one of the most impressive creations in crime fiction today. . . . An old-fashioned moral force and sense of disquiet of the sort rarely found in contemporary crime fiction.”

—*The Guardian*

About the Author

Henning Mankell's novels have been translated into forty languages and have sold more than forty million copies worldwide. He is the first winner of the Ripper Award (the new European prize for crime fiction) and has also received the Glass Key and Golden Dagger awards. His Kurt Wallander mysteries have been adapted into a PBS television series starring Kenneth Branagh. Mankell divides his time between Sweden and Mozambique.

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Chapter 1

On Saturday, October 26, 2002, Kurt Wallander woke up feeling very tired. It had been a trying week, as a severe cold had infected practically everybody in the Ystad police station. Wallander was usually the first to catch such viruses, but for some strange reason on this occasion he had been one of the few who did not fall ill. Since there had been a serious rape case in Svarte and several cases of GBH in Ystad during the week, Wallander had been forced to work long and strenuous hours.

He had remained at his desk until the early hours. He had been too exhausted to work, but at the same time he had no desire to go home to his apartment in Mariagatan. A squally wind was blowing hard outside the police station. Occasionally someone would walk along the corridor past his office, but Wallander hoped nobody would knock on his door. He wanted to be left in peace.

In peace from what? he asked himself. Perhaps what I want most of all is not to have to think about myself. About the increasing feeling of repugnance I’m carrying around inside myself and which I don’t discuss with anybody else at all.

Autumn leaves swirled against the window of his office. He wondered if he ought to take some of the holiday owed to him and try to find a cheap package trip to Mallorca or some similar place. But he stopped short of making any such decision—even if the sun was shining down on a Spanish island, he would be unable to be at peace with himself.

He looked at his desk calendar. It was 2002. October. He had been a police officer for over thirty years, and had progressed from a probationer patrolling the streets of Malmö to become an experienced and respected

detective who had successfully solved numerous difficult cases of serious crime. Even if he could not be pleased with his life as a human being, he could be pleased with his performance as a police officer. He had done his job well, and perhaps helped people to feel more secure.

A car in the street outside roared past at full speed, tires screaming. A young man at the wheel, Wallander thought. He is no doubt well aware that he is driving past the police station. His intention is to irritate us, of course. But he can't do that to me. Not anymore.

Wallander went out into the corridor. It was empty. He could hear faint sounds of laughter from behind a closed door. He went to fetch a cup of tea, then returned to his office.

The tea tasted odd. When he looked at the bag he realized that he had taken one tasting of sweet jasmine. He didn't like it, threw the bag into the wastepaper basket and poured the drink into a plant pot containing an orchid given to him by his daughter Linda.

It suddenly struck him how everything had changed during his many years as a police officer. When he had first started to patrol the streets there was a big difference between what happened in a city like Malmö and in small towns like Ystad. But nowadays there was hardly any difference at all. This was especially true for all the crimes connected with drugs. During his early days in Ystad a lot of drug addicts went to Copenhagen in order to obtain certain types of narcotic. Now you could buy everything in Ystad. He knew that there had also been an explosion in drug trafficking over the Internet.

Wallander often talked to his colleagues about how it had become so much more difficult to be a police officer in recent years. But now, as he sat in his office and watched the autumn leaves sticking onto the windowpane, he suddenly wondered if that were really true. Was that just an excuse? To avoid thinking about how society had changed, and hence also criminality?

Nobody has ever accused me of being lazy, Wallander thought. But perhaps that's what I am, despite everything. Or am becoming so.

He stood up, put on the jacket that had been draped over his visitor chair, and left the office. His thoughts remained inside the room, the questions unanswered.

He drove home through the dark streets. Rainwater was glistening on the asphalt. His head was suddenly empty.

He had the next day off. Half asleep, he heard the distant ring of the telephone in the kitchen. His daughter Linda, who had started work as a police officer in Ystad the previous autumn, after finishing her training at the police college in Stockholm, was still living in his apartment. She should really have moved out by now, but had not yet received a contract for the apartment she had been promised. He heard her answer, and was relieved that he wouldn't need to bother about it. Martinson had recovered and been on duty since the previous day, and he had promised not to disturb Wallander.

Nobody else ever phoned him, especially not early on a Sunday morning. On the other hand, Linda spent ages every day on her cell phone. He had sometimes wondered about that. His own relationship with telephones was quite complicated. He felt put out whenever a phone rang. He guessed it was a sign of the simple truth that they belonged to different generations.

The bedroom door opened. He gave a start and became angry.

“Shouldn’t you knock?”

“It’s only me.”

“What would you say if I flung open the door of your room without knocking?”

“I keep my door locked. You’re wanted on the phone.”

“Nobody ever rings me.”

“But someone has.”

“Who?”

“Martinson.”

Wallander sat up in bed. Linda looked disapprovingly at his bare stomach, but said nothing. It was Sunday. They had made an agreement to the effect that for as long as she lived in his apartment, Sundays would be an exclusion zone in which neither of them was allowed to criticize the other. Sunday was proclaimed a day reserved for friendliness.

“What did he want?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Today is my day off.”

“I don’t know what he wants.”

“Can’t you tell him I’m out?”

“For God’s sake!”

She left him and returned to her own room. Wallander shuffled out into the kitchen and picked up the telephone receiver. He could see through the window that it was raining, but the clouds were scattered and he could detect traces of blue sky.

“I thought today was supposed to be my day off!”

“So it is,” said Martinson.

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing.”

Wallander noticed that he was becoming irritated again. Was Martinson ringing without any specific reason? That wasn’t like him.

“Why are you ringing? I was asleep.”

“Why do you sound so angry?”

“Because I am angry.”

“I think I might have a house for you. Out in the countryside. Not so far from Löderup.”

For many years Wallander had been thinking that it was high time he moved from his flat in central Ystad. He wanted to get out into the countryside, he wanted to acquire a dog. Since his father had died several years ago and Linda had flown the nest, he had felt an increasing need to change the circumstances of his own life. On several occasions he had been to view houses that real estate agents had on offer, but he had never found one to fulfill his requirements. Sometimes he had felt that the house was more or less right, but the price was out of his reach. His salary and his savings were inadequate. Being a police officer meant that a fat bank account was just not possible.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here. Tell me more.”

“I can’t just now. It seems there’s been a break-in at the Åhléns supermarket last night. But if you drop by the station I can tell you about it. And I can let you have some keys.”

Martinson hung up. Linda came into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. She looked inquiringly at her dad, then poured one for him as well. They sat down at the kitchen table.

“Do you have to work?”

“No.”

“What did he want, then?”

“He wanted to show me a house.”

“But he lives in a terraced house. You want to live out in the countryside, don’t you?”

“You’re not listening to what I say. He wants to show me a house. Not his house.”

“What kind of a house?”

“I’ve no idea. Do you want to come with me?”

She shook her head. “No, I have other plans.”

He didn’t ask her what those plans were. He knew that she was the same as he was. She explained no more than was necessary. A question that wasn’t asked was a question that didn’t need an answer.

Chapter 2

Shortly after noon Wallander left for the police station. When he came out into the street he paused for a moment, wondering if he should take the car. But his conscience immediately began to nag him: he didn’t

get enough exercise. Besides, Linda was no doubt standing at the window, watching him. If he took the car, he'd never hear the last of it.

He started walking.

We're like an old married couple, he thought. Or a middle-aged policeman with much too young a wife. At first I was married to her mother. Now it's as if the two of us are living in some sort of strange marriage, my daughter and I. All very respectable. But a cause of mutual and constantly increasing irritation.

Martinson was sitting in his office when Wallander arrived at the deserted police station. While his colleague concluded a telephone call about a missing tractor, Wallander glanced through a new edict from the National Police Board that was lying on the desk. It was about the use of pepper spray. An experimental operation had taken place in southern Sweden recently, and an assessment had concluded that the weapon had proved to be an excellent device for calming down violent individuals.

Wallander suddenly felt old. He was a terrible shot and was always frightened of getting into a situation when he would be forced to fire his service pistol. It had happened, and a few years ago he had shot and killed a man in self-defense. But the very thought of expanding his limited arsenal with a collection of little cans of spray was not something he found attractive.

I'm growing too old, he thought. Too old for my own good, and too old for my job.

Martinson slammed down the receiver and jumped up from his chair. The action reminded Wallander of the young man who had joined the Ystad police some fifteen years earlier. Even then Martinson had been unsure whether or not he was cut out to be a police officer. On several occasions over the years he had been on the point of resigning—but he had always stayed on. Now he was no longer young. But unlike Wallander, he had not put on weight: on the contrary, he had grown thinner. The biggest change was that his thick brown hair had vanished—Martinson had become bald.

Martinson gave him a bunch of keys. Wallander could see that most of them looked rather ancient.

"It belongs to a cousin of my wife's," said Martinson. "He's very old, the house is empty, but for ages he's been digging in his heels and refusing to sell it. Now he's in a care home, and he accepts that he won't be leaving there alive. A while ago he asked me to look after the selling of his house. The time has now come. I thought of you straightaway."

Martinson gestured toward a worn-out and rickety visitor chair. Wallander sat down.

"I thought of you for several reasons," he continued. "Partly because I knew you were looking for a house out in the country. But also because of where it's actually situated."

Wallander waited for what was coming next. He knew that Martinson had a tendency to make a long story of things—to complicate matters that ought to be simple.

"The house is in Vretsvägen, out in Löderup," said Martinson.

Wallander knew where he meant.

"Which house is it?"

“My wife’s cousin is called Karl Eriksson.”

Wallander thought for a moment.

“Wasn’t he the one who had a smithy next to the gas station some years ago?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

Wallander stood up.

“I’ve driven past that house lots of times. It might be too close to where my father used to live for it to be suitable for me.”

“Why not go and take a look?”

“How much does he want for it?”

“He’s left that up to me. But as it’s my wife who’s in line for the money, I have to ask for a fair market price.”

Wallander paused in the doorway. He had suddenly become doubtful.

“Could you perhaps give some indication of the asking price? There’s not much point in my driving out there and looking at the house if it’s going to be so expensive that I can’t even contemplate buying it.”

“Go and have a look,” said Martinson. “You can afford it. If you want it.”

Chapter 3

Wallander walked back to Mariagatan. He felt exhilarated, but also doubtful. Just as he got into the car it started pouring down. He drove out of Ystad, joined the Österleden motorway, and it occurred to him that it had been many years since he had last taken this route.

How long had his father been dead now? It took him some time to recall the year of his death. It was a long time ago. Many years had passed since they made that final journey together to Rome.

He recalled following his father, who had sneaked off to wander around Rome on his own. Wallander still felt a bit ashamed of having spied on him. The fact that his father was old and not fully in control of his senses was not a sufficient excuse. Why hadn’t he left his father in peace to look around Rome and soak up his memories? Why had Wallander insisted on following him?

It wasn’t good enough to say that he’d been concerned about his father, worried that something might have happened. Wallander could still recall his emotions from that time. He hadn’t been especially worried. He had simply been curious.

Now, it was as if time had shrunk. Surely it could have been only yesterday that he drove out here to visit his father, to play cards with him, maybe have a drink and then start quarreling about something of no significance.

I miss the old man, Wallander thought. He was the only father I'll ever have. He was often a pain in the neck and could drive me up the wall. But I miss him. There's no getting away from that.

Users Review

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Jerry Linton:

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