

# Peace Corpse

by  
Charles B. Neff

iUniverse, Inc.  
New York Bloomington

## **In the following pages you will meet:**

### Participants in the Youth for Peace (YFP) Meeting in Stockholm

Mariela Fuentes, from Spain and Nicaragua  
Ghada Shafi , from the West Bank, Palestine  
Binyamin Dayan, from Israel  
Ali Yaniv, from Syria  
Olga Klimenko, from Ukraine  
Kurt Breuer, from Germany  
Haidar, a Palestinian  
Levi, an Israeli  
Shimon Eisenheim, an Israeli advisor to YFP  
Simon Crosby, an American advisor to YFP  
Eva Horvath, a Hungarian doctor now residing in the West Bank

### Swedish Citizens and Residents

Magnus Torval, a detective with the Stockholm Police  
Karl Blixt, a retired police officer  
Anders Svensson, security chief of Stadshuset (City Hall)  
Milan, a Bosnian from Vårbo  
Ahmed, an Arab from Vårbo  
Zelda Bergman, a Swedish journalist  
Bengt Arnus, an official in the Swedish Foreign Office

# ONE

On the rear deck of the old steam ferry, Mariela Fuentes scanned the upper deck and gangways for a glimpse of Ali Yaniv. During her third pass she spotted him, motionless in the jostling crowd as he leaned against one of the lifeboats. Maybe she'd been wrong to follow him. But she felt compelled to find out what was behind Ali's ambiguous warning at the Youth for Peace meeting.

The Stockholm skyline grew smaller in the ferry's wake. The horizon broadened, and as the late afternoon sun broke through gathering clouds, the gray northern water around them turned a warmer blue. Still, cold air penetrated Mariela's light jacket, and she wished for something heavier. Summer was officially here in Sweden, on this, the longest day of 2008. But at the moment Mariela would have preferred a temperate day in Madrid or even the torrid humidity of her native Nicaragua.

Earlier in the day, sitting at an outdoor café in one of Stockholm's many squares, she hadn't planned to be out on a boat as the temperature went down. Then she'd seen Ali and made her decision to follow him and to speak to him if she found the right opportunity. What was he involved in? What had the stranger said to him? Worst case, his outburst at their Youth for Peace session could mean real danger for the participants or at least a major disruption of their deliberations. That group didn't have any time to waste. With luck, she'd get some answers to her worries by sticking with him.

For the time being, she could concentrate on the scenery. The nine steam ferries that had lined up so precisely in Stockholm's inner harbor were now weaving through the islands—thousands of islands, stretching almost to Finland—large ones with houses and tiny ones, rock bergs really, each visible crown hiding a treacherous mass beneath.

It was hard to keep her attention on the expanding vista. She was surrounded by milling, raucous revelers, people of all sorts, laughing, drinking, singing off-key to a Dixieland band's amplified music. Not too different from the Youth for Peace debates, she thought, with an inward laugh.

The sun seemed hardly to have moved at all an hour and a half later as they approached their destination, one of the larger islands. Vaxholm Island lay so close to the Swedish coast that it could be reached by land transportation from downtown Stockholm. The ferry docked, and Mariela saw a crowd already on the island. Most people must have chosen the quicker way to this celebration of the summer solstice.

For the next hour, she kept track of Ali as he meandered here and there. She gave him time to relax, waiting for the moment when she could approach him and find out more about his real concerns. Suddenly he darted away.

Mariela sped up, searching. It took her a few minutes, moving from booth to booth and plowing back and forth through the teeming celebrants, but eventually she spotted him again. It wasn't easy. Ali was short and thin to begin with and was wearing the standard uniform of teenagers across Europe: jeans and a sweatshirt. Finally she recognized his size and shape, and his scraggly beard came into focus again.

But so did a strange behavior. Ali wasn't paying attention. He bumped into people and didn't move out of the way when someone bore down on him. His gaze seemed fixed on a distant

point. He listed away from the crowd and leaned against one of the booths, not casually, as he had stood on the ferry, but as if reaching blindly for support.

The crowd swirled between them. Mariela hurried toward Ali when she heard one raised voice, then another, from the general direction of where she'd last seen him. Shoving forward through a clutch of celebrants who had stopped moving, Mariela glimpsed a body on the ground. It took her a moment to register that the twisted form belonged to Ali.

Her first reaction was an involuntary cry in Spanish.

*"Dejenme pasar!"*

People looked at her but didn't move. She switched to English.

"Let me through. I know him!"

Most Swedes could understand that. A narrow path opened for her, and she pushed forward to kneel beside Ali.

He was unconscious. One arm was outstretched; the other lay across his stomach, fist clenched. A tremor ran down his legs, gradually subsiding. His eyes were shut, and Mariela saw pain along his pinched mouth.

She was reaching for Ali when she heard English words.

"I will do this."

Strong hands moved her to the side. She caught a quick glimpse of close-cropped blond hair and light eyes in a broad, calm face. When she regained her balance, she was behind a man hunched over Ali, his huge frame blocking most of her view. He wore no uniform yet projected authority as he gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

When emergency medical technicians arrived, accompanied by a policeman, the big man pushed back on his haunches and spoke.

"We will leave him to experts now. Then we find out how this happened."

His tone was correctly procedural, but Mariela sensed the real message: Ali was dead.

# TWO

Magnus Torval rose to his feet and quickly surveyed his situation. The EMTs were in their practiced routine. The circle of worried onlookers had grown. They would have to be moved back and encouraged to disperse. The young, dark-haired lady he'd found by the body would have to be questioned.

Magnus focused first on her. She, too, had risen, her head sluing from side to side in uncertainty. Essentials: black hair; tallish; twenties, probably early twenties; dressed in jeans, brown windbreaker with hood, and sneakers with red markings. She looked his way. Eyes, very dark brown, almost black. Striking, he added to himself, though that would not be in his report.

"Please remain where you are, miss, regardless of what I say to other people. I need to talk to you." His communication module was already in his hand, and he turned away to request assistance. He also asked for a medical examiner. He finished his call, looked across the crowd, and raised his voice in Swedish.

"An individual has fallen and needs assistance. A police unit will soon arrive. For now, I ask that all of you move back at least four meters, beginning with those of you at the rear. You may remain here if you wish, but you must be quiet and ask no questions. I suggest it is best for you to go back to the celebration, have food and drink, and enjoy yourselves."

Keeping his voice neutral was a practiced habit. Adding comfort and reassurance to his tone was harder, not something he fell into naturally. Even when he tried, most people still reacted only to his physical presence. Moving slowly and forcing his lips into a tight smile, he walked toward the nearest section of onlookers, arms outstretched.

"All right. Let's move back here."

He took another step closer, not quite touching anyone, but definitely crowding those immediately in front of him. He knew they couldn't miss his size now: 2.02 meters, 145 kilos—*six foot six and 320 pounds* as his American friends would say. His chest and arms were much larger than normal; both were a product of the powerlifting he had started to do seriously at age twenty—a young age to get into that sport. That was eight years ago now.

People began to move as he walked a widening circle, calling out encouragement. When he had created an open space about ten meters in diameter, he called to the crowd, "Thank you for your cooperation."

A few people were already leaving. More would follow their lead as they lost interest in the body behind him. Now, to the young woman, who had remained close to the EMTs, just as he had asked her to do. Her posture projected composure, but her eye movements betrayed agitation. Time to find out what she could tell him.

"I appreciate your waiting, miss. I won't be much longer."

Magnus took a few minutes to examine and photograph the body. He asked preliminary questions of witnesses and learned that the young man appeared to have collapsed on his own. Soon two uniformed men, each carrying plastic stanchions about four feet long, worked their way through the onlookers. They pushed the crowd farther back, not being as courteous as Magnus had tried to be, and set the stanchions down at the edges of the open space around the body.

Once they had connected the stanchions with yellow tape, Magnus scanned the area, satisfied. He instructed the EMTs to finish their work but not remove the young man until he returned. Magnus did not say “body,” although the EMTs clearly knew by now that’s what he meant. They were already moving the man onto a collapsed wheeled stretcher.

Magnus motioned to the young woman.

“Come with me, please. We’ll find a place to talk.”

The knot of onlookers had grown smaller, but the roiling crowd behind them was a thick human river with multiple currents and eddies. Crossing it required quick starts and changes of direction then sudden stops. To make sure he didn’t lose the young lady, Magnus gripped one of her arms, squeezing only as hard as he needed to, to maintain contact.

They emerged from the crowd near a permanent outbuilding at the end of a row of food stalls. Magnus released the young woman’s arm, pointed to the shed, and led her to its rear, glancing around frequently to make sure she was following. A bench with cigarette urns at both ends stood empty under the shed’s overhang.

They sat, and Magnus removed a spiral notebook from the pocket of his tweed sport coat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the young lady inch away from him until she could go no farther. Interesting. Either just nervous or wanting to hide something. He half turned toward her.

“To begin with, I am Magnus Torval, a detective with the Stockholm Municipal Police. Is English all right or should I call for a translator for a different language?”

She looked straight ahead as she answered.

“English is all right.”

“Fine. May I have your name, please?”

She hesitated—not for long, but long enough if you were paying attention.

“Mari.”

“That’s M-a-r-y?”

“With an *i* on the end.”

She still looked directly in front of her. Had she given him her real name?

“And your last name, Mari?”

Now she really paused and, for the first time, looked at him. Her dark eyes transmitted fear. No, not fear exactly. None of the other telltales of that emotion were there: darting eyes, nervous gestures, shallow breathing. She was calm enough but obviously deeply cautious about something.

“I would rather not say.”

He turned the rest of the way toward her and lowered his notebook to his lap.

“Then it seems we have a problem. Let’s see how big it is. Nationality? Address while in Sweden? Purpose of your visit to Sweden, and length of stay, beginning with the date of your arrival? Name of the deceased, if you know it? Can you provide me with any of those?”

She looked away, pulling her windbreaker more tightly around her, and then looked back. He saw an uptick of agitation in her eyes.

“The name of the man is Ali. I’m not sure of his last name. I need time before I can give you any more information.”

Magnus held her gaze. He was running out of options.

“If it were up to me ... perhaps. But you must realize what is expected in situations like this one. You are at the very least an interested witness and perhaps a material one. It is my responsibility to obtain information from you. Tell me why you need time.”

Some of the agitation left her narrowed gaze as she searched for the right words.

“I am part of a group involved in an honest and honorable cause. I really should consult others in the group before I say more. I know that sounds vague and mysterious and maybe even potentially dangerous. But our group isn’t a bunch of terrorists or anything like that. We’re trying to build trust and cooperation. Isn’t that worth something?”

“In general, certainly. And that’s the kind of spirit I personally think we need more of. Swedish police know how to be respectful in an investigation, but I have no choice but to demand information. Now.”

She sank back against the bench, her head down. He barely heard her soft reply.

“I understand.”

“I can’t give you much time, but—”

Magnus felt his communications module buzzing at his side, emitting a short and long sequence that signaled an emergency message.

“Torval.”

At first the words in his ear were so loud and rapid that he couldn’t understand them. Very poor procedure. He’d mention that later.

“Calm down. Who is this, and what’s the emergency?”

“Patrolman Johansson. These EMTs received a call to go elsewhere.

They want to leave the body in our custody since you told them not to move it. They also want to leave immediately. I told them to stay. But they say they won’t unless you call their superior and he countermands his previous instructions.”

Magnus glanced at Mari, still immobile, before half turning his back to her. Johansson raised his voice.

“They’re leaving. You’ve got to speak to them right away.”

“Put the lead EMT on the phone.”

Magnus checked on Mari again, before stepping a couple of paces away. On this phone call he might need to mention death or suspicious causes, and he didn’t want to increase his witness’s agitation.

The EMT began a deliberate, overly detailed description of his situation. Magnus half-listened while thinking of how to resolve the petty dispute and get back to Mari.

When he looked over again, she was gone.

# THREE

Mariela pushed through the crowd, suffering glares and sharp grunts from the people she cut off or fell against. Each move forward created a disturbance behind her—maybe, she thought hopefully, making the job of pursuing her more difficult. She had no doubt that the big cop, Magnus, would be after her.

She hadn't any idea where she was heading, except in a general direction away from the shed where they'd sat. She moved with the crowd, remembering the water to her left and a sign she had seen earlier indicating that both the bridge back to the mainland and the train station lay to her right. Magnus would probably call immediately for some kind of watch at the train station and by the ferry dock. She couldn't use the ferry, anyway, since her boat wouldn't be leaving for another hour. Too long.

She glanced up for a second. The patchy sun breaks that had accompanied the ferry's outbound trip were long gone. Dark clouds announced a coming rainstorm. The late evening was fading quickly into a long dusk under the clouds.

When she reached another row of food stands, Mariela followed her instinct and ducked into a narrow passage between two booths. Two swarthy young men knelt behind the booth on her left, going through the motions of washing cooking vessels in a large tub. They didn't stop their slow scrubbing, although one glanced quickly in her direction.

After a few strides more, she entered a thick stand of trees and momentarily couldn't distinguish objects in the deeper shadows. She slowed to a cautious walk until she stubbed her foot and hit her knee against something solid. She had come up against a rough stone wall.

Cautiously swinging her legs over the low barrier, she sat facing away from the direction from which she'd come. She needed to get her bearings before plunging farther. The wind had picked up off the water and was penetrating her windbreaker.

She'd panicked. That wasn't her usual reaction to difficult situations and was no part of what she considered her basic nature. She'd been in rough neighborhoods in Madrid and in Nicaragua where she was born, and had several times been questioned by armed soldiers. Even then she had stayed calm, planning a way out—just the opposite of her impulsive flight a few minutes ago.

She knew the cause of her reflexive action: the dream about an old event had reappeared, this time assaulting her when she was awake. The policeman's physical presence, and her fear that he might overpower her, took her instantly back—back to a deserted movie house in Managua four years ago. Her uncle died first, then the man who had been holding a gun against her head. With the man's blood running into her eyes, she'd stood there and screamed. In fact, the screaming had never stopped. She just kept it deep inside. But after her sudden flight from the big cop she had to admit that it wasn't as deeply hidden as she'd pretended.

A lightning flash, followed by two smaller ones, interrupted Mariela's thoughts. As thunder rolled in and she felt the first drops of rain, she got a fleeting look at her position. She had to get moving.

Through a gap in the trees, she saw people beginning to trot along a walkway by the seawall. They were all heading in the same direction, hurrying to reach shelter as the rain grew stronger.

Mariela had no better idea than to join them. With them, she would preserve some of the cover of a crowd. And these people were going somewhere other than to the railroad station or the ferries.

She moved by feel toward the spot where the lightning had shown her a way through the trees; she was helped by sounds from the seawall and emerged just as a boisterous group of about a dozen people appeared opposite her on the path. In front was a male figure whose voice sounded older and drunker than the others. Mariela fell in behind the group, keeping a few paces to the rear.

She couldn't follow the animated conversation in front of her. It was in Swedish, of course; but, in addition, the wind carried off most of the words before they reached her. She formed the impression that this was a family group of some kind, led by an older jester. Smaller figures were interspersed among larger ones. Their gaiety in the face of the now-heavy rain stamped them as people who were used to sharing adventures together.

They arrived at a junction where two long piers jutted out into the water. Other groups were already aboard or stood beside private pleasure craft moored to the piers. Mariela felt exposed and decided she'd seem even more out of place if she stopped. Not knowing what else to do, she continued to follow the same group as they kept on walking toward the end of the pier.

They halted beside the last boat, a large one. In a move that probably had been executed many times before, the ragged group shifted into a loose formation with children in the lead, climbed a short plank, and, more quickly than Mariela would have thought possible, were all on board. All except their leader, who still stood on the pier. Legs planted firmly and hands clasped behind his back, he faced Mariela.

He said something in Swedish and, when she shook her head, switched fluidly into English.

"Can you understand me now?"

She nodded.

"How can we help you?"

The light was too dim for Mariela to see the man's face clearly. His white hair plastered to his head, he had the same aura Mariela imagined a ship's captain would, standing on the bridge of a large vessel. He clearly was not as drunk as she had guessed, maybe not at all. She began to shape a story in case she needed it.

"That's all right, thank you. I can find my way."

"Your way where?"

"Back to Stockholm. I guess I went in the wrong direction for the train."

"Indeed you did. And you got yourself very wet in the process."

She'd felt the wetness over the shoulders of her nylon windbreaker for the last few minutes. Now drops of water were starting to run down her back under her shirt. She didn't have to pretend she was miserable.

The man took a step forward.

"Well then, if you don't mind somewhat close quarters and what may be a rough, slow trip, you could travel with us back to Stockholm. What do you say to that?"

Just what I hoped, she said to herself. Out loud she phrased it differently.

"That's most generous of you. I accept."

They got underway with a minimum of fuss. Mariela saw a tall mast and furled sail, then heard the thump of what sounded like a big engine starting up. The white-haired man, the one she now thought of as "the captain," followed her through a hatch and down a short flight of stairs into the main cabin. Two built-in sets of bunks along one side and two long beds along the other doubled as seats. Clothing hooks, storage lockers, and a tiny galley occupied spare space. A door forward probably led to more berths.

A woman was already at the galley stove, putting a kettle on to heat. Others were in various stages of shedding outer garments or taking seats around a bolted-down oak table in the center of the cabin.

The captain raised his voice, announcing Mariela's arrival. That he spoke in English was no surprise to Mariela. Virtually all Swedes, at least those who lived in the cities and had a high school education, spoke English.

"This young lady lost her way and needs a ride to Stockholm. Please welcome her."

He turned toward Mariela.

"I am Karl Blixt, and this is my family. And your name?"

"My name is Mariela."

Blixt rapidly recited the names of the others in the room. Mariela heard a Lars and a Birgitta and more such names, making no attempt to sort them all out.

When Blixt left, Mariela took an offered seat at the table. The assembled group, children and adults, treated her almost as if she had always been a member of their entourage. It was enough that she told them only that she was visiting Sweden and usually lived in Spain. No one quizzed her further about why she was in the country or why she had ended up at the boat pier. Most of the conversation was about the celebration on the island, the food, the music, and the weather. Mariela kept her own questions to herself.

Blixt reappeared and immediately went to the stove to fill a mug with coffee. Holding up the pot, he motioned to Mariela to join him. As he poured, he began casually, "So tell me about yourself, Mariela."

She repeated the scant information she had revealed to the others.

Blixt, looking into his cup, sounded friendly. But with his next question, Mariela felt the conversation begin to shift.

"I'm sorry you got lost and wet, Mariela. I would have thought there might be someone with you who could have saved you the discomfort. Just how is it that an attractive, single young lady like you was at the festivities alone?"

Mariela started the story she had thought she might need.

"I did come with someone. But we had a quarrel. I decided to leave him and travel back alone."

"You are in Sweden such a short time and already know a Swede well enough to have such a serious quarrel?"

"He wasn't Swedish."

"A fellow countryman, then? With whom you came to Sweden?"

"I traveled alone but met someone here I knew well."

Blixt looked at her, his smile all affability.

"Life is full of unusual coincidences, isn't it?"

But a flicker in his eyes told her that he doubted her story. She shifted the subject before getting in deeper.

"I'm very grateful for this ride. But I'm also curious about who I'm riding with. Out on the dock I took you for a sea captain. Is that what you do?"

A bemused look crossed his face.

"A captain? Yes, I was that once. But not ever of the sea. I'm retired now."

She was puzzled.

"A captain?"

"Yes, that and later a commissioner. Both with the Stockholm police."

She hoped she continued to look bewildered, rather than startled or fearful. Had she jumped from the frying pan straight into the fire? Blixt either hadn't noticed anything or pretended convincingly that he hadn't. His smile broadened, though his eyes hung on to a quizzical stare.

They moved back to the table, where Mariela had trouble joining the conversation in the same lighthearted way she had before. In response to one of the children's questions, Blixt said they had just over an hour to go. He had predicted a long trip. On the other hand, the water remained calm, despite a warning to the contrary. She would count that as a blessing.

Beyond the prospect of a smooth boat ride, everything else about the hours to come was murky, and that thought made Mariela impatient. How could she and the others resolve cooperatively the effects of Ali's death when they were so divided about his intentions? The detective, Magnus, would find her sooner or later. Probably sooner, and that would further complicate matters.

She needed to talk to Ghada right now. Her hand itched for a throttle she could shove to full speed ahead.