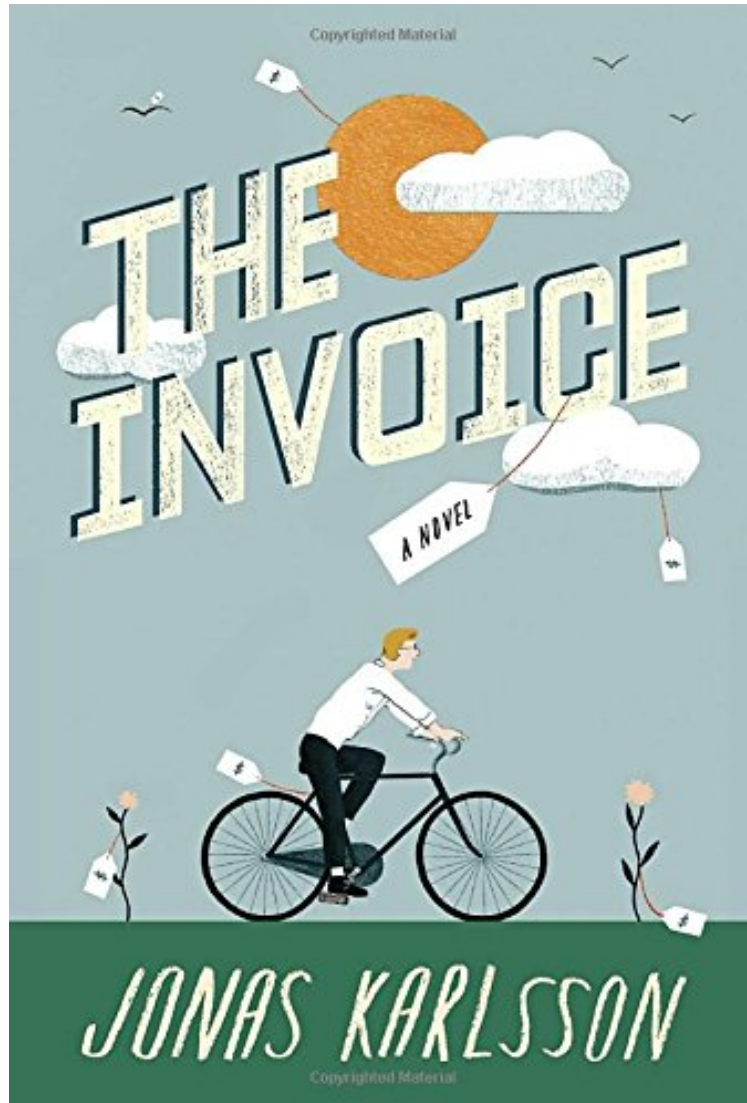


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## The Invoice: A Novel

Jonas Karlsson

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**Jonas Karlsson : The Invoice: A Novel** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Invoice: A Novel:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Unusual story but slow. By CJArtThe premiss is unusual but I found it slow and rather boring. I gave up about 3/4's through. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting By curliegirlieI read this book for a book club. I say interesting because it really got you thinking about materialism and what is really important. I read it in a few hours I really enjoyed it. Only 4 stars I would have liked it to be longer. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Kafka-light By Jane PalmerAny time you can combine the humorous and

the profound, I am on board. That is exactly what Karlsson does here. Kafka light. I loved it.

A heartfelt exploration of the cost of life and love—and the importance of the little things—from the author of the international bestseller, *The Room* Hilarious, profound, and achingly true-to-life, Jonas Karlsson's new novel explores the true nature of happiness through the eyes of hero you won't soon forget. A passionate film buff, our hero's life revolves around his part-time job at a video store, the company of a few precious friends, and a daily routine that more often than not concludes with pizza and movie in his treasured small space in Stockholm. When he receives an astronomical invoice from a random national bureaucratic agency, everything will tumble into madness as he calls the hotline night and day to find out why he is the recipient of the largest bill in the entire country. What is the price of a cherished memory? How much would you pay for a beautiful summer day? How will our carefree idealist, who is content with so little and has no chance of paying it back, find a way out of this mess? All these questions pull you through *The Invoice* and prove once again that Jonas Karlsson is simply a master of entertaining, intelligent, and life-affirming work.

International Praise for *The Invoice*: "A fanciful escape from everyday life." – New York Post "The unassuming hero of Jonas Karlsson's clever, Kafkaesque parable is the opposite of a malcontent... *The Invoice* explores how we define a happy life through the trials of another plain-spoken everyman teetering between banality and absurdity. Both of [his] novels, as tightly constructed as theatrical plays, are laced with incisive criticism of our soul-sapping world of coldblooded bureaucracy. Karlsson expertly wrings humor from the contrast between the bizarre, increasingly alarming circumstances in which his narrators find themselves and their low-key, matter-of-fact responses." –Npr.org "A thought-provoking existential comedy." – Shelf Awareness "A fable for the ages. [*The Invoice*] should be read alongside *The Trial* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an antidote." –Kirkus "Karlsson's story recalls the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka, if those two had been, well, happy. The narrator, an affable fellow at loose ends, understands his uncluttered life better than he thinks he does, and the author's sympathetic portrayal of him, as well as the mirror his experience holds to an increasingly Byzantine and humorless society, wins the day." –Publishers Weekly "[E]ntertaining, thought-provoking and delivered with a good humor that makes it hard to resent its irrepressible hero." –The Guardian, UK "Karlsson's wry, whimsical novel excels at describing the simple pleasures of everyday life: it's as if Kafka decided to look on the bright side." –Mail on Sunday, UK "A spectacular little book ... a small gem full of humor." –Livres Hebdo, France "Jonas Karlsson has written a flawless portrait of a happy, lazy rebel." –Libération, France "[In *The Invoice*] you will find the humorous surrealism of Amélie Nothomb, the intrusive bureaucracy of George Orwell and the desperate fates Kafka's characters suffered. Much more than just a pamphlet on our society's obsession with money, this novel is a clever tale of happiness." –Gael, France "Jonas Karlsson delivers a brilliant story." –Version Fémina, France

About the Author JONAS KARLSSON writes plays and short fiction. One of Sweden's most prominent actors, Karlsson has performed on Sweden's premier stage and in several acclaimed feature films and television series. In 2005, Karlsson made his debut as a playwright, earning rave reviews from audience and critics alike. Spurred by the joy of writing for the stage, Karlsson began writing fiction. His debut novel, *The Room*, was an international bestseller.

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It was such an incredible amount, 5,700,000 kronor. Impossible to take seriously. I assumed it must be one of those fake invoices, the sort you hear about on television and in the papers. Unscrupulous companies trying to defraud people, often the elderly, out of their money. It was very well done. There was no denying that. The logo looked genuine, at least to me. I don't really know, I don't get much post, apart from the usual bills. This one looked pretty similar. Except for the amount, of course. W. R. D., it said in large letters, and the bit about conditions of payment was very convincing. The whole thing had that dry, factual tone, just like something from a genuine organization. But if it was genuine, there must have been a massive mistake. Some computer must have got me mixed up with a big company, or maybe a foreign consortium. 5,700,000 kronor. Who gets bills like that? I chuckled at the thought that someone might actually pay that amount of money by mistake and never question it. I drank a glass of juice, dropped some advertising leaflets into the recycling box, all those offers and brochures that somehow managed to get past the "No adverts, please" sign, then put on my jacket and went off to work. I worked part time in a video shop for enthusiasts. There were two of us who took it in turns to stand there two or three days each week, placing orders, sorting films as they came in, cataloguing and putting them on the shelves. Every now and then I was able to help a customer find the right film or explain why a special edition with extra material hadn't come in yet, or possibly didn't include a specific interview that the customer had seen online and which they thought cast the director in question in an entirely new light, and which he or she (usually he) could reproduce pretty much verbatim for me if I felt like listening. Mostly, though, I just stood there thinking about other things. The walk was a bit windy, but it was the start of light-jacket weather, and most of the trees already had plenty of leaves on their branches. As I walked I thought about the invoice, and wondered how they had managed to get hold of my name and address. Did they just pick the first one they came across? Unless perhaps there was someone else with very similar details? The windows of the shop were covered by a greenish-

yellow layer of pollen, and the door was tricky to open. It didn't seem to matter how we adjusted the closing mechanism. Either the door was hard to shift or it flew open at the slightest touch. Today it stopped halfway. The floor felt sticky under my feet as I walked to the counter to hang my jacket on the hook beneath it. I put a pot of coffee on to brew in the little kitchen behind the desk. Something had burned onto the bottom of the jug, and Tomas—who worked the other days—said he never drank anything out of it, but I didn't think it was that much of a problem. Quite the opposite, in fact—it gave a bit of a kick to what was otherwise a pretty insipid drink. I pushed the door of the cupboard under the sink several times because it wouldn't shut properly—it was missing its little magnet-thing. Each time it swung open again a couple of centimeters. In the end I got a bit of sticky tape, rolled it up and stuck it to the inside of the door, and that kept it closed. Under the counter there was a basket containing the films that had been returned last week, the ones Tomas hadn't bothered to put back on the shelves. I sat there looking at them as I waited for the coffee. There was a Kubrick, a Godard and *The Spanish Prisoner* by David Mamet. I turned the case over and read the back. It had been a long time since I'd watched it. That was when I was still with the love of my life, Sunita, and we would take turns to show each other our favorite films. I'm not even sure if we managed to get to the end of it. She didn't think it was that great. When the coffee was ready I found a bit of milk in the fridge that was only a couple of days old. I poured some in and drank as I put the rest of the films out. As I was on my way back to the counter, I felt my shoes sticking to the floor again. I assumed someone must have spilled some Coke or something similar, because wherever I walked my shoes seemed to stick to the lino flooring. It sounded kind of funny, actually. Well, it did if you moved with the right sort of rhythm. I sat for a while behind the counter and pondered the possibility that someone had stolen my identity—cloned it, or whatever the word was. And had then ordered something and let the company invoice me for that insane amount. But what could you order that cost 5,700,000 kronor? It seemed to me that they ought to have better safeguards in place for this sort of thing. Sometime between eleven and half past we usually got a brief period of direct sunlight in the shop. I tried leaning over and tilting my head to see if I could work out what was making the floor sticky, and, sure enough, from the right angle you could see little islands of what was probably a spilled soft drink. I stared at it for a while. It looked a bit like a map of the world, if you removed parts of Asia and Australia. I squinted. Africa looked really good. Not to mention what were probably Greenland and Alaska. But, I reasoned, that's probably only because we're not so familiar with the geographic details of those regions. I thought for a while about which countries' shapes I knew best, apart from Sweden, of course, and came to the conclusion that it was probably still the ones in northern Europe. A short while later the sun disappeared over the rooftops. But the stickiness was still there: I could hear it clearly every time I walked across it. I called Jörgen, my boss, and asked if we could buy a mop. He said that was fine. And that it was probably good to have one for future use, and that it would be nice if I could clean the whole floor. "Just keep the receipt," he said. So I went to the hardware shop and bought one of those buckets with a strainer where you can squeeze the water out of the mop that comes with it. I filled it with warm water and realized that I should have bought some sort of floor-cleaner or washing-up liquid, then reasoned that it would probably be okay as long as the water was hot enough. I cleaned every bit of floor in the shop. It looked pretty good. The whole shop felt nicer. Almost a bit luxurious. I changed the water a couple of times, then, finally, mopped the soles of my shoes as well. Then I sat for a while, changing the background on my mobile phone. I switched it off, then on again, and changed the background once more. Just in time for lunch my friend Roger came in. When I emerged from the toilet he was standing there talking on his phone. He nodded in my direction. Then he disappeared back out into the street. Twenty minutes later he came back in and asked if he could eat the rest of my takeaway. "You don't mind, do you?" he said, and I told him I didn't. He sat down on the stool behind the counter and slurped up the remaining noodles and meat. He said he'd had a cold for almost three weeks, but that it finally seemed to be on the way out. "To start with, it was like just a bit of a sore throat," he said as he chewed the food. "Then it turned into a really bad sore throat, the sort where it hurts to swallow. Then it went down my tubes and turned into one of those real bastard coughs, the tickly sort where you can't sleep properly. I called the doctor's and said I needed penicillin, but by the time I got there my temperature had gone down and the cough was a bit better. So they refused to give me a prescription. They told me to take paracetamol instead, and come back if it got worse. But it didn't. It just got better." He tried to cough, but couldn't really manage it. He sighed and shook his head. Then he went on eating until the aluminium tray was scraped clean. Then he pushed it away and asked if we'd had any new films in, then, when I said we hadn't, he sighed again and looked out through the window. "Well," he said, "I'd better get going." He grabbed a handful of the sweets we keep to offer children, then disappeared out through the door. I followed him, thinking I might as well hang up the faded red "Open" flag. No customers came in that afternoon either, so I had a chance to sort some invoices. I added the receipt for the mop and bucket. I punched holes and put everything in folders. Jörgen had a particular way he wanted things organized. Receipts in a green folder and unpaid invoices in a blue one. Then he would pay those himself and transfer them to the green folder. As I was sitting there leafing through the folders, I found myself thinking once more about the odd invoice I'd received. I noticed that some companies printed the full amount, down to the last öre. That made it look like a very long number. Sometimes it was hard to see the little decimal point between the zeroes. Maybe that's what had happened to me, I thought. Maybe they'd just missed the decimal point, unless perhaps I hadn't noticed it? No, that couldn't be right. Because even if you removed two of the

zeroes, it was still an insanely large amount. I certainly hadn't ordered anything that cost 57,000. I'd remember something like that. And what did W. R. D. stand for? I had a bit of a look to see if I could find anything similar among the shop's invoices, but there was nothing like it there. No, I thought. There must have been some sort of mistake somewhere, simple as that.