

# Agnes Lidbeck

AT A LOSS

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Gå förlorad

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Sample translation

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## Synopsis

Anders is married to Kristina, and father to Anna. Along with his mother, Gunnel, they are all the family he has, and he loves them immensely. Sometimes almost too much, the very thought of them being harmed makes his body tighten and his teeth grind, still he can't help from imagining the worst-case scenario. To lose them would be the worst thing of all – yet still alluring. If you are alone, you cannot be deserted.

Anders, like his mother, is a psychologist, and he runs his practice in his mother's offices/apartment. Unlike his mother, he carries no grand ambitions. Someday, he will try to find another office to work from. (Someday, his mother's apartment will be his instead.) He bakes sourdough bread, goes for runs, drives his daughter from the stable, pleases his wife in bed, shops for groceries and knows exactly how much fruit is needed. There shall be no room for misunderstandings or displeasure in their family. Still, something is chafing.

Over the course of twenty years, we accompany Anders as a husband, father and son. A marriage that evolves, a daughter that grows up, a mother that becomes an old woman. In the middle of it all is a man who is watching the events taking place, sometimes crippled by fear, sometimes desperately trying to stop time.

In *At a Loss* Agnes Lidbeck investigates the small truths and the big lies in our lives, the difference between our aspirations and our potentials, the explosive nature of our emotional reactions and our rational explanations for why we couldn't achieve more.

Sample translation

Part I [pp. 9-49]

Killing wasps. It takes a certain flick of the wrist. A quick roll, diagonal, protects the palm. If done correctly the wings are torn without anyone getting stung. But, if you fail, and you do sting yourself, the creature will still be dead, fallen to the ground, crushed beneath a heel.

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Sitting at the outdoor table, Anders watches the man roll them, one after another, the wasps. It is meant as entertainment, entertainment for him, he gets that. He gets it from the way the man looks at him between each kill, with a clown's face. Eyes wide. Lips tensed in an O.

The remains of a meal on the table. Waffles, jam, cream; despite the heat. Gravel. Sparrows flitting from nearby chairs, limping under the table. Gunnel's dress, halfway up her thigh. Jam on Anders' best shirt.

They're smoking; despite the heat - Gunnel and the man. Tables wobble, along with the chairs, along with arms spilling ash over the gravel, the gravel that makes the furniture teeter, adrift like the boat they took to get here, adrift like the faceless marble sculptures in the park. A sparrow pecks his shoulder, and Anders is awake. The heat, it is the heat of the duvet. There is silence, the gravel dissolved. Itchy soles.

Wanting to cup them in his hand, he fumbles for the child's feet, eyes still closed. The first reflex in a day of reflex: reaching for the proximity of the child. But she's not there. Is she dead? In a body still sluggish from dreams, the imagination vaults between pockets of sleep.

He fights his way onto an elbow, a tender, tensed shoulder — a rounded shoulder, the chiropractor said six months ago and he's still no

better. No, not dead. Simply asleep, on the other side of Kristina. That's odd though. She's usually wedged right in, and now her head is on Kristina's other arm, on the arm that's free.

Anders lets his thoughts wander: they are hidden from me, in the dark, closed in on each other, unreachable, I am the one cut loose, I am the one unmoored, at a loss. The sparrows of sleep strewn skyward as they take wing. The skittish beat of wings and branches against a summer storm. He has nodded off again. Gunnel lifts a feather to her lips: all smoke.

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An outside observer would say that all three of them are symbiotic. Anders, Kristina, and their daughter Anna, in the dark. Sounds carry, even though details are lost to the eye. Sounds carry in a bed of uniform breath. The spasm of a forehead mirrored by a twitching nose. The child whimpers, a whimper of the throat. Half a sound, transmuted into a dreamlike hush in Kristina's mouth. A sound that reaches Anders through the spine. Awake again, needing the bathroom now. The facts of morning.

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Anders doesn't tiptoe, as he leaves the room, but he walks softly, cautiously aware of where the floor creaks, over by the door. Creaking, thus waking, would be an aggression, a petty protest. There's no need for a lamp, he can see the bathroom mirror in the early light, the first greying of the day, through milky panes.

His hand through his hair, his hand across the bridge of his nose, his neck cracked to the right, no flushing means no waking them, a sticky palm on the banister, moist from the early hour, sleep has been too heavy.

Why hold on? Am I afraid of plunging helplessly down the stairs? Legs still wonky from sleep. Still wonky from last night.

Bringing the paper in chills him to the bone, hurrying back along the garden path, folding up his pyjama sleeves and kneading the dough left to rise overnight in the cool of the pantry. A dough from the night before. Baking: one of his unrestricted pleasures, a pleasure he grants himself. The types and specificities of flour, the heat of the oven, the temperature turned up or down, a knuckle against the bottom of a loaf, testing.

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Baking, it's a point of pride with Anders, the bread conversation pieces, comparisons to be made between them. The structure of the crust, the depth of colour in his photos.

Sure, it's easy to be a cynic, Anders muses, but bread is more than the photo-friendly crust, more than just oat blends to pontificate on, just more. Bread is something bigger, something to put your palms against, something to warm the palm of your hand.

The warmth made tangible: when Anna's had three extra slices for her afternoon snack and it's time to bake again, a day earlier than planned. Getting the bowl out with a kind of benevolent resignation, a hand on her hair, guffawing, "you'll eat us dry". And on cue, she'll brag that she can eat more than anyone. When Kristina walks into the kitchen she repeats it "Mummy, I can eat the most, more than anyone, right?"

It's then, Anders knows it, alone with the dough in an empty kitchen, it's then, when I'm standing with the bowl in one hand and she spreads her arms out to show the scope of her appetite, that's when it may just happen, that Kristina looks me in the eye and encapsulates our joint laughter, only releasing a tiny bit to the child, like a ray through closed teeth.

That's when it may happen, that Anna is not allowed to share everything. Kristina looking at me, looking to me when she says "oh but poor old daddy, baking again", and there might be weather on the radio, after that, but with our laughter still held between us, and not dispersed, not lost to the rest of it.

These scenes occur. Anders knows it. There has been laughter. But surely it's been a few years since Anna bragged of an appetite. Time, it must have passed. This isn't that kind of dough. This is a dough from a silent kitchen, a solitary one.

The old lady had come around for dinner, he emptied his last glass after she'd left in the taxi. He calls her the old lady behind her back, Gunnel when she's in the room. He knows she wants her meat rare, bleeding.

The last glass, emptied, innocuous now, rinsed in the sink. He washes dough from his fingers, sticky, too sticky. The last glass, the one he drank alone, while measuring the flour, measuring wrong, measuring while swallowing.

Adding more flour, kneading the overnight dough, Anders is almost sure the dream was a memory. Isn't it one of my earliest, from childhood, the man rolling the wasps with his bare hands? Palms diagonal, thumbs out, the force of the wrist. He slides bread onto trays, unsure of the park, going to the park by boat, which park?

The old lady ate slowly, last night. Should one be worried? Is it a sign of ageing? Or will she never age, did she always eat at her own pace, unconcerned, as if she never had a young child to consider?

When he came into the living room after doing the washing up, the patio doors were open despite the late autumn, Gunnel tapping her ashes in the ashtray.

The pretentiousness, Anders thought, smiling at her ring of smoke, the pretention of a cigar, obvious enough to make it seem unstudied. The old lady and her diva ways, the very ones that make her beautifully eccentric, not as predictable as the rest of us. The generosity of privilege, a generous charade, her silliness bestowed on the less fortunate. You have to smile, at it, it's touching, really.

Friday night. The smoke and the heat of a fireplace, radiating heat against the breeze creeping in from the patio. But a fire doesn't cut it, in November. The open door made the radiators rush and swoosh. Anders was aware of the heating expenses. He thought of mice and other critters, darting, seeking an escape from the cold. He moved to close the door, stopped in midmotion by Kristina:

"Leave it", she interrupted, abrupt, throwing a disgusted glance at the ashtray. She can't ever just smile. She didn't have to choose that approach, that tone. She could have chosen the cheerful crack of fire,

Anna's feet tucked beneath her on the couch, a slight laughter. Anders stopped, knelt at the fireplace, adding another log.

She's incapable of restraint; she can't resist pointing out flaws, poking a finger in the ribs, making her point, seeking a reaction. She knew what would happen and still, she can't help nibbling and prodding. And then of course things were as they always are, and now here I am, hands full of a dough that's not right.

The taxi left. The old lady, unapologetic, Kristina, unforgiving, and Anna between them, fretful, of course he reacted. He drank the last glass. Upstairs silence, at last. Still, he must have measured it wrong, the flour.

Taking the bread from the oven, now, his fingertips stinging as he lifts them from the baking tray to the breadbasket. He ought to be boiling eggs, but the stove is so slow.

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Anders hates the stove. It's not ancient. It's not faulty. He hates it for just those reasons, hates it for the way it keeps on working, but poorly, unattractive. Yesterday he wiped around the burners, oiled the cooktops, but the rust is already showing.

Anders has seen a stove, a big black top, six burners, or, if you'd allow yourself the dream, a country style kitchen, gas burners, enough room for proper equipment. The next door neighbour has one; Anders does his best to see it as a banality, the neighbour's stove, the way his barbecue is banal, but every time he's standing around waiting for the water to boil he thinks about it, about that stove, he thinks that it really isn't too late for more kids, some siblings for Anna, I'd be manning the stove and the kids would mess around, a pair of boys maybe, twins, Kristina smiling as I handled the heavy trays, hot from the oven, she would warn the boys to "watch out, only daddy's allowed near the oven".

Proper equipment. Not this, this standing about with a pot that holds three eggs, waiting for it to simmer. He waits for it to simmer. They always have eggs on Saturdays.

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“Oh my, you’ve really gone above and beyond”, Kristina says, entering the kitchen. The girls, Anders calls them in his head. The child’s face, unmarked. Kristina tying the extra knot on her robe, a hand on Anna’s shoulder, ushering her towards the table.

The candles lit, burning, the juice in its pitcher, the bread, not burned, an egg by each plate. Anders would like to smile, a wide smile, throwing his arms open in invitation: look at this, you see this, you see the table, here for you when you wake up, but he contents himself with turning off the radio that’s been murmuring in the background, blurring the usual voices. Now that the girls are here.

He knows full well that Kristina would reach out her hand and turn it off, otherwise. She finds most sounds annoying first thing in the morning, and especially the radio conversations, the debate, the exchange of opinions. She finds them intrusive, he wants to accommodate her wishes. He wants to catch her eye, in the sudden silence, to see if she knows he’s created it for her, the silence.

He’s about to ask Anna for a knife for the honey, but changes his mind, pushing at his chair, reaching the drawer in a few steps. “You looking forward to riding today, honey” he says with a glance at her bent down head, the knife in his hand. “I thought I’d take you, give mummy a rest”.

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Is it a nod, passing from Kristina to Anna? In that case, is it a nod of approval or of encouragement? Or a simple gesture to get your elbow off the table? Was there even a question?

In the afternoon they stop at the supermarket, Anders and Anna, on the way back from the stables where he's collected her, as per agreement. Needing a few things, no weekly shopping, but they have to pick up some fruit, and a packet of saffron.

Kristina called after him, on his way out, "Will you pick up some fruit as well?"

Pick up some fruit as well, there's a mutual agreement to the words, normally, there's no conflict of opinion there, no room for misunderstanding.

Four grapefruits, a net of oranges, and further into winter, when they come into season, blood oranges. Six tart apples. Organic. He puts them in his basket, the apples, despite their brown spots. There's no need to worry about those spots, I've explained that to Kristina, she's shaky on details like that, I have to help her. No shiny green waxed apples. Really, one shouldn't be buying apples of any kind, shouldn't buy fruit, plastic bags, bananas shipped in from some deforested faraway place, one shouldn't drive, Anna should be riding a red bike, front teeth gapped, I'd be riding a green or a black one, wellies, there should be wellies. One should really be picking apples from one's own tree. I should be making preserves. Should be eating porridge. Shouldn't be late for pick-up. Alas, Anders is never late for pick-up. He does most of the picking up. When the fight concerns who does what, he rarely mentions the pick-ups.

Nobody should fault me for not picking up. Nobody should be wondering whether they'll have to remind me to pick up. Nobody should be wondering whether I'll be on time. I'll always be on time, and I'll never mention being on time.

He's promised himself that.

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Last time he made himself that promise was last night, the first time he woke, in the dark, lying in bed wondering what could happen in the morning, what could happen in the day.

He stayed very still, playing it out in his head, how they'd leave him, come morning, and what would happen next. How Kristina would carry Anna out the door, kicking it shut behind them, or even how she'd leave it open as they left. How he would stand knocking outside her new apartment, hearing voices inside, but no one opening. He imagined coming back another evening, lateish, and Kristina finally opening the door, half-dressed, misbuttoned, blocking his view but still wanting him to know that someone was moving around in there, pulling a shirt on.

Anders laid with sweat at the cup of his throat, thinking of how her new man would be the next door neighbour, or even Torbjörn. His knuckles white and gripping the wheel of the car on the way back home to an empty house. He tensed his hands, as on the imaginary wheel, straining not to move, not to wake Kristina, keeping himself flat on his back, making his usual list, in his head, his usual deal.

Dear God, I'll never be late, God, I'll always pick her up on time, God, I'll give up smoking if you let me keep them, I won't ask for anything else, as long as I get to keep them I'll never, never again, at the thought of what he'd never again, his heart beat too quickly for him to dare finish that train of thought.

I'll die here, in this silence. I'll have a heart attack, right now. They'll regret it when they wake, she will regret the new apartment and Torbjörn, or the neighbour, she'll regret it. The prayer mutated in his head, turning into the one formal prayer he'd ever learnt, in school, as a child.

Moving his lips silently he kept mouthing, Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the lord my soul to keep And if I die before I wake I pray the

Lord my soul to take Amen now I lay me down, all over again, from the top, take my soul dear God take it all but don't take them and not the old lady either even though I wish she'd, no I don't wish for anything, please dear God don't take them, don't let them leave me, and then he fell back to sleep, from exhaustion, a mouth still full of prayer.

Anders woke again from the sparrow on his shoulder. Eyes still closed, he reached for the heel of Anna's foot, wanting to confirm the passing of the night. The first reflex in a day of reflex. Ensuring the child is still there.

While the eggs boiled he thought, it's a good thing I don't believe in God. Layered under the thought: the decision to collect Anna at the stable today, once more. Layered under the thought he turned off the radio, got there on time, before the end of class, got there in time, walking across the frozen mud of the stable-yard.

Anders blew on his hands. A cat crossed the stands. He couldn't see her, couldn't see Anna. It made him wonder whether he'd forgotten something, despite all prayers. Anders saw, vividly, before his eyes — the child crying, left behind in some other changing room, the only one left at ballet class, which is Sundays, isn't it, or waiting, the last one left at some birthday party where the parents were already slamming the dishwasher shut, she'd be waiting at the very furthest tip of the sofa. The friend, selfishly playing with her gifts.

The parties aren't like that anymore though, are they. Anna has outgrown those, hasn't she. Kristina is always pointing that out, how he doesn't keep up with her development, always ahead or behind on that axis.

How is one supposed to remember her age, Anders often wonders, silently, brushing aside her accusatory assumptions. How is one supposed to keep track of time? Keep track of parties?

And, even if the kids are no longer mean to each other at parties, there are still other threats, she might have locked herself in the bathroom, causing the lock to jam, she might have gotten upset and run outside and might be sitting on a bench in the park, getting her bottom cold, catching a bladder infection, there might be flashers in the park, or she might have run too fast, into a glass door, there might be shards of glass all over the floors of the party hosts.

He counted the usual fears to himself, while at the same time aware that beneath the small catastrophes, the catastrophes that do not really matter, lay something darker, the true fear, the constant fear. That she'd been taken. That they'd picked her up and wouldn't let him have her back.

A fear that he's never been able to conquer with logic. That must be embedded in other, possible, failures. In the stale air of the ballet locker-room, in the tint of the lockers, in the scent of the party hosts' dinner preparations, real terror packed tightly underneath.

And then, a blink, the scents fading, he brought himself back, back to the present. Anna was right there, despite everything, on a brown horse. She's taken her coat off, that was all. Her face shaded by the big helmet. He couldn't remember that sweater from earlier in the day.

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The cat jumped onto the railing, balancing onwards to some other destination, ignoring the hand that Anders had stretched out to give it a stroke, the stroke transformed into a half-hearted nod to some other dad, with cold hands in his pockets, the nod turning into a forward lean, elbows on the railing, hands hanging loose.

He listened to the instructor calling out from the middle of the paddock. The acoustics were off, making the words difficult to decipher from where Anders was standing. Shoulders down, mouth firm, reliable, competent, a trustworthy mouth, in charge.

A horse, throwing itself suddenly out of step, or perhaps only tossing its head. For Anders, still battling the worst, that hint of the worst, the possibility of the worst still faintly in his blood, Anna was already thrown off, crushed beneath the hoofs.

No more resting hands. Anders was standing with his back straight, teeth clenched, ready for what? Ready to kill the horse with his bare hands? Ready to carry a mauled child?

Demonstrate calmness and competence, he repeated to himself, demonstrate it with the back, the arms, that should appear strong in this sweater.

Shoulder groaning, from the tension in the neck, he closed his jacket with his hands, instead of filling them with the mangled remains of the child.

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Anders hates the fact that they have to allow Anna to keep riding. Kristina was talking about a riding camp this summer, but when Anna's arms are small enough to fit inside my clenched fists, how will she be able to sleep away from home?

The horses. Just one of the ways in which Kristina tries to compensate, Anders believes, a way in which she invents a childhood, living vicariously through Anna.

"You want Anna to ride just because the other girls do, or what, would you rather have her break her neck than be different?"

You are one to talk. Kristina's eyebrows said it all, straight away, no pause. She's got a temper, unlike me, Anders thought. No wonder one hesitates to start a conversation with her. He was standing with the knife deep inside the roast. The music was grand, sweeping. He'd been in a good mood cutting the net from the meat and choosing the tracks. Now the fight was in full swing and he stuffed the roast with cloves of garlic, thinly sliced, and also, later, the lemon peel. That's his secret ingredient. The lemon peel.

She put the plates down and began counting on her fingers, his own anxious bourgeois attempts. "tennis lessons, boating lessons?"

"But none of those will kill you" Anders said and rinsed the knife, wiping the blade with a towel, one has to take care of one's tools, it can't go in the dishwasher. I don't know how often I have to point that out, knives have to be handwashed, the dishwasher will ruin the blade. He held it, tip outward, wiping it down gently.

Kristina raised her eyebrows a little further, the fourth and fifth finger, "Gunnel for dinner every last Friday of the month, strictly red bulbs in the Christmas tree, and ballet?" no more fingers, the hand hitting out, towards the window "Which one of us is shit-scared because this house isn't period? I'm certainly not."

He silently cut the lemon peel into slices. She was still waiting for the

water to boil, continuing without mercy, “And if the horses are what Anna actually likes, out of all this, maybe you can keep a lid on your neurosis”

“But is she old enough, really, to spend a week away from home. You really think so?”

“What is it that you think will happen”

The answer didn't come to him at the time, not until he was at the stands in the stables, a shove through the brain, a shove from the wrangling horse, even though camp is already booked. All the things that might happen when you sleep away from home. Rape and snakes and drinking. Things are different these days. Why are you so keen on sending her away, they might go diving, somewhere with rocks at the bottom of the lake, brain damage, wheelchair, food through a tube and a small coffin, with the photo, from that time under the big oak, when she was missing a front tooth, in a simple frame on the lid, then you'd cry.

The horses were walking, sluggish now, coming to a stop, and he had to force himself to calm his breath, his perspective.

There's no point in getting worked up, the discussion has already been lost, it was lost at the moment she put the potatoes in the boiling water and made him admit, made him retreat. Of course it would be unreasonable to keep her at home. “No, of course I don't think the girls are drinking already, not really. No, I suppose there are chaperones who look after them when they go swimming. No, this may not be a snake summer.”

“But that”, he insisted purely on principle, “that you can never know for certain.”

“I suppose there are helicopter ambulances in that case. It's not the far north”

“Thank God” Anders said, and then, in the same breath “I'm sorry”.

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The apology came too late, or, it would never have helped. Kristina was

already blushing severely, the blush that comes on sudden, when she's thought herself to be safe, to have the upper hand, and Anders has inadvertently reminded her of the balance of things. The balance of things: him being bigger and stronger, him being Anders and her being Kristina, her northern awkwardness, her mother nothing like Gunnel, with her stylish apartment, her grey jumper, the orchids at the window.

Anders has always been proud of his easy access to his emotions, his ability to verbalise them. He's always been proud of his ability to let go, no holding back, of living true to his own needs, and, in his opinion, this is what makes him such a good counsellor, his vulnerability and his courage to show it. Not to patients, of course, but at home, he dares, as he often says, to be rather feminine, in that aspect.

This is something that Kristina lacks, he sometimes muses, she doesn't have that genuine sensibility. Maybe it's on account of her background, he believes, some sort of reservation, not allowing herself the unguarded honesty that is necessary to be truly loved. But despite her flaws, we have the tools, we know what to do. Create time, if time is what is called for. Open communication.

It's not that I don't truly love her, Anders corrects himself. Isn't it more of a question of whether she truly loves me?

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"Sometimes I feel like we've been living parallel lives", Anders once said, early on, when Kristina had turned around, her chin in her hand, drawing on his chest with her finger, him looking in her eyes. He meant the opposite. Parallel lives do not intersect. What he meant was that they had been moving towards each other. But parallel felt like the right word, it felt like it should signify intimacy.

"Well", Kristina said, a laughter somewhere in her voice. "Well", Kristina said, but Anders thought he could tell that it made her happy.

He thought he could tell it made her happy that he felt the same way that she was probably feeling, and that he was able to verbalise it. He felt generous, at the time, generous to be linking them, him and her, in some joint experience. He had seen a little bit of movement in her eye, back then, early on, when she realised he wasn't in touch with his father, either. A glint.

He had not been able to tell her that there was no way, no possible way, that she could have gone without a father in the same way he had.

There was no possible way that she could have come home to an empty flat in the afternoons, with a silence only broken by the old lady at the front door, only broken by Gunnel at the front door. Reading glasses slung around her neck, making a cup of tea. Some tea and a sandwich will do, won't it.

He raised his head from his homework, watching through his fringe of hair, "sure, it will". He did not feel hunger, as long as no hunger was required of him. And the door, so often, closing again.

"I won't be very late" she said with her hand, right beside his duveted body, not on the shoulder, not on the cheek, the hand next to the body, saying, "not very late". The man with his cheeks filled with air, the same afternoon. The man with tensed lips, the bodies of wasps, jammy sticky fingers.

Further back "no wetting the bed, Anders, or you'll sleep in wet sheets".

Ridiculous, really, for Kristina to believe they had been fatherless in the same way. It became evident, when he was there, visiting, up north, painfully evident what her life must have been like. Two evenings and one speechless day in between, full of store bought biscuits and spongy cake.

Kristina was already pregnant at the time, and he could feel her radiating a kind of relief, a relief that he was rescuing her from turning into her mother, left back there. Rescued her from becoming her own mother, a mother presenting the small town on a platter, the small glimpses of lake view, the deli serving tomato salad with limp mozzarella,

sliced red onions. Call that a view?

Anders walked a few paces behind them, Kristina and her mum, by the water. It was windy. He noted the wind. They had coffee. He noted that they had coffee. Hardly, he thought, the most intellectual of pursuits, to have coffee. The nostalgia of women's magazines They use the word to have coffee. They perform the act of having coffee.

Kristina's loyalty, touching really, he thought, not directed at me but at her poor mother. He knew, had seen, Kristina's own apartment, he knew the walls were painted white, and her curtains a soft linen grey. He knew her bathroom bar of soap was not pink. He knew all that about her and still, she knew where to find the cups, there in her mother's kitchen. She took them from the cupboard without the least bit of resistance, like someone sleep-walking.

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It is agreed that it might be best, if your mum comes down to visit instead. It is agreed that your mum is getting a bit too old for the train. It is agreed that next year might be better. And then, there's the funeral. Anna, two or three years old at the time. The smell of banana filling the car.

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Should one feel guilty about it, Anders wonders. What's to feel guilty about, he asks himself, that we didn't move Kristina's mum down to us, that we didn't move her into our house, that we didn't let her sleep in our bed, or what? Should one feel guilty about that, or what?

A little bit of guilt is appropriate, if only due to the sheer relief of the funeral falling on a Wednesday afternoon, no time to stay the night. A little bit of guilt is only fair, in relation to the relief, but at the same time, can one really expect someone to learn to love, truly, up north, with that floral tablecloth in the kitchen.

Of course one can learn to love even if the tablecloth has a floral pattern, of course people in other places aren't animals, they aren't just fleshy lumps of sponge cake dissolving in a cup of coffee, of course they also have emotions, a soul. None the less. There are different cultures. Different customs. And she has grown, I am proud of her efforts. We both understand how a relationship works, we both know how to deal with love. I am patient when sometimes it doesn't come as easy to her. Making time, if time is called for. Open communication.

Not that I don't really love her, Anders corrects himself, the way she is. It's more of a question whether she really loves me. I shouldn't be ashamed of that thought. Isn't it that what everyone wants, to be loved, for all that we are. And of course she does. She loves. In her own way.

In her own way. The way she loves. The way she fights. The way she hurts, the way I hurt her. Oh Kristina, I know you, Anders thinks, tired of knowing it so well.

I am too susceptible to her moods, it's exhausting, he'll admit to his friends when drunk. But now, he was sober, just a regular day, not admitting anything. Time to add the lemon peel. Pots and pans and lids. Friday evening.

The blush, Kristina's blush when he joked about the north, made him tired. Initial reaction. It's ungrateful that blush, showing up despite his best efforts.

I do my best no to point out, I do my best no to remind her of her place, I am careful, sometimes too careful, not to hurt her. I defend her to the old lady, loyally defensive. I never make a point of things being what they are. So it's not on me, if she's overly sensitive, perceiving everything as criticism.

While making him tired, the blush did something else as well. There is something about the hurt itself, about Kristina being hurt, something about the way she raises her chin, despite her trembling mouth, that makes her seem so very fragile.

That fragility has a fleeting, subtle taste, marrowlike, like sucking from a cracked bone. He suckles on her moments of self-doubt, hastily licking their oily remains from his lips. Darting tongue.

Anders won't admit that he enjoys the flavour. It passes through his body like an echo, or a premonition of sexual arousal.

Not enough to inspire a kiss, or an actual caress, but enough for a metaphorical hand against her cheek. Letting her win, so she won't see

the pleasure on his lips.

His actual hands were slick with blood and olive oil. He lifted them, taking a step back. "I'm sure you're right" he said, safe in the knowledge that she wasn't right, safe in her inadequacy.

Once he backed off, Kristina, as always, presented her palms in a gesture of reason, of non-stop logic reason. She is so pure, her hands tell him, that despite his pretensions and his mocking of the north, she'll turn the other cheek. If only he gives in, she'll always turn the other cheek.

Mashed potato gratin. The meat thinly sliced. Gunnel chewing, slowly, marking the tendon with her tongue to her teeth.

"Granny", Anna said "you know, I am going to riding camp, mum says I am" with one eye on Kristina, "right?"

"We'll have to see, honey, if daddy will let you go" Kristina calmed her, turning to Gunnel "Anders is not a big fan of the idea".

"Well that's just silly" Gunnel said, weighing knife and fork in her hands. "You were always at camp during summer. Of course Anna should go to camp"

"Well, this is not any camp, this is riding camp" Anders breathed, "not just camp".

"If you can afford it, I suppose" Gunnel pointed out, looking at the size of the roast and the blood pooling on the cutting board. "If money is no object".

"Is it very expensive" Anna asked and Kristina looked to Anders, who said nothing, looking back at her.

"No, no, not that expensive, of course you'll go" Kristina said "if daddy thinks it's ok".

Bitterness. Pointless, Anders thought, standing in the stables, pointless bitterness over a fight already lost. Money does matter, of course, even though that isn't the whole of it. We're not made of it, that's just a fact of life. Kristina wants a pool for the backyard, and a fancy heating system. Her haircuts are crazy expensive.

Her being the breadwinner plays into it, obviously, but that is temporary, she's just head of the department for the interim and I suppose that person, what's-his-face, will be back soon, and anyway, I'm not like that, I don't think like that, the argument is pointless, and the argument has already been lost.

He can hold off the pool. He can call it unreasonable, unrealistic. He can hold off the vulgarity of that bright blue eyesore. But not something as insignificant as the riding camp. And she knows that, she's so fucking pleased about that extra cash coming in, I can tell from the way she says nothing about it.

The cat licking its paw. The wall-mounted clock, hacking at three past the hour. The lesson was still going, delayed. You have to let it go, Anders thought, it's no good getting stuck on details. Be present in the here and now. It's not the end of the world. Nothing is irrevocable. I am at the stables picking up my daughter, that must also be of some importance. No one has to die if you are a dad who picks up at the stables, among the other things you do.

He gave her a one-armed hug once she was off her horse, more than that would be showy. He can't drop to his knees with his arms spread wide anymore. After the hug, the usual questions, walking back over the same frozen muck as before. Did you get a good horse, did you remember

your hat, but go on and get it then, here it is, isn't it, and Roxy, is he your favourite then? He got the usual answers. Mmm. No. No, Missy is, I've told you.

She was in the back seat and he had to circle the square three times, before he found a spot. "Will you stay in the car" he asked, eyes in the rear-view mirror, regretting that he hadn't said "come along".

Anna shrugged, but still came along, when he added "come on, surely you will want to pick out some candy, sweetie".

Now, they're in the supermarket aisle. The right kind of apples are in the basket. And still, he holds out a box of grapes in front of Anna. "what do you think?"

She shrugs, again, and he reaches for another box, pale wintertime strawberries "and maybe these as well? We can make a fruit salad? Wouldn't that be yummy?" She nods.

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The nod is a crack in the curtain. Through the crack he can glimpse forgetfulness: the promise of children forgetting. He adds an unripe mango, and a star fruit, the crack of forgetfulness becomes a little smile, maybe now she's almost forgotten, in the face of all this fruit. Anders smiles back, tearing at her smile with his own.

He adds blueberries, and physalis and bananas but that's where her smile disappears, and forgetfulness passes. She's not so little anymore. She doesn't forget as quickly.

Persisting, "Blueberries", Anders holds out the box, asking her to be a child, a child by force of blueberries, but all that remains of the momentary relief is a taught pull at the corner of her mouth.

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He adds the blueberries to the basket anyway, despite Anna's failure to promise continued childhood, continued forgetfulness.

“Pick your candy and I’ll meet you at the tills”. There is only a very short line, he fumbles for his card long before his turn.

“Hi there” says the woman in front of him, turning around to get a bag. He can’t place her, despite her kiss on his cheek. Not until she turns to Anna, who has come up quietly behind him, asking her “have you been to the stables? Alma had a cold”, making a small face, and Anna nodding back, in childish silence, childish blankness, childish passivity, handing her bag of candy to Anders who adds it to his pile, and he smiles at her, relieved, because he knows who Alma is, she’s the new girl in the green house and this mum’s name is Maria, I am absolutely positive she’s Maria.

Alma’s mum, Maria, turns towards him “we really should get together, soon”, before she goes back to packing her things, and Anders nods, vigorously, continues to nod when his bag is packed, one hand on Anna’s shoulder.

Anders nods. Absolutely, soon.

They walk together to the cars and when he is looking in the rear-view mirror to reverse out, Maria smiles and raises her hand and he raises his in return and he also catches Anna looking at him, in the mirror, like the horse throwing its head, so quickly, before she looks down again

and there is no real reason for the heat beneath his collar, so he turns the heating down, and it is not until they get home, that he remembers, damn it, the saffron!

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On the Sunday, a museum, a light drizzle, “something educational” Anders said when they were choosing their outing, cracking the shell of his morning egg.

Anders is still zeroing in on Anna, has been for several minutes, Anna who has stiffened next to Kristina. He’d like to ask them to look different. He’d like to ask them to look less posed, he’d like for Kristina to not smile. Anna’s jacket is still a child’s jacket, dirt splattered over pink pockets, so why doesn’t she look younger, why does she seem to be waiting patiently

when he wants sudden spontaneous motion?

Maybe it would look better in black and white, he muses. Black and white solves most issues. It adds depth. He doesn't stop himself from thinking "depth". He's not even aware that he's thinking "depth".

Finally, Anna turns away, watching a boat pass, and Kristina loses her focus as well, moving her hand, her knuckles, to swipe at her nose and he gets it, the shot. He gets the shot of them not looking portraity, with Anna looking full of energy, full of discovery. Stunted, rather than appeased.

He wishes they would disappear for a bit so that he could look at the images on the screen, but they're insisting, "come on", Kristina's voice is her I'm done voice, "let's have coffee" and Anders tries his best not to say "do you mean lunch".

In the silence, Kristina adds, "or lunch, then, for Christ's sake".

Monday evening, little more than 24 hours after the lunch at the museum, Anders paces from sofa to window, back and forth. Pushing himself up for a look in the fridge, the bathroom with a handful of soap, passing through to the bottom of the stairs, listening. Walking to the window with a view of the driveway. Keeping watch.

It's quiet upstairs. It's dark outside. The dishes have all been done.

Back to the sofa. Pillows on the floor. Putting the pillows back in their place. Sitting down, pushing up. Wiping down the kitchen counters, watering the basil, pouring surplus water from the dish. It's pale and stringy, not from lack of care, but due to winter. Kristina often sighs about it, its lack of life, in the dark. The neighbours have "fantastic basil" Kristina claims, despite the same dark winter.

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In the morning he was at work, in the office, in the morning he reached out his hand to open the office door, and then changed his mind, knocked instead. The old lady, she always has the same inquisitive look in her eye, like it could be anyone, and she opened the door with that same look again.

A regular Monday, with regular Monday noises. The door to her office ajar while she wrote, the phone ringing, her hoarse laughter down the receiver and then the door closing, the silence heavy from the conversation he was excluded from. Same old story.

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It's been five years since he started working together with, or rather, at the same practice as Gunnel, or rather, at the old lady's practice. It's a joint operation but he's expected to bring in his own clients.

"The name will help, that should be enough" Gunnel said when they discussed the arrangements. The name hasn't helped enough, marginally at most, he told Kristina last week, when they were talking about if he could still stand it, or not.

"I don't know if I can stand it any longer" said Anders.

"Then don't" said Kristina

It's not that easy, Anders shouted in his head, as he shrugged.

Five years. Monday morning. Their offices are located in the apartment, in Gunnel's apartment. Monday mid-morning. The light spilling over hardwood floors. Orchids trembling at the window.

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He studied psychology. Gunnel smiled. Not at one of the top universities, but he did study psychology and then he met Kristina, who hadn't studied at a top university either, and who'd gone into HR after her degree.

"A classic women's trap" said Gunnel, but that "with her background, I suppose it is admirable".

Where should I be then, with my background, to be described as admirable, Anders wondered. It was at that very early stage in their relationship where he could talk to Kristina about it, exaggerating the hurt in his voice, and she'd smile in a mixture of satire and pity, saying "poor Anders, feeling oedipal today are we?"

Anders would sigh, putting his forehead to hers, "Matricidal, rather" and she would say, "ooh, going Greek now" and he could say "no, Latin, actually", and she would wrestle him onto the pillows and he would let himself lose, fall, forget, forget for the duration. And then afterwards, when he was done with forgetting, he would say "oh well let's just forget it".

Time has passed since, years, the child was born and now, on Monday evening at the end of the day, Anders moves restlessly between the sofa and the other places, as mentioned. But before then, there was Monday, at work: off to the kitchen for more coffee. Not fully-booked today.

Hours of time when he could have been writing something, studying something, putting something together — or, alternatively, he could have gone out, looked for other ways to pass the time, corporate clients, more coaching, or, alternatively, taken the time off to read, discover something new, something to broaden the horizons, visiting an art exhibit, or just, movement, getting some oxygen into his system. He should have moved on, to new colleagues, or started his own shop. But he did none of that. Five years of this, and it's still Monday, mid-morning.

Through the waiting area for more coffee, orchids dancing from his steps, shaking their stems, at the window-sill, he topped up his cup, wiped the dribbles from the counter, went back to

his room and sat at his computer, his door ajar, the stillness continuing until Gunnel opened her door and put her head through his.

Straightening his back, he kept his hands poised over the keyboard, showing her he'd been absorbed in work, not in the least bit moping, and she wound a scarf around her neck. They had lunch at their usual spot. A brisk walk, afterwards.

The old lady doesn't mince her words. "A sign of insecurity. Only an insecure person would insist on making a career that way, forcing children to become little machines".

It's her field of expertise, the theory that has built her reputation, how the female psyche should be embraced. She is calm, convincing. When they stopped for coffee and she put her hand on his "you're not really compatible. There are significant differences that need to be overcome. The sort of differences that lead to conflict".

She used her professional voice, it did not judge, it did not accuse him. He thought, as they kept walking, that the old lady will always have a point there: we aren't simply what we've made ourselves, but also where we come from. Class. One should be able to talk about class.

“There’s something anxious about her conformity” Gunnel said when they reached the bridge, shaking her head slightly. Anders did not agree, not in words, but he couldn’t keep from mirroring her gesture of concern. Shaking his head he told the old lady:

“But despite all that I want to be with Kristina. Despite her flaws, I choose her, every day. Despite the cost. Even though so many things that should be natural, aren’t natural to her”.

“Well, you’re loyal to a fault”

“That’s true” said Anders, “I need to work on setting healthy boundaries”.

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A patient arrived. Anders told her to wait. “I’m a bit early” she said, hand to her neck, and Anders smiled, politely professional, not to worry. “I just need to finish up”. The day wasn’t empty.

Anders pulled his coat on, made it to school for pick-up. He always makes it on time, he’s never late.

Anna had forgotten her hat. He waited in the car while she ran to get it. She did not run to get it. She dragged her feet.

Kristina was late, she texted, you go ahead and eat. Anders did not have time to peel the potatoes. The stove, an eternity until the water boiled. And then Anna wouldn’t eat. Grated carrots, she poked at the darker strands. Potatoes with their skins on. “You’re old enough to peel it yourself” Anders said and peeled Anna’s potato, scorching hot against his thumb. How do you not like cold lamb. She pushed the potato around her plate. Her mouth looked like Kristina’s.

It wasn’t a hard slap. But, as always, harder than a caress. Given in sudden frustration.

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After Anna went to sleep Anders paced. The sofa, the kitchen counter.

Soap in hand, pink. Monday evening. Finally, steps on the garden path. Finally the front door. Anders put his head in his hands, remorseful in front of Kristina, as always. "I don't know what got into me, I just" he watches her with fear in his eyes "I just lost it. I lost it completely".

Kristina says nothing. The silence is not reprimanding, it's meticulous. She struggles with her words: the words she chooses have to signal that this is not a big problem, that these things happen. That it is not an event that should overshadow everything else. This time either. That is the slaps are so infrequent, they don't form a pattern, there is nothing in them that can be measured, no way of telling time by the way he strikes, that the slaps are light enough not to create any certainty, light enough to be put aside.

When he looks at her, it's through tunnelled hands, certain she'll find the words that will allow him to drop them, the hands, to stop covering his face. He does not reflect on the fact that he portrays his guilt, like an actor, his despair, that he reaches for her understanding through performance.

Kristina now finds the words, putting her cup back with a little gesture towards the coffee table, placing a hand on his knee. "Hey, it can happen to anyone. Of course it isn't good, of course, but it is" she moves her hand in a circle. A circle that encompasses the entire lounge and the entire neighbourhood, their entire lives and their entire universe, encompasses Anna, tucked in and sleeping safely in her bed, encompasses childhood and childish innocence, encompasses the knowledge which we all share, the knowledge that children aren't always innocent even though they are without blame in theory, that encompasses our realistic approach and we know that children can also provoke, even though, of course, one must never

lose one's temper to a degree where, she chooses her words with the gesture. Even though no word is spoken, the word *slap* must be kept at a distance.

Anders sighs, as always. A sigh which in turn encompasses Anna's disobedient tantrum earlier in the afternoon, how she threw her hat on

the floor, how she made disgusted sounds at the table, pretending to vomit over her plate “you know, she just pushes every button at the same time” and how suddenly there was this darkness, swallowing more than could be saved, that swallowed — Anders swallows, hands knit as though in prayer before him, he sees the light at the end of the tunnel know, sees the redemption there — swallowed everything.

“Is it really ok, you think” he asks and she rolls her shoulder, a roll that maybe clears the last dregs from the moment, that opens his hands and lets the light back in. “It is, it isn’t, it is. Either way I am sure you are not really like that”. Her voice becomes firmer “I know you are not really like that”.

Anders exhales, leaning back. He can’t drink tea, that would be flippant, but tomorrow evening and every other evening, he will be allowed to drink tea again. He is not like that. She is sure of it. Still.

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Anna gets a furry keychain to hang from her rucksack, she strokes her cheek with it, says it’s soft. Anders smiles at Anna, and at Kristina, who smiles at them both. “It’s a good thing everyone is friends again”, Kristina says.

Agnes Lidbeck about writing her debut, *Supporting Act* (2016)

It is much more difficult not to write a book than it is to write one.

I am 23 years old when I decide to quit literature. Virginia Woolf told us that it takes a room of one's own to be an author, I've decided sitting alone in a room is not for me. I want a life that is shared. If giving up writing is what it takes to interact with others, then the writing will have to go. Diligent, I delete every single word I've written so far, throwing floppy disks in the trash. I even change my sweaters from black to navy.

Despite my best intentions, I find it hard to stay off the pen and paper. A relapse is never more than a day away. I seem always to be throwing out scraps of paper, notes appear from nowhere halfway through my morning walk and there are poems at the bottom of my work documents. When I delete them it is like emptying bottles down the sink and promising a better tomorrow.

It takes ten years of throwing out and deleting before I give in, to Anna. I am cooking for my kids when she steps into the kitchen. At the time she's no more than a single sentence. But she is forceful, more forceful than my good intentions and more forceful than my duties as a mother. I let go of the spatula.

The book that originated in the kitchen got written in the margins of daily life. In the evenings when the children finally sleep with their heads on my stomach and thighs and I lie prone on my back, scribbling quietly. Using work flights, using crayons during library storytime, making swift notes on my mobile on my way home with the groceries; the bags in the slushy snow, fingers red, someone screaming from a pram, probably at me.

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