

Sample translation of *Blood Bound* by Augustin Erba

(Translation by Eva Apelqvist)

From pages 9-39:

EVERY NIGHT I PRAYED to God that my mother wouldn't die.

I was a skinny five-year-old boy; old people pinched my cheeks and said that my eyes were as brown as gingerbread cookies. My mother, my father, my sister, my younger brother and I; nobody knew anything about us. They might have known that we children had odd names: Amadeus, Elisabeth and Leopold. They didn't know why. They might have known that my short father worked downtown, but they didn't know that he was an Egyptian nuclear physicist. And they didn't know that my mother was a princess.

She was thin when I was little, my mother. Thin, with a swollen abdomen. Her mouth was full of gray amalgam, maybe that's why she didn't like to eat.

"I'm not fit to live," my mother told me when I was five years old.

When she read *The Princess and the Pea* to us kids and we heard how the poor princess, despite having a bed with a hundred mattresses stacked on top of each other, complained about the pea at the bottom, we laughed knowingly. We asked our mother if she would have felt the pea under the mattresses and she nodded.

"My body is sensitive," she said. "I am not well."

My grandfather spoke the same way. People either have good health or they don't. My grandmother's brother had a bad back. My grandfather's mother had bad lungs. My mother had bad everything. Somebody, probably my grandfather, had given my mother the verdict about her health when she was a child and thereafter every cold, every cavity was further proof that my

mother was a fragile being, born to sit on a throne in a castle, sleep on top of a hundred mattresses and be waited on.

Just like my mother had been born with bad health, Archduke Rudolph had been born with a bad brain. Rudolph, who would have inherited the Habsburg Empire, was a constant presence in our lives, despite the fact that he had been dead for almost a hundred years. He had had frequent migraines so in my mother's mind they were twin souls. Rudolph was the son of Emperor Franz Joseph. He was a bearded young man with a constant frown, raised to be an emperor. My grandmother was the great granddaughter of Rudolph's older sister. The fact that Rudolph, who was married, had had a much publicized love affair with a seventeen-year-old baroness, thus bringing shame on the entire family, was rarely mentioned.

Some say that the Habsburg Empire died with Rudolph one morning at a hunting lodge at Mayerling. When a servant knocked on the door to the archduke's room on January 30, 1889, no one responded. With the help of one of the archduke's hunting companions he beat down the door. They found Rudolph shot dead. The young baroness was on the bed. She too was dead. Historians argue about the cause of Rudolph's death; some say it was a political conspiracy, that the two of them were murdered because Rudolph was said to have been in favor of the liberation of Hungary. Others believe that by demanding that Rudolph break up with his mistress, the emperor drove him to suicide. Yet others say it was an attempt to defeat the Habsburg family, by murdering its main heir.

My mother and my grandfather said they knew that was a lie. They had preferred it if Rudolph was murdered, everybody in the family had, they said. In reality, it was a well-kept family secret that Rudolph had suffered from mental illness. A person who was about to inherit an empire had to be protected, especially if he, as my grandfather phrased it, was feeble-minded.

As a side-effect of his migraines, Rudolph had periods of severe depression. That is why he, according to my mother, one morning when the pain was worse than usual, gave up. He wrote a suicide note, a goodbye, and shot himself in the head. The Habsburg family had conquered Europe with border-crossing marriages, not wars. Thereafter the marriages had been kept in the family, so that none of the countries would end up outside the control of the family. Due to hundreds of years of marrying their cousins, the Habsburgs were always plagued by rumors of mental illness. If Rudolph had been murdered by secret agents, it would have been a failure of the secret police, but such things can be handled by crisis management. If he, on the other hand, suffered from mental illness, this would have been a threat against the Habsburg family and would thereby have threatened the entire stability of Europe. This is why the death was shrouded in mystery. My mother said she had inherited Rudolph's migraines. It ran in the family, she said.

“He had *such* bad migraines,” she said.

She said she very much understood why he would shoot himself.

The emperor had no other sons, so the right of inheritance was passed on to his brother. The brother didn't want to be the emperor either and passed the Habsburg empire's crown to his son, Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The assassination in Sarajevo, when a nationalist murdered Franz Ferdinand, spelled the beginning of World War I. When the war was over, the Habsburg Empire had been crushed. All that remained were the Schönbrunn Palace, the Hofburg Palace and my mother's migraines.

“I hope you haven't inherited my bad teeth,” she told me.

“I hope you haven't inherited my uncle's bad back,” she said.

“I hope you haven't inherited Rudolph's brain,” she said.

I concluded that my body was equipped with a number of timed inherited genetic catastrophes. When I turned sixteen, the migraine would detonate, then maybe the backache and finally, mental illness. I was doomed to become a human wreck fighting just to stay alive like my mother. I couldn't imagine anything more beautiful.

SOMEBODY GRABBED my father's expensive radio through the open window. The antenna stuck out too far, in order for my father to be able to listen all the way to Egypt. I had heard my father sing duets along with the radio whenever it played something by Oum Kalthoum. My father had the voice of a tenor, but when he sang with the Arabic singer he did it in a kind of falsetto where he would glide on the semitones. The nice radio was gone and with it, my father's ability to listen to news and music from his homeland.

"There are many poor students here," my father said and left for work.

Our first apartment was located in a student area north of Stockholm. Most of the buildings were low gray boxes with red or blue window frames. They were two stories high. It was a quiet suburb, because this was in the days of the birth control pill. After giving birth for thousands of years whenever their bodies dictated it, it was as if the Swedes, with the arrival of the pill, made a collective decision to wait to have children. The few children who did live here had parents with major financial struggles. I don't remember any other families that already had three children; my father had a different view of how many children were needed in order to be a family. And of the pill.

My mother called the police and carefully described the stolen radio.

"They will never find it," she said. "They won't even look very hard."

She sat down at the kitchen table and took out the radio manual. On the outside was a picture of the radio. It probably took her two hours to elaborately copy the picture and create a missing item poster. It never occurred to her to simply cut the picture from the manual and use that. We went to the shopping center and put up the missing item poster, as if the radio was a missing cat, but nobody got in touch with us.

THE ANT EXTERMINATION COMPANY HAD POISONED all the holes they could find in the dirt around the student housing area, but every morning the ants marched through our apartment in long rows. Tiny black bouncing bottoms and wagging antennas. I lined up my toy soldiers; there was a guard from the French Revolution, there was an American Pacific Ocean platoon and a chief dressed in feathers. The warriors had a foot plate so they could stand. I positioned them in a row facing the river of ants. All the soldiers took one step forward and each foot plate smashed an ant. The ant stream intensified because now they not only had to transport food but also gather their dead.

My mother stood in the crowded kitchen. My newly born little brother was on the laminated table and my mother was searching for the diaper pack. When her eyes returned to the baby, ants were crawling all over the child, an ant bottom sticking out of the little pink mouth. My mother screamed. Loudly.

My father came running from the bedroom with morning-curly hair, rubbing his crusty eyes.

“There are ants everywhere. Everywhere.”

My mother rubbed her eyes too and her whole body was shaking.

I WAS SIX years old, but I remember clearly the gray walls in the offices of the housing agency by Fridhemsplan. On the walls were drawings of the Million Program. A gray woman with a blouse talked with stiff pink lips and said that if we really wanted to live someplace better than a suburb we should go home to Egypt.

Gångsätra, Sickla and Fisksätra; red and yellow high rises with balconies and a view of forests and lakes. The gray woman called another number but my father didn't move. He raised his voice. I wondered if he was really as angry as he sounded. Back then I thought it had to do with me being a disobedient and hopeless child. Later I thought it had to do with him being an Egyptian.

He spoke.

She didn't understand him.

Then he said that he was mad at his wife who could never help when he needed somebody who spoke good Swedish. He said that he wanted to know what he must do in order to get an apartment and he said that he worked at the university, that he was a researcher and not-just-anybody. In my ears it sounded as if he was yelling. I noticed that my fat father looked different from the others who were staring in front of them with downcast eyes waiting to be denied an apartment. My father wore a beige suit jacket, a nicely ironed light blue shirt, a tie with discreet stripes, pants with a crease, polished, pointy fashionable shoes, and he was shaved. But when he spoke, he couldn't make it sound Swedish.

My father spoke loudly to those who tried to bully him, it was as if he truly didn't understand that in Sweden he was at the very bottom layer of society. Everything he had had in Egypt – money, cash, languages – was gone. I shoved one hand down my pant pocket and with the other I pulled at my father's jacket sleeve. He didn't notice me, because now he was in the

middle of the third attempt at trying to make himself understood and though he wasn't swearing, or raising his fist, the people in the room shrunk at the sound of my father's voice and his severe facial expression. The woman behind the glass pane had stopped saying that we should move to Africa. She flipped through her papers again and my father signed the contract for our move to Fisksätra.

MY GRANDFATHER SAID that Fisksätra was a typical example of socialism: building a high rise neighborhood right next to a beautiful fideicommissum like Erstavik was a premeditated kind of theft. The owner of the large forested property would lose big money because the poor people of Fisksätra would wear the woods out. The Wallenberg family certainly had had to pay when it bought Saltsjöbaden a hundred years ago. But with people inundating Fisksätra, property values for the upscale homes in Saltsjöbaden would drop; yet another way to penalize those who had saved their money and invested it in property instead of wasting it irresponsibly.

“The socialists want everybody to be equally miserable,” my grandfather said.

He and my grandmother lived in a two-bedroom apartment in upscale Östermalm, given to him by the royal family.

Our family got an apartment on the bottom floor of a high rise in Fisksätra. The building across from ours was a concrete skeleton, the apartments gaped like empty eye sockets in a skull and the paths around the building were covered with rough gravel. Large black hoses and rust-red pipes with electricity and water were out in the open. I was six years old and kicked around in the gravel, yanked at the hoses and tried to get the picture of the building across from ours and the building we lived in to merge in my head. I couldn't fathom how that skeleton could possibly turn into something like our building. I can hardly even as an adult accept that we live in piles of

molded gravel and rocks piled on top of each other. We hide the truth behind putty and plaster and words like “wall” or “floor.” It’s really just gravel and rock and wood, all of it, but we don’t want to acknowledge it.

THE FORTY-YEAR-OLD woman who lived above us came for a visit, lighting a lighter under a spoon to show us her hobby.

The plumber, who had so much chewing tobacco under his upper lip that a black trickle always ran from the corner of his mouth, went by our window every Monday on his way to the state-owned liquor store, a grocery cart full to the brim of empty cans and bottles.

The fake blonde in the building across from ours sat in her window 24/7 dressed in a white lace bra and beige underwear. Now and then she pulled the brown draperies shut.

An older boy in the building next door threw a rock that hit me so unfortunately that I had to get stitches at the improvised health clinic, housed in an apartment next to the Fisksätra Center.

WHEN I WAS A KID I woke up before everybody else. On a good day, this meant five thirty. On a bad day, four thirty. I tiptoed into the living room without waking my parents, pulled out the top drawer of the vitrine and once again, broke into the box of chocolates. It was a large white box with a dancing couple on the outside, my father had brought it from a conference in Amsterdam. Sometimes I didn’t steal anything but contented myself with smelling. Sometimes I took a piece. Sometimes two. I knew that sooner or later I would be found out. But it wouldn’t be this morning. When the box of chocolates was empty I took a spoon, opened the refrigerator and dug hard honey out of a jar. That’s how I staved off my hunger in the morning.

My father woke late, he stayed up in the evenings, writing and counting and watching television. He didn't like mornings and I knew that if I bothered my father or my mother in the morning they would be furious. Elisabeth, who was a year younger than I, was in the bed across from me with a pillow over her face. Her head with its shiny brown hair never moved until somebody woke her up.

When my mother once tried to make semlor, a tube of almond paste was accidentally left over. She didn't notice that I slipped it into my pocket. It lived under my pillow for several weeks and I didn't have to worry about being hungry because I could take a bite of almond paste. It hardened a little more every day, and in the end I had to gnaw it, like a stick of hard candy.

From the moment I woke up I listened for one sound only. The mailman shoved the morning paper through the mail slot in the door and it bounced down on the rug in the entryway. But that wasn't the sound I was listening for. From my parents' bedroom my father's snoring came echoing through the small hallway that led to our big entryway, the one with the murky aquarium. It wasn't the sound of my father's chopped-up sleep that I was listening for. What I listened for would come from the bathroom and on weekdays I would hear it around six thirty. Click. Click. Click. The clicking sound of my mother popping her pain pills out of the blister pack.

I flung the door open to mine and Elisabeth's bedroom and waited until my mother came out of the bathroom. Her black hair hung in strands and the eyes in her long face were closed. Usually she wore light beige, plush pajamas. She was still trying to keep the world out. She moved slowly, as if wading through waist-deep water in an unknown lake.

“Mother?”

She kept moving forward, her eyes still closed. Her eyelids were shut as protection against my seven-year-old voice.

“Mother!”

“Hush, don’t wake your father.”

Her gaunt body bent with each coughing spell she was trying to suppress. It looked like her bones were a size too large for her skin.

I have always been afraid that my mother would die. It started with the varicose veins. Her blood vessels were long, greenish-black snakes on her legs. The vessels were not only ugly, they were dangerous. So dangerous that they needed surgery and somebody had to come and take care of us while our mother was in the hospital and our father was counting in his office. Our mother told us that the varicose veins would rupture and then she would die, swimming in her own blood. It was just a matter of time.

Her swollen abdomen hurt. The pain pills she had taken her entire life despite the fact that they, according to her, didn’t help, had corroded her stomach and soon the blood vessels around her stomach would detonate into a bleeding ulcer and she would die, drowning in her own blood. It was just a matter of time.

Her migraines were frequent. She had tried some different medicines back in the 60s and they didn’t work. So it was meaningless to try new ones, she said.

“Doctors don’t know much. They’re just trying to sell medicines. Science hasn’t come far enough to know what to do with my headache,” she said.

My mother wrapped a wet towel around her head and nobody was allowed to bother her for two days. Maybe the migraine was a beginning tumor. Maybe the episodes would last longer and longer. One day she might go into her room with a migraine and never come out again. Just like Rudolph von Habsburg. He had a firearm, my mother had pills. It was just a matter of time.

In the evenings, when I had crawled in under the covers of my bed that stood along the book shelf, I negotiated with God.

“If somebody has to die, please let it be my father instead. Allow him into paradise, because he deserves it, right? He doesn’t like it here anyway.”

“**SEVEN TIMES NINE,**” my father said.

“Sixty-three,” I answered, quickly.

My father walked the asphalt-covered path through the woods. I bounced around next to him. A few kilometers from Fisksätra was the next suburban center, it was called Tippen and it had more and nicer stores than Fisksätra. The Tippen station was closer to Saltsjöbaden.

My mother was lying in her darkened room. My father and I were going to the pharmacy in Tippen to buy more painkillers.

When my mother called for the pills my father was at his desk. He had left his office door open, perhaps so he could hear it if my mother called. I was reading in the swivel chair in the living room and could see my father scratching himself with a pen, lifting it now and then from his frenzied formula writing. The smell of his pipe spread through the apartment. “Shenouda?”

My father did not let go of his pen but continued to throw down numbers and formulas as if he didn’t want to interrupt his train of thought.

“Shenouda?” my mother called again. My father sighed heavily, put his pipe down and went to her.

He put on his leather coat and motioned with his hand for me to come.

“Let’s go.”

“Do I have to?”

My father’s look was my answer.

I put my boots on, the ones my mother had bought from a catalogue, three sizes too big, and the hat my grandmother had knit for me and my red winter coat.

I was barely out the door before it began.

“What’s five times five?” my father said.

“Twenty-five,” I said.

As we walked through the woods, my father inundating me with numbers, we neared an older couple, they must not have been from Fisksätra because he was wearing a hat and a coat and she wore a long coat with a fur collar. They must have heard my father’s loud voice and might have been wondering why a seven-year-old needed to know the multiplication table. I could have explained to them that without an education you cannot get by in this world. And if they would have kept asking, I would have said that math is the only field of research where it doesn’t matter what language you do your research in. The numbers and the symbols are the same all over the world. If we had to flee from Sweden I would still make it if I was good at math. Then what happened to my grandfather wouldn’t happen to me. He had studied to become a Hungarian jurist and had no use whatsoever for that education in Sweden.

”What’s fourteen times fourteen?”

”But we haven’t practiced that,” I said, still busy imagining how I would explain to the old couple why I had to learn math.

The slap stung my cheek. He didn’t hit me so hard that the inside of my cheek started bleeding, but hard enough that my hat flew off. My cheeks burned, not from the slap but because I was embarrassed of my father. I didn’t dare look at the old couple but dove down for my hat and put it on more firmly.

”Think!” my father said. ”Concentrate!”

I knew that thirteen times thirteen was one hundred and sixty-nine because we had practiced that.

”Faster,” my father said.

If I added another thirteen I would get fourteen times thirteen. One hundred and sixty-nine plus thirteen is one hundred and eighty-two. But since the multiplication sign works both ways, I not only had fourteen times thirteen, I also had thirteen times fourteen. So if I added fourteen to the first answer, it should be correct.

”One hundred and ninety-five,” I said.

The slap hit me with a loud smack.

”You’re not concentrating. You must concentrate. Math is concentration.”

I tasted metal in my mouth. The inside of my cheek must have split. Wasn’t it right? I counted again.

”How is it going?” my father asked, clucking with disapproval.

It was the last part of the calculation that had gone wrong: I had been sloppy with the addition. Fourteen plus the sum of thirteen times fourteen was not one hundred and ninety-five. I swallowed the stuff trickling down inside my mouth.

”One hundred and ninety-six.”

”Good. What’s nine times eight?”

”Seventy-two.”

It took ten more minutes to get to the pharmacy. Then we had to go back home again.

”**AND THEN WE HAVE** the story about pennalism at the private school,” says the graying editor, he lifts his eyes from a piece of paper and pushes his glasses up on his forehead. ”I have no idea if we can get anything out of that. Anybody knows anything about the French school?”

Until that moment my mind has been wandering, but when the editor says French school I return abruptly. For the last three months I have traveled via Greyhound through the United States. Every night a new city, every morning a new chapter. Every new setting and every new person has redefined me. A person who travels for three months without a goal has time to think. When I stepped into the office after my long absence, reality and ordinary life washed over me. The smell of static electricity, the sound of the keyboards, the taste of bitter Swedish coffee. I was going to take it easy for a few days until I got used to being back. One of the things I realized when I traveled is that this is where I belong. In one of Sweden’s largest news offices, on television, as a reporter. That’s when I hear the editor say the words, the French school.

My mouth turns dry and I look out over the office. Twenty some reporters, photographers and editors, sipping their coffee, hawking up morning phlegm, taking notes. It’s too soon, I think. I’m not ready. In every person’s soul there are stories that must out. I have always been

afraid that the stories will escape my lips before the storyteller is ready. That the stories will be shaped so loosely that their imprint will wash away with the next wave sweeping across the sand.

”I could take it,” Ludde and I say at the same time.

Our eyes meet over the ocean of screens. He sits crooked at his desk, a few meters from the editor. His plaid wool shirt looks new. I believe I see a suppressed smile in the corner of his mouth. A smile that comes from being born on Östermalm, from having well-to-do parents, parents who inherited money, furniture and property from their parents, a smile that comes from knowing that he doesn’t need this work to make a living.

“Amadeus was first,” the editor says and nobody objects.

“Nice to have you back,” Ludde says.

The rest of the meeting disappears in an adrenalin fog. All I can think about is that I am returning to the French school. Stomach acid stings in my throat.

I know why I have to be the one to do the article about the abuse at the French school. I also know that if I explained why, I would never be allowed to do it.

“Amadeus,” Kajsa calls across the office, she dances up to me and gives me a hug. Her green eyes are perky. Her light, see-through top makes it look like she’s on her way to a party.

“You sure got a tan,” she says.

“You forget I’m half African,” I tell her and walk toward my desk.

“We have to celebrate that you’re back. You must have seen a hell of a lot.”

“I really have to work,” I say. “I have a lot of catching up to do.”

Ten minutes later I’m in the news car.

“Amadeus?” says the freelance photographer we hired, tasting my name as if it was milk from an expired carton.

“Where is somebody with a name like Amadeus from?”

“Stockholm,” I say.

We leave the television building garage and head for the French school.

“No, I mean for real.”

I put my hands in my lap.

“I was born at the general maternity hospital here in town,” I say.

“You speak Swedish really well.”

“I see..”

“Where are your parents from?” the photographer says.

“It’s a long story.”

“If you name your kid Amadeus, well then, people will wonder.”

“My mom was hoping I’d be a great piano player,” I say.

The French school has been in the same spot for more than a hundred years, across from Johannes Church and cemetery. Generations of children have looked out the windows of their school at the final destination waiting for them. The dead call out to them from their graves.

“I’d say,” the photographer says, quenching a burp, “these kids are well off.”

The light rain gives the headstones a shiny surface.

“Not all of them,” I say.

A rancid smell fills the car. I reach for the power window switch but stop: I don’t want to seem impolite.

Above the entryway it says Ecole Française. Reporters and photographers crowd in front of the closed door to the school, trying to stay out of the rain. I breathe through my mouth but am overwhelmed by the image of chewed-up sausage slowly dissolving in the photographer's stomach.

Our rivals are standing in the rain by the entry. I suggest that we wait until they take lunch.

"The kids have to go home sometime and then Expressen will get them," the photographer says.

"Nobody will talk to Expressen."

"How do you know?"

"You don't tattle. That's just how it is."

The photographer reaches into the backseat and grabs an old morning paper. He unfolds it.

Three days ago I was in New York. Three weeks ago I was in Chicago. Three months ago I landed in Vancouver. For the past months I have been on the trip I dreamt of all my life. Now here I am, in a car with a photographer, chasing news. Just like before I left. One difference: I no longer long to travel.

The school bell rings. Not a student in sight.

We see our rivals discussing something. I can almost hear them: "There's no point until they go home," "We might as well have lunch," "I have to pee."

"They're leaving," the photographer says.

The other journalists walk determinedly toward the coffee shop next to Johannes fire station, a few hundred meters from the school. I wait until they disappear through the glass doors.

“Come,” I say.

The photographer wrestles himself out of the car, the camera in the left hand and the tripod in the right. We walk quickly toward the school.

“Aren’t we going to the front door,” the photographer says when I, instead of walking toward the entry, turn right, toward an inconspicuous door leading to the building next door.

“That’s not the school, is it?” the photographer says and stops.

“This is where we’re going,” I say. My stomach flutters when I reach for the doorknob. Maybe it’s locked.

The handle goes down but the door doesn’t open.

“Locked,” the photographer says. “What’d you think?”

Waves of nausea wash over me. My fingers fold stiffly around the handle. I yank at it again. Nothing. I let go.

The photographer steps up and yanks powerfully at the handle. Nothing.

Then I remember.

“Excuse me,” I say and the photographer moves over.

I push my shoulder against the door and lift while I turn the handle down. Sighing, the door gives.

“Sesame,” I say quietly to myself.

The spiral staircase in front of us is lit. I hold the door open.

“Is that the basement?” the photographer whispers.

“It’s the library.”

We head downstairs, our steps determined. The tripod hits the railing of the spiral staircase and the metal echoes like a broken church bell. We glimpse the red door. It makes me sweat. On solid ground again. Underground.

“Wait here,” I say with all the authority I can muster.

“Should I set up? Is this where we interview?”

“If things turn out the way they’re supposed to,” I say.

He opens up the tripod. I pull the red door open.

The smell of the French school library brings feelings similar to those of being drenched by a truck in a November rain. I shrug off the feeling while I step inside. It feels so small, smaller than a classroom; possibly larger than a living room.

“Bonjour,” says a small woman behind a desk. She is wearing a nun’s veil and must be over eighty. Her wrinkled hand holds a stamp with the French school insignia. It stops in the air when she sees me.

“Bonjour Mademoiselle,” I say. “Ça va?”

“Ça va, jeune homme,” she says and her little hand stamps the inside of a book with the force of a hole punch. Thwack. I nod at the nun and continue into the other room, the reading room with the non-fiction books. The spines of the books hiss my name. The spines of the books call after me when I walk by them: “I am a story! Pass me on!”

Several tables have been pushed together like an island in the room. An island on steel legs.

The island in the room grows when I come in and I shrink. You could anchor here, I think. Even if the winds blow strong, even if you’re in a gale, you could anchor here.

The only inhabitant of the island is a ten-year-old wearing a red tie and a suit jacket; a boy with brown skin, brown eyes and frizzy hair. He starts when he hears me, as if he's about to run away. There's a surprised look on his face, he probably didn't expect anybody else to come in here.

"Hello," I say.

He looks around, even though he knows as well as I do that we're alone. He holds onto the island.

"How do you do?" he says.

His upper lip is stiff, his gaze bounces around the walls like a fly on a summer window. He flips through the book without reading the pages. A briefcase is on the floor next to him. A grownup little boy.

"I know why you're in here," I say, swallowing.

"I like to read," he says. He shows me the book.

Slowly, I take it from him, close it and put it on the island.

"I know you do," I say. "But there's another reason you're here and not out in the yard playing ball with the others."

The boy's finger moves across the surface of the island. As if looking for irregularities.

"And you and I are going to talk about that now," I say. "We're going to talk about the things they think they can do to you. We're going to talk about what happens when not even teachers tell the truth. And most of all, we're going to talk about what we can do about it."

The boy doesn't answer.

"May I sit down?"

Without waiting for a reply I sit down on a chair next to him.

The boy's eyes finally meet mine. They're wide open; he opens his mouth but not a single word comes out.

“AT FISKSÄTRA SCHOOL,” my mother said, taking a frozen hen from the freezer box, “they don't have to be quiet during class. People just talk straight out, the good students can't concentrate.”

She put water in a large pot, added a bouillon cube and three bay leaves then dropped the hen in the pot. The splash made a puddle around the burner and spotted the wallpaper by the stove. I was sitting at the kitchen table, swinging my legs and copying the New Testament into my notebook. So I would be ready when school started. Fisksätra school sat on the hill overlooking Saltsjöbanan's platform, a few minutes from where we lived. I had both heard and seen the firetrucks that were frequently called to the school.

“It's okay if it's disorderly,” my mother said, “because the students that go there don't have to learn anything, they're going to work as street cleaners anyway. And if all you're going to do is clean, you don't have to know anything. It's not difficult to clean.”

I glanced at the floor, where crumbs and dust bunnies filled the corners.

“At Fisksätra school the kids use drugs,” my mother said. “And they fight all the time. The teachers don't care about the students, they can kill each other and nobody notices.”

Our kitchen table had a wobbly leg, you had to be careful not to bump it. I was writing about how Jesus as a twelve-year-old was teaching the wise ones at the temple, while seeing in front of me how seven-year-olds at Fisksätra school were smoking cigarettes during their breaks, poking each other with syringes and chasing each other with knives.

”But I thought I was going to the French school,” I said. ”Like you did when you were a kid.”

”We don’t know if we can afford it,” my mother said, and poured salt in the pot. Now the hen would cook all day and if my mother remembered, she would cover it with water again before it boiled dry. The puddle next to the burner would partially evaporate and partially burn into the stovetop and leave yet another crust on top of the leftovers of what my mother had cooked before.

LUDDE SAUNTERS TOWARD me after the morning editorial meeting. While my sense of inferiority is noticeable in the way I keep my head lowered the opposite is true for Ludde. Today he’s wearing dirty sneakers, worn jeans and a shirt that hasn’t been ironed, but he still moves as though he’s attending the Nobel banquet.

”Cool stuff yesterday,” Ludde says. ”How did you get a hold of that kid?”

”I knew where to look,” I say, darkness grabbing at my chest.

TONIGHT I HAVE TO go somewhere with my grandfather because my mother might get a headache and my father has to be left alone to draw his three-dimensional coordinate systems.

”Why can’t she come too? I asked my mother and pointed to Elisabeth.

It was Saturday afternoon in late summer. Elisabeth was in bed with her scarf wrapped around her neck and a comic book in her hand.

”She’s too young,” my mother said, rearranging my collar.

”She’s just a year younger than me.”

”She’s no trouble,” my mother said.

I stopped talking. My grandfather, whom we were strictly forbidden to address with the second-person pronoun ”you,” didn’t like children. He said so himself. My grandfather was the only child of a sixty-year-old father and a twenty-year-old mother. He was sent off to boarding school at the age of five. Until then he had lived in their large house in Budapest, cared for by servants and without any contact with his father, whom he described as always busy.

Out of all the stories that my grandfather loved to tell, his favorite was the one about when he arrived at the boarding school. He described how all the children were screaming and running around, he thought he had ended up at a mental institution.

You could tell that my grandfather was the one ringing the doorbell, he pushed the button to the mechanical bell as if it took some reflection. When kids sometimes as a prank rang the bell and ran, it would say cling-clong. My grandfather rang it with a cling-click-clong. He kissed my mother on both cheeks and said: ”Good day, Amadeus. How do you do?” and I would reply: ”Very well, thank you, Grandfather. How is Grandfather?”

He was bald on top, my grandfather, with shocks of white hair on both sides. His cheeks hung down, it made him look like a bloodhound. A bloodhound with a constantly questioning look in its eyes as if it had been shown a meaty bone a long time ago and was still wondering when he’d get it.

My grandfather and I were sitting on Saltsjöbanan’s commuter train.

”Today we’re going to see one of the foremost operettas in the word,” my grandfather said. ”It’s from a time when the melody and the lyrics were the most essential in all forms of performed musique,” he continued, and the teenager in the seat next to ours turned his head to see who my grandfather was talking to. When he saw that it was a kid who had probably not

even started school yet, he stared at my ironed black pants, my tie and my polished shoes. I didn't dare look at him, but as my grandfather's sentences grew longer and longer, I noticed out of the corner of my eye how he picked at his faded jeans. He couldn't know that my grandfather's way of interacting with children was to treat them like very short adults.

On this summer night, with low-hanging clouds looming above us, Park Theater was showing *The Riviera Girl*.

We sat down on the benches that had been set up and my grandfather placed the bag with the picnic food we had brought from home underneath. We never ate at a restaurant. Not because he couldn't afford it but because he had once lost all his money and wanted to make sure that that never happened again. That is also why we sat outside to see this operetta instead of, for example, inside the Oscar Theater; the Park Theater was free. My grandfather always brought tea in a thermos, sandwiches with liverwurst and cucumbers, and egg sandwiches with anchovies. He also usually brought an egg for me, boiled separately. He took out a blanket and draped it across our legs.

That's how I would sit during the entire performance.

"The very best operettas are made by Hungarians," my grandfather said. "It's the Hungarian blood. Emmerich Kálmán who wrote this one, he and Franz Lehár were the best. Unfortunately, Kálmán had to flee Hungary, a grand man was lost to our country."

"Oh," I said, hoping my grandfather would pull out the picnic lunch soon because I was hungry. "What time is it?" I asked.

My grandfather lifted his arm slowly, he never made a sudden move, and looked at his wrist watch.

"It's another half hour before the performance begins."

I understood that there was a certain risk that my grandfather would begin telling long stories about operettas in Budapest during the 1920s, so I asked why the composer had to flee. Surely a man in flight would be exciting.

“He was Jewish. And the Nazis persecuted Jews.”

I knew what Nazis were. I had seen them on television.

“A Jewish man came to our door when the persecutions were at their very worst,” my grandfather said. “When he knocked on the door to our palace right outside Budapest he had no idea that we lived there.”

I heard on his tone of voice that this could be a long story. “The Jewish man had thrown himself off the crammed train headed toward what the Germans referred to as a work camp. The young man, with short legs and a long upper body, was a medical student. He didn’t for a second believe that the camp was a work camp – rumors had been circulating for years about what was really going on – so when he managed to open up a small crack in the train car he didn’t hesitate for a second.”

My grandfather looked straight at me, as if considering whether or not to continue his story.

“Maybe you’re too young to hear about things like this,” he said, looking at his watch. Still twenty minutes to go.

I shook my head.

“Oh well,” he said. “I might as well tell you so you know. The young Jew squeezed his way out. He flew through the air and hit some tall bushes growing along the rail. He rolled several times down a hillside then came to a complete stop. He had hurt his shoulder badly against a rock and had gotten a cut on his forehead. He hoped that the soldiers who had seen him

tumble off the train would think that one of their colleagues had dumped a dead body. Considering the number of people crammed into each car, this wasn't unlikely. The train thundered on without anybody noticing that one of its passengers was now fighting for another future than the one that the Third Reich had had in mind for him. The young man crept on all fours, crawled under the barbed wire that surrounded the railroad and started walking. That is how he arrived at our little palace. It had two wings and an orangery. The orangery was..."

"But what happened to the Jewish man?" I knew that if my grandfather started talking about the buildings, he would never stop, buildings and furniture and paintings and wall-hangings, he could talk about that forever.

"Oh well, then. By the way, the orangery was destroyed by bombs during the war. But if it hadn't been, some communist might have been sitting in my orangery drinking vodka right now. Very well, the young Jew was hungry, thirsty and bleeding. If he had known who we were he would probably have kept going. Your grandmother was home alone, except for the maids and the kitchen staff. All the men had been called up. I was at the military base. She had just turned eighteen. We were newly married."

Even though I wanted to know more about the Jewish man it was pointless to try to interrupt him. The story about his marriage, like the story about when he arrived at the boarding school, was one of his recurring favorites.

"She was eleven years younger than I. Some said that she, royal princess and archduchess of the Habsburg dynasty, would not have been allowed to marry a – in their eyes – simple Italian-Hungarian prince, if it wouldn't have been for the war." My grandfather gave a lopsided smile. "She was one of eight siblings and her parents gratefully accepted my proposal, since they

thought that I could protect her; the Red Army might sweep into Hungary at any moment.” He paused and straightened the picnic bag.

Your grandmother walked slowly toward the sound of the knocking on the door. The other women didn’t dare open. Even though the Nazis had respect for the imperial double-headed eagle, it might be drunk soldiers or a dispatch, there to announce that I had died in a bomb attack. She walked through the hallways, in the room to the left I had put an Empire style chair upholstered in blue, it had once been at Versailles, its left foot had a slight defect and next to it was a picture that I bought in Paris, of our ancestor...”

“What happened to Grandmother?”

My grandfather closed his mouth as if torn between telling a story about the past that I actually seemed interested in and talking about his long lost furniture and paintings.

“In the hallways were paintings of our ancestors; cardinals, kings and emperor and – as you have probably already forgotten – our remarkable relative Pope Innocent the eleventh.”

More and more people began arriving for the Park Theater’s performance and my grandfather lowered his voice. He kept talking and I heard from the way he spoke - it sounded like he was reading - that what he said might actually have been written down in one of his many journals and he was now retelling his writing from memory.

“Your grandmother opened the door carefully. Outside stood a man with his entire life in his eyes. On the chest of his torn coat was the yellow Star of David. It had not occurred to him to tear it off. Your grandmother looked at him and did what she has done all her life. She did it without thinking. She followed her heart. She led him up in the attic and pointed to a couch and said he could live there.”

My grandfather shook his head as if he still, many decades after the end of the war, could not believe what had happened.

“You can imagine what I thought when I got home. Suddenly we were hiding Jews. We would be shot on the spot if it was discovered.”

“Were the Nazis mean to you too?” I said.

“We never had any problems with the Nazis,” my grandfather said.

“Was Grandfather a Nazi too?”

It wasn't until many years later that I understood the scope of my question. Hungary had been friendly toward the Nazis, like Sweden. My grandmother's noble family had many Nazis. A few of them had worked closely with Hitler. Considering my grandfather's background as an officer in the military and my grandmother's family, it wouldn't have been surprising if my mother's parents were Nazis or at least Nazi sympathizers.

My grandfather turned away from me and I saw on his face that he considered my question ignorant.

“I have never been a socialist,” he burst out, emphatically.

“A socialist?” I said, thinking he had misheard me.

He never admitted to bodily ailments, if my mother asked how his eye surgery went, he pretended not to hear it. In his opinion, it was impolite to talk about your body. I knew from experience that his hearing was bad on one ear, he might not have heard me.

“I said *Nazi*,” I said, a little louder.

“Nazi is short for National Socialist,” my grandfather said. “They were a socialist party and it would never occur to me to sympathize with socialists. It was a party for the middleclass.”

“Did they discover that you had hidden a Jewish man?”

My grandfather's face perked up.

"I was totally petrified," he said. "I wanted to send him away, but your grandmother refused. So I said we had to pretend that he was our servant."

My grandfather's hands were resting in his lap and he turned his palms up and shrugged his shoulders as if he wanted to show how powerless he had been in the face of his young wife's conviction.

"But the Nazis arrived," he said. "A group of German soldiers came driving in a large noisy Mercedes that left deep muddy tracks on the lawn in front of our palace. They lined up and their officer nodded at an adjutant who went and knocked on the door. They weren't kept waiting, because everybody knew what it meant when a truckload of Germans came knocking. A well-dressed man in light colored clothing and white gloves opened. The officer probably took a second look at the servant. Then your grandmother entered the room. She had irresistible blue eyes, long flowing black hair and a proud stature that emphasized her exquisite chest. She was an incredibly beautiful woman. Maybe the most beautiful woman in all of Hungary. The Jewish butler served tea to the Germans and the gray-clad soldiers consumed a large portion of our ration. The Germans should have asked why a young man who didn't seem to have any physical ailments was not at the front, doing his duty. They should have asked to see his papers. But they didn't. They just conversed politely with the kind archduchess. It would have been absurd to even suspect that a Habsburger would have a Jewish man as a servant."

My grandfather shook his head at the memory.

A sound came from the Park Theater's low stage. Somebody was testing the microphones.

“I got in touch with a network that smuggled Jews to America. One night the cook packed some food and when I wasn’t paying attention your grandmother gave him a gold necklace.”

“Grandmother gave away gold?” I said.

My grandfather rolled his eyes as if this was beyond his comprehension too.

“Your grandmother gives everything away. Sometimes I’ve considered locking things up.” He paused. “But now, in retrospect, I think it was a beautiful thing to do. She knew there is no wall so tall that a donkey with gold can’t get over it.”

“Was Grandfather angry that Grandmother gave the gold away?”

He sighed and his shoulders sunk a little: “Yes, yes, I was angry. Your grandmother is a good person, but back then I thought she wasn’t being practical. And the worst thing is that my anger was wasted because a few months later we had to leave everything behind and flee with nothing more than a knapsack. If you think about it, I might as well have given him my paintings too. Then they wouldn’t have been ruined by the bombs. Hush, it’s starting.”

He put his finger in front of his mouth.

“What happened to the Jewish man?” I asked.

My grandfather frowned and put his finger in front of his mouth again and I knew we had to pay attention. While I listened to the musical story about a prince from Vienna falling in love with a Hungarian opera singer, I thought about what my grandfather had told me. During intermission my grandfather brought out the food from the picnic bag and I was so hungry I forgot to ask what happened to the disguised butler.

From pages 109-115:

MY MOTHER TOLD ME to pay careful attention to my mother-in-law, that way I would know what my future wife would look like when she got old. She told me this when I was in elementary school. And, as with all her advice, repeated it frequently. It still echoes in my head: “If you think her mother is nice and beautiful, then you have made a good decision. But if you don’t like her – remember that everybody eventually turns into their parents. *Everybody!*”

The high rise in Högdalen is speckled and the color of ochre. Petra holds onto my hand, as if she’s afraid that I am going to try to escape; she pushes the elevator button with her index finger. It doesn’t light up, but I can hear the elevator coming.

“You don’t have to worry,” she says. “They’re happy I’ve found a good man.”

“I’m glad you want to show me off,” I say.

We take the elevator to the fourth floor. A brown door with a carefully handwritten note: NO ADVERTISING, PLEASE. So, one of her parents has nice handwriting. Petra’s round, slightly childish writing may not stay like that forever. Or maybe our generation has just lost the ability to write by hand. Or maybe my mother was wrong and we are not predestined to turn into our parents. Or that was something that happened to people in the past, when parents were the only adult role models.

The woman who opens the door is dressed in a pink polo shirt and blue pants. It’s obvious that she’s Petra’s mother. And despite the fact that it’s been a long time since I stopped believing what my mother said to me, I start paying attention to the similarities. They have the same small nose, they’re the same height and I think they have the same body type. Petra weighs seventy kilos – when she told me, she looked as if she thought it would scare me off - and Petra’s

mother looks to be over a hundred. Her forehead is shiny and when she sees me she smiles and says: “You must be Amadeus.”

“Hello,” I say, holding out my hand.

Petra’s mother grabs it and squeezes. “Barbro.”

“I’m sorry, my hands are a little wet,” she says. “I was cooking.”

“Oh well, oh well,” comes a deep voice from inside the apartment, but nobody comes out.

“Let’s go in there,” Petra says and her tense lips and her voice tell me she’s uncomfortable. Petra has a pleasant and warm voice, far from the forced falsetto so common among my stressed colleagues, but today, around her parents, it has shot up half an octave.

“Welcome, come on in,” Barbro says and I take my shoes off.

Petra’s dad is still nowhere to be seen.

“Do you want something to drink?” A voice from the kitchen.

“Come out here and say hello first,” Barbro says.

A loud noise, it sounds like a chair falling, and then the kitchen door swings open. A man in a tight suit with a goatee and a ponytail, flies forward and grabs my hand.

“Hello, hello,” he says, bowing. “Evald.”

I can’t decide if he exaggerates his bows to lighten up the situation, or if he’s serious.

“Hello,” I say. I bow too.

“Well then,” Evald says. “Maybe now I may offer you something.”

He squints and I recognize the movement from Petra. That’s how she looks when she wonders if she’s said something wrong.

“Do you drink alcohol?” Barbro says.

Evald's eyes look just like Petra's.

"What would you like? Beer, wine? We have whiskey too."

"I'll have whatever you're having," I say.

Evald returns to the kitchen and we follow, he takes the ice cubes from the freezer and bangs them against the kitchen sink so several cubes end up on the floor. He takes down two glasses and pours something green from a pitcher that he retrieves from the refrigerator. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a painting on the kitchen wall, a naked woman.

"Let's see how you like this," Evald says.

"What about me?" Petra says and Evald startles, takes down another glass, grabs the ice cubes off the floor and rinses them under cold water before he plops them into the glass that he gives Petra.

"Daaad," Petra says.

"I think I'll just have some wine instead," Barbro says, takes a wine glass, opens the refrigerator and pours from a bag-in-box.

"I guess I'll just say cheers and welcome to the family," Evald says, lifting his glass.

I raise my glass.

We drink, quietly.

"What is it?" I ask.

"You don't have to pretend to like it," Petra says.

"It's cool that you make your own juice," I say.

"It's kale. And flax seeds," Evald says and takes another mouthful from the glass. "What do you do?"

"I'm a journalist," I say.

I feel strangely removed. Here I am, welcomed into the family, but instead of participating, I'm just watching. I feel like I'm stuck on the outside, even though I've been invited inside.

"But Dad, you already know that."

He takes another mouthful of green juice from the already half-empty glass.

"It sounds like an interesting job," Barbro says. "But difficult to make a living. Tough competition, right?"

"All good jobs are difficult," Evald says. "Don't you agree?"

Barbro moves to the stove and stirs one of the pots. "I was going to be a journalist too," she says. "Then I realized I wanted to work with people."

"Amadeus works with people," Petra says. "He interviews people all day."

"What did you do instead?" I ask.

"Socionom," Evald says. "She works for the county."

"Say it like it is," Barbro says. "I'm a social worker."

"Then you really get to meet people," I say, but I cut myself off when the doorbell rings.

"Did you invite somebody else?" Petra says, she adds, lowering her voice. "I thought it would be just us."

"Nobody at all," Petra's dad says.

"I'll get it," Petra's mom says, heading for the front door.

"Honey, how nice to see you! What a surprise!"

Barbro's sharp voice carries into the kitchen. Evald refills his glass from the pitcher with the green stew.

Anneli walks in.

“What are you doing here?” Petra says and her voice rises another half octave.

“I was in the area,” Anneli says. Her eyes fly around, then, for a nanosecond, get stuck on her mother who is staring fixedly into her wine glass.

“Lucky that we have enough food,” Evald says. “Wine?”

“I’ll set the table for one more,” Barbro says.

I notice that there are already five plates on the table.

“Amadeus is on television,” Anneli says and takes some white wine from the box in the refrigerator.

“I made leek and potato soup,” the mom says, whipping the ladle around.

“More health?” the dad says, waving the pitcher around.

“How long are you in town for?” Petra asks her sister.

“Just today and tomorrow. A work conference.”

“It’s vegetarian,” Barbro says about her soup.

“Nice,” I say. “It smells really good.”

“Is it because you’re Catholic that you don’t eat meat?” Evald says. “I don’t like meat either.”

“Excuse me?” I say.

“Well, the fact that you’re a vegetarian.”

“I’m not a vegetarian,” I say, looking at Petra.

Evald looks at her, then at his wife.

“He’s not a vegetarian,” Evald says.

“That was the other one. You’re mixing them up,” Anneli says. “This one eats meat.”

She turns to me: “We’re so happy that you like Petra. Her old boyfriend was totally hopeless.”

“Anneli!” Petra says.

“This family is very open,” Anneli says. “He was a real loser. I swear he went out with Petra because of her big boobs.”

“Anneli, please!” Petra says.

Evald drinks from his juice and Barbro stirs the soup faster.

I listen to their voices, follow the dialogue that bounces between them and I can’t understand the subtext. Or the topic. What’s going on?

“So you’re on television,” Barbro says.

“He’s on television all the time,” Petra’s sister says. “He was on yesterday. And the day before.”

“Then you have a lot of groupies,” Evald says.

“*Evald*,” Petra’s mom says.

“I’m sorry. We’re just trying to get to know each other here. You don’t mind, do you?”

“You live close to the subway,” I say. “That must be convenient.”

“We got tired of living downtown. Too much pollution,” Barbro says.

“And too expensive,” Evald says. “What kind of journalism have you done?”

“He did a really nice piece on the French school,” Anneli says. “There was this little kid, an incredibly cute little guy, who got beat up every day.”

“Maybe he can answer for himself,” Barbro says.

“I’m a general reporter,” I say.

“Journalism is a good job,” Evald says. “You can make a difference.”

Barbro tastes the soup. "I think it's done. Please sit down."

"How do you like the painting?" Anneli says and points to the wall.

I turn and look more carefully at the watercolor, the one I noticed when I walked in. It's a picture of a naked woman and now I see that she's lying at a peculiar angle and that what I thought was a pet next to her thigh is her hairy pubic area. I don't know what I'm supposed to say.

"A little unexpected in a kitchen," I say.

"But how do you like it?" Anneli persists.

"It's very lifelike," I say.

"Dad painted it," Petra says.

"Ah," I say.

"It is lifelike," Evald says. "She looked just like that."

"I really don't understand why it has to hang in the kitchen," Barbro says.

"We're open to everything in this family, but that one is a little controversial. You get to say that, right?"

"Art should provoke," Evald says.

I shiver.

"It's embarrassing, Dad," Petra says. "And it's especially embarrassing when Klasse is here."

"Klasse?" I say.

"Our neighbor," Barbro says.

"That's his wife in the picture," Anneli says.

“Here, have some soup,” Barbro says. “How long did you say you’ve been working as a journalist?”

“Almost ten years,” I say.

“What? How old are you?” Evald slams his juice glass down.

“I’m thirty,” I say.

His facial expression darkens.

“What did you say? Thirty?”

“Dad, please,” Petra says. “I’m not fourteen. I’m twenty-seven.”

Evald wipes his forehead with a napkin, wrestles his way out of his jacket and smiles shyly. “Sorry, that’s right. I forgot.”

I’m just about to open my mouth to try to make my way into the conversation when a new thought pops up. I dismiss it immediately, because it feels far-fetched. It returns. Is it possible that they’re just nervous, that that is the explanation for their behavior? This entire time I’ve been thinking that I’m the one being appraised, that I’m the one to be evaluated. Maybe that’s what’s given me this sense of alienation. Their love for Petra is obvious, it transcends the contrived conversation, it seeps through the forced tone. Maybe they’re worried. They should be worried, worried about who this strange person who might be hanging around for years might be. And they may also be worried about what I think of them. Worried about what I may turn out to mean for Petra’s relationship with them. They might be worried about losing her.

I start seeing them in another light, I see a family that, despite Petra’s cancer, has still managed to give her a sense of security and the confidence that I have longed for myself. I see a family that has stuck together and that wants to stick together. It’s not surprising that I don’t recognize it, that I don’t understand it, even when it’s right in front of me.

When I finally open my mouth, there is a note of timid affection in my voice.

From pages 282-293:

ON THE DAY MY father died clouds were piling up above the orange high rises. I was about to turn eleven. The dirty ice in the asphalt-covered yard reflected the light from the street lamps with a matted shimmer. The few lamps not broken by somebody kicking at the base or throwing rocks at the top lit up the darkness that would last well into the morning on this dove-gray winter day. For those of us who lived on the bottom floor it felt like the compact cloud padding was nature putting a compress on the wound of gravel that people had dug and on the rocks they had piled on top of each other.

“Amadeus,” my father called out in the apartment around nine o’clock this Sunday in March. “Do you want to come to church?”

I had been up for a long time, read the morning paper and waited for permission to eat breakfast. When I heard my father I quickly jumped into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin so he wouldn’t see that I was dressed. There was a click from the door, I kept my eyes shut tightly when my father looked in on me and saw that his son, the son who always woke up between five and six in the morning, was still fast asleep at nine. I didn’t want to sit there on Saltsjöbanan’s commuter train and tell him the answer to seventy-six times fifty-six. I didn’t want to come up with the right formula for figuring out the sum of

n

$\sum_{k=1}^{n} k=1+2+3+\dots+n$

$k=1$

I didn't want to risk a slap if I said the wrong thing. I especially didn't want somebody else on the subway, or anywhere else, see me getting hit.

Seconds passed. My mother was in bed and would probably not get up for a few hours. If I could escape the church visit I would probably have a nice quiet morning. Elisabeth was sleeping in her bed on the other side of the room. And she really was asleep, because she knew: if you sleep you're off the hook. She wore her thick scarf wound around her neck.

“Do you want to come to church?”

I don't know how long my father stood there looking at me and I don't know what he was thinking. Did he ever wonder why we never wanted to be with him? Did he ever wonder why we were afraid of him? Didn't he long for us to love him? Didn't he long for us to bounce up and want to follow him wherever he went?

How did he feel this morning when he asked me if I wanted to come with him? And why did he ask me? Was it because he was feeling bad because he hadn't been drilling me hard enough with my math skills? Was it to make life easier for my mother who was sick in bed again? Was it because he felt he should take me to church so I would become a good Christian?

I turned, pushed my face against the pillow and sighed as if I was sleeping. The door closed again and I heard him put on his old-fashioned yellow faux fur coat and reach for the black fur hat on the hat shelf. He never got used to the cold weather in Sweden.

Then the front door closed and I heard his steps outside the door, then across the yard and I knew I had won a few hours of freedom. Mother was too sick to bother and Father was gone. Now nobody would tell me what to do. Now I could read in bed and be like any ten-year-old and I could read any book I wanted. I read *The Count of Monte Cristo* and I read it for the tenth time

and nobody came into my room and told me I should read it in French, nobody came in and said I had math problems to solve and nobody came in and said I should be outside to get some fresh air. I don't know how I got breakfast, perhaps my mother got up at some point, or maybe I made my own breakfast with the bread and butter we had. I remember that I missed my grandmother and her food.

Every once in a while when my father decided to go to church, he changed his mind halfway to the station. So I stood by the window with the view of the bridge to the commuter train and watched the short round man stroll across the cement bridge and down to the train platform.

My life would be so much better if my father didn't exist. Much easier to have breakfast, or come home from school, or do my homework, if it weren't for that angry disappointment hovering over us.

My father would take the subway alone to Karlaplan and walk across the icy streets to a building that might have looked like an office if it weren't for the arched entryway. There he took his hat off, nodded hello to the priest and with water from the baptismal font, made the sign of the cross, genuflecting briefly. He didn't pick up a red hymnal to bring with him, but went and sat on the fourth bench in the row next to the westernmost wall of the church. At the very front of that row, next to the sanctuary, was a separate altar with a statue of the Virgin Mary. If the train had left on time and the subway had not been delayed, my father would have arrived at the very moment the priest used the wooden stick to hang the bronze numbers that showed which hymns the congregation would sing. My father put his hat next to him on the light blue church bench and went down on his knees. As opposed to the rest of the congregation he spent most of Mass kneeling. And he blew his nose.

As long as I can remember, my father blew his nose. I suppose that the medical explanation was that his many years as a smoker had destroyed the cilia in his throat that would otherwise have gotten rid of the tar and other residue from the burnt tobacco. Every day my father expelled thick, green lumps of phlegm. In my parents' bedroom, where my father sneezed in his sleep, I sometimes slipped on the floor on such lumps or saw traces of dried phlegm on the closet wall. When he was awake and the sneezes didn't take him by surprise he'd take out one of his white, ironed cloth handkerchiefs with a green or blue border, draw a deep breath and trumpet out a cascade of snot into the handkerchief. First he squeezed both nostrils so they vibrated together. Each time my father would take out his handkerchief my cheeks heated up because I knew we only had seconds to go before everybody's eyes would be upon us. When he'd finished clearing both nostrils, he folded that part of the handkerchief, opened up another fold and progressed to solo blows; he treated his large Pharaohic nose as a musical instrument, playing first one nostril then the other. My father probably blew his nose at church a few times and whoever was unlucky enough to sit close to him, maybe deep in prayer, might well have believed that this was the coming of the angels, heralded by the fat little Egyptian in the fourth row.

The Mass that my father attended a few hours before he died was conducted in French. At ten o'clock, the door to the sacristy opened and a man with a limp, a head of rich black hair and an even richer voice strode in through the middle aisle, between the fifty or so members of the congregation that regularly attended Sunday Mass. Catholics from all over Sweden were said to make pilgrimages to hear Raymond Crochet, the singing priest. My mother said God had given the priest his beautiful voice to compensate for his limp.

Maybe the nausea started while my father was attending Mass. The pain might have gotten worse during the commuter train ride. The only thing I know for certain is that he could not possibly have understood the seriousness of his condition, because then he would not have stood outside our door around eleven thirty.

When my father was at church I stayed in bed, reading. Elisabeth had woken up, untangled herself from her scarves and her double shirts and gotten out of bed. Our mother was still in her room and Leopold was in his crib in my mother and father's bedroom. I had to pee and since I had forgotten that my father had gone to the ten o'clock Mass, I didn't check the time before I opened the door to my room to sneak out to the bathroom. If I had checked I would have realized that my father might get home around that time and then I would have waited in my room until he had gotten situated in either his office or the bedroom. As it were I was standing in the middle of the entryway next to the phone when the front door flew open. I took one step toward my door, but stopped when I saw my father's swaying body.

The first thing that occurred to me was that his forehead was sweaty. It wasn't a normal sweat, not the sweat that came from biking with us, and it wasn't the sweat that came from stress, the kind that made his forehead shiny. This was another kind of sweat, a sweat that poured from his forehead and glued his hair to his head despite the fact that the oily Nivea had been washed out. He was holding his fur hat in his hand and his curls had not bounced back up, they were flat waves on his head and he was staring right past me. He stepped out of his black, pointy leather shoes and dropped his thick, yellow winter coat, the one that made him look like a tree stump, straight down. I knew something was wrong because I had never seen him that sweaty before. He looked focused, but he still didn't seem to see me. He opened the door to the bedroom. He said he didn't feel good, my mother came out – still wearing her pajamas.

“You look completely done for,” she said when she saw my father, her shoulders slumped and her head lowered as she took in this new trial.

“Go to bed and I’ll get you a pain pill.”

She went to the kitchen, then the bathroom, I heard how she rustled with her medicines to find something less strong than what she usually took herself. My father and I were still standing in the entryway. I stared at him and he stared back. There was something deeply troubled over him, as if he was carrying something incredibly heavy on his back. He looked harried and I had never seen my father harried before. This last Sunday he stood across from me looking like he had been slapped by a giant. I understood, and I think he understood it too, that this was not a regular fever spike. It was not a nasty flu or an unexpected cold. It was something entirely different. He went into the bedroom. I heard my mother follow. I went to the bathroom and while I peed my father managed to get out of his church clothes, pull on his light blue pajamas and sit down on the bed to read the paper.

“Dear God,” I said. “Please don’t let him be sick so he can’t go to Yugoslavia.”

I came out of the bathroom and was on my way to my room when I heard a bang, the loudest bang I’d heard in my entire life. I rushed into the bedroom and saw my father lying with his head on the floor and his body still on the bed. His eyes were closed and his pajamas had gotten bunched up. My mother was on her knees on the bed with the newspaper he had just started reading and she screamed out loud, a sharp pleading sound that I had never heard before.

“Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.”

She was slapping him on the back with the newspaper.

“Out, out,” she screamed and I fled. But first I saw Leopold standing up in his crib, his pale blue eyes nailed to the large body that lay twisted, draped over the bed and the floor. The

five-year-old was holding onto the top rail as if his crib was a ship in a storm. My mother pushed me out in front of her and slammed the door behind us. Not a sound could be heard from the room where my father was. My mother started tearing through the apartment, she pulled her hair until long, black strands came out and cried “Oh God. Oh God.” I stayed in the entryway. When he saw my mother tearing around, Felix came to life, maybe thinking that she wanted to play, and he followed her around jumping and bouncing. He barked and howled, howled and barked. The large black German Shepard and the screaming woman.

When my mother had run to the other end of the apartment she turned and ran back again. She caught sight of me and pointed at me with a trembling finger: “Pray!” she screamed.

“PRAY!”

I didn’t pray. I turned around and lifted the gray telephone receiver with its coiled cord and dialed the numbers on the number plate.

“Emergency room,” said a woman with a tired voice.

“Hi,” I said.

I gave her our telephone number. Then I told her our address. She listened.

I heard my mother from the living room. She was still screaming that same word.

“It’s my father,” I said.

“What happened?”

“He collapsed. He may not be breathing. We need an ambulance.”

My mother should get dressed, I thought. She’s still wearing her pajamas.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll send one.”

Then she hung up.

I stared at the phone and saw Elisabeth standing next to me.

“Don’t go in there,” I said when she moved toward the closed door.

“Is he dead?” Elisabeth asked.

“Our little brother is still in there, should we get him out?”

“Where would we put him?”

We looked at our mother who was still running around between the rooms in the apartment as if she was a bird accidentally lost among humans. She bounced against walls and windows and then, disheveled, fumbled her way on through the rooms.

“The ambulance is coming,” I said.

She stared at me and screamed that it was God’s punishment, that’s what it was. It was God’s punishment for our deeds. Elisabeth went into our bedroom and came back out with the thick scarf wrapped around her neck.

“We have to lock up the dog,” I said. “Otherwise he’ll bite the ambulance people.”

I reached up as far as I could and got the leash down. Felix had continued chasing after our mother but when he saw me with the leash he trotted up to me, he thought we were going outside. I leashed him and even though he pulled toward the front door, I managed to drag him into the kitchen and slammed the door shut behind him. I got the key and turned the lock. He jumped and barked and scratched at the door, but we didn’t open.

“Shouldn’t the ambulance be here by now?”

I looked at my watch, it had been ten minutes since I called, maybe more.

“Hello,” I said after dialing the number again. “I’m the one who called for an ambulance a few minutes ago. Where is it?”

“It’s on its way,” said a man’s voice. It sounded nice and a little concerned. “What’s going on there?”

“My father’s in the bedroom. He’s not moving and I don’t know if he’s breathing.”

“God’s punishment,” my mother yelled when she came by. I heard her voice failing her, there was a squeaky sound as if her vocal chords didn’t want to make the sounds that her body wanted them to make.

I covered the phone receiver so he wouldn’t hear her. If they thought we were crazy then maybe they wouldn’t come.

“Is your mother there?” said the man on the phone.

“Wait,” I said and held out the receiver to my mother. “It’s the hospital,” I said.

She stared at the phone as if it was a knife pointed at her and backed away from me and Elisabeth.

“She can’t talk,” I said. “But you can talk to Elisabeth if you want to.”

Elisabeth shook her head and waved with both hands.

“Your older sister?”

“She’s nine.”

The phone was quiet.

“Hello,” I said. “Are you coming soon?”

“We’ll be there as soon as we can. I’ll talk to the ambulance and tell them to hurry up.”

When the ambulance finally arrived it was without blinking lights and screaming sirens. It didn’t come speeding, and it didn’t take the turns on two wheels. The wide flat hood and the high rear floated slowly into our yard. The ambulance was back in the suburb again. I hung over the balcony railing, waving energetically. Whoever was driving must not have seen me. The car slowed down at every street number, as if to make sure it hadn’t gone a centimeter too far. I threw my shoes on.

“I’m going to get the ambulance,” I said to Elisabeth who was on her back, motionless, staring at the ceiling.

Out the door of our apartment, then the front door of the building. I ran across ice, gravel and asphalt. When I reached the ambulance, I went up to the driver’s side. The two people in the car were looking at each other, not me. I knocked on the window.

The person closest to me, a young man with a thin beard-circle around his mouth and a beginning double chin, looked at me. His face showed no emotion. I knocked on the window again. He looked at his friend. The car stopped. The window came down a centimeter.

“That’s where you’re going,” I said, pointing to our building. “That’s where he is.”

“You’re the one who called us,” the one in the other seat said.

From where I stood I couldn’t see that far in, I just heard the voice.

“It’s my father,” I said. “He collapsed.”

Maybe it was the way I said it or the look on my face. Because now the ambulance drove straight to the building. I ran alongside it. Windows opened in the high rise. Somebody called:

“What happened?”

The man with the circle beard, the one who drove the car, got out first. Then came his colleague, who was a head shorter, with hair to his shoulders, thick glasses and white shoes. The two men closed and locked the front doors of the ambulance and walked toward the rear. They turned the handles down and opened the back doors wide.

When I opened the front door of our building I noticed a large puddle of vomit on the ground next to it. It was fresh and I realized that it must be my father’s. He might have been fighting nausea the entire way home on the train. He might have thrown up several times on his

way home. I held the door open for them when they came with the gurney. Elisabeth met us in the doorway. From the kitchen came barking. The men stopped.

“The dog’s been locked up,” I said. “With a key.”

Elisabeth looked at the two men walking inside. They looked back.

“Hello,” said the one with the circle beard.

“Hello,” she said.

They opened the door to the narrow hallway. They had to fold the gurney to fit.

I went in the living room to find my mother. She was sitting on the couch with her hands folded and she was still wearing her pajamas.

“They’re here,” I said.

“What took so long?” she said.

“They must have gotten lost,” I said. I didn’t want her to know how slowly they had been driving, or how uninterested they had seemed by yet another emergency visit to our neighborhood. I sank down on the couch next to her and waited.

I heard them knocking around in the room where my father lay.

“Grab here and lift,” one of them said.

“Oh.”

Thud.

“What the hell. You can’t just let go like that.”

“Let’s try again.”

“One and two...”

Quiet.

I heard the rustle of something. A stethoscope?

And then one of the voices: “There’s a kid in here.”

Suddenly they were in our living room. Their shoulders were slumped and they were looking at each other. The longhaired one sat down next to my mother. A longhaired, blond man in an ambulance uniform sitting next to a pajama-clad woman with unkempt black hair. She didn’t look at him, her eyes were stubbornly stuck on a spot somewhere by the window.

“There was nothing we could do,” he said.

“It must have been quick,” said the other ambulance driver and looked at our blue-patterned living-room rug.

“It probably didn’t hurt.”

My mother was still staring in front of her.

“Oh well,” said the one with the circle beard.

“Right,” said the one with the long hair. “I’m sorry.”

He stood up.

“Sorry for your loss,” said the circle beard and started backing up.

My mother’s eyes moved, gained focus.

“Where are you going?” she said.

“There is nothing else we can do.”

“But he’s still in there,” my mother said.

“Maybe you want to say goodbye,” said one of the ambulance drivers.

“You have to take him with you.”

The two men in overalls looked at each other.

“You have to take him with you,” my mother said.

“I’m sorry but we don’t transport... that is... we only move people who are on their way to the hospital.”

“Take him to the hospital then.”

“He’s not going to the hospital,” the other one said, licking his lower lip. “He’s already dead. You’ll have to call a car to take him to the morgue.”

“You can’t leave him here.”

One of the men looked at his wristwatch.

“We’re not allowed to move him in the ambulance,” the other one said. “And he’s very heavy.”

My mother stood up and looked at the men, first one, then the other.

“He cannot stay here, you must take him with you.”

I looked out the window, into our street. Despite the cold, despite the ice, many of those who were usually hanging around but had been inside for the past few days, had gotten their coats and hats and mittens on and were standing around the ambulance to find out what had happened.

Through the front door came first one of the ambulance men, the one with the circle beard. His arms were stretched tight by his sides and you could tell it was difficult to carry the gurney. Thereafter came the gurney and on it, what had once been my father. They had not covered him, not even his face, they had not rearranged his clothes, I saw my father lie there on the gurney as if carelessly thrown into a grave. His pajamas were twisted, and one of his arms was bent in a strange angle. The curious people around the ambulance leaned over to see better. One of the dark-haired ones made the sign of the cross. My father was barefoot and the orange ambulance blanket was bunched up by his feet. His eyes were closed and had it not been for the

unnatural angle of his arm and the fact that he was outside in below zero weather, it would have looked as if he was sleeping. The doors to the ambulance were shut.

The car started and the people standing around moved over. I pulled the shades to my room and went out in the entryway. The front door was still open. I closed and locked it. Then I let the dog out.

“Who’s going to walk you?” I thought, but I knew the answer. None of us would be able to walk our big, angry dog. I petted the German Shepard on its head, but he quickly ran into my mother and my father’s bedroom, chasing after the scent of the strange men, the ones who had carried my father away.

My mother had gone into the bedroom. I didn’t follow her. It sounded as if she was making the bed. I closed the door to our room. Elisabeth sat in her bed leaning against a pillow. She was reading a comic book that had lost its cover.

“Do we get to go live with Grandmother and Grandfather?” she said.

“We can sleep in their basement,” I said.

“Grandmother can live here.”

“Our father was never home anyway,” I said.

I said it quietly so my mother wouldn’t hear me if she walked by. In my head one thing was more important than anything else; I knew I would never have to be afraid of getting hit by my father again. That was the only thought that my ten-year-old brain had room for. While our mother picked up in the bedroom, where the man she called the first, only and great love of her life had just died, my own great feeling was that somebody had removed something heavy from my life. I snuck a peek at Elisabeth. She wasn’t crying either. Her eyes were moving between the

comic strip squares and when they rose above the edge of the comic book, our eyes met. Her eyes were not red-rimmed, she was breathing calmly.

“Did he look scary?” she said.

“He looked like he was asleep,” I said.

She returned to her comic book.

“But he was kind of crooked on the gurney,” I continued.

“Do you think we’ll get supper,” she said.

I don’t know what my mother said to the five-year-old who had stood in his crib in the room where our father died. It was at least an hour from the time Leopold saw his father collapse until the strange men in overalls carried the body off. Nobody took him out of his bed. We sat down at the supper table without him, he got a bottle of gruel that he drank alone in his crib. Even though he was too old for gruel. Nobody held Leopold or explained to him that his father, the one who liked to throw him up in the air and tickle him under his chin, would never come back again.