

My Struggle

29th July, 2008

The summer has been long, and it still isn't over. I finished the first part of the novel on the 26th of June, and since then, for more than a month, the nursery school has been closed, and we have had Vanja and Heidi at home with all the extra work that involves. I have never understood the point of holidays, have never felt the need for them and have always just wanted to do more work. But if I must, I must. We had planned to spend the first week at the cabin Linda got us to buy last autumn, intended partly as a place to write, partly as a weekend retreat, but after three days we gave up and returned to town. Putting three infants and two adults on a small plot of land, surrounded by people on all sides, with nothing else to do but weed the garden and mow the grass, is not necessarily a good idea, especially if

the prevailing atmosphere is disharmonious even before you set out. We had several flaming rows there, presumably to the amusement of the neighbors, and the presence of hundreds of meticulously cultivated gardens populated by all these old, semi-naked people made me feel claustrophobic and irritable. Children are quick to detect these moods and play on them, particularly Vanja, who reacts almost instantly to shifts in vocal pitch and intensity, and if they are obvious she starts to do what she knows we like least, eventually causing us to lose our tempers if she persists. Already brimming with frustration, it is practically impossible for us to defend ourselves, and then we have the full woes: screaming and shouting and misery. The following week we hired a car and drove up to Tjörn, outside Gothenburg, where Linda's friend Mikaela, who is Vanja's godmother, had invited us to stay in her partner's summer house. We asked if she knew what it was like living with three children, and whether she was really sure she wanted us there, but she said she was sure, she had planned to do some baking with the children and take them swimming and go crabbing so that we could have some time to ourselves. We took her up on the offer. We drove to Tjörn, parked outside the summer house, on the fringes of the beautiful Sørland countryside, and in we piled with all the kids, plus bags and baggage. The intention had been to stay there all week, but three days later we packed all our stuff into the car and headed south again, to Mikaela's and Erik's obvious relief.

People who don't have children seldom understand what it involves, no matter how mature and intelligent they might otherwise be, at least that was how it was with me before I had children myself. Mikaela and Erik are careerists: all the time I have known Mikaela she has had nothing but top jobs in the cultural sector, while Erik is the director of some multinational foundation based in Sweden. After Tjörn he had a meeting in Panama, before the two of them were due to leave for a holiday in Provence, that's the way their life is: places I have only ever read about are their stomping grounds. So into that came our family, along with baby wipes and diapers, John crawling all over the place, Heidi and Vanja fighting and screaming, laughing and crying, children who never eat at the table, never do what they are told, at

least not when we are visiting other people and really *want* them to behave, because they know what is going on. The more there is at stake for us, the more unruly they become, and even though the summerhouse was large and spacious it was not large or spacious enough for them to allow themselves to be overlooked. Erik pretended to be unconcerned, he wanted to appear generous and child-friendly, but he was continually contradicted by his body language, his arms pinned to his sides, the way he went round putting things back in their places and that faraway look in his eyes. He was close to the things and the place he had known all his life, but distant from those populating it just now, regarding them more or less in the same way one would regard moles or hedgehogs. I knew how he felt, and I liked him. But I had brought all this along with me, and a real meeting of minds was impossible. He had been educated at Oxford and Cambridge, and had worked for several years as a broker in the City, but on a walk he and Vanja took up a mountain-side near the sea one day he let her climb on her own several meters ahead of him while he stood stock-still admiring the view, without taking into account that she was only four and incapable of assessing the risk, so with Heidi in my arms I had to jog up and take over. When we were sitting in a café half an hour later – me with stiff legs after the sudden sprint – and I asked him to give John bits of a bread roll I placed beside him, as I had to keep an eye on Heidi and Vanja while finding them something to eat, he nodded, said he would, but he didn't put down the newspaper he was reading, did not even look up, and failed to notice that John, who was half a meter away from him, was becoming more and more agitated and at length screamed until his face went scarlet with frustration, since the bread he wanted was right in front of him but out of his reach. The situation infuriated Linda sitting at the other end of the table, I could see it in her eyes, but she bit her tongue, made no comment, waited until we were outside and on our own, then she said we should go home. Now. Accustomed to her moods, I said she should keep her mouth shut and refrain from making decisions like that when she was in such a foul temper. That riled her even more, of course, and that was how things stayed until we got into the car next morning to leave.

The blue, cloudless sky and the patchwork, windswept yet wonderful countryside, together with the children's happiness and the fact that we were in a car and not a train compartment or on board a plane, which had been the usual mode of travel for the last few years, lightened the atmosphere, but it was not long before we were at it again because we had to eat, and the restaurant we found and stopped at turned out to belong to a yacht club, but, the waiter informed me, if we just crossed the bridge, walked into town, perhaps five hundred meters, there was another restaurant, so twenty minutes later we found ourselves on a high, narrow, and very busy bridge, grappling with two strollers, hungry, and with only an industrial area in sight. Linda was furious, her eyes were black, we were always getting into situations like this, she hissed, no one else did, we were useless, now we should be eating, the whole family, we could have been really enjoying ourselves, instead we were out here in a gale-force wind with cars whizzing by, suffocating from exhaust fumes on this damn bridge. Had I ever seen any other families with three children outside in situations like this? The road we followed ended at a metal gate emblazoned with the logo of a security firm. To reach the town, which looked run-down and cheerless, to no small degree, we had to take a detour through the industrial zone for at least fifteen minutes. I would have left her because she was always moaning, she always wanted something else, never did anything to improve things, just moaned, moaned, moaned, could never face up to difficult situations, and if reality did not live up to her expectations, she blamed me, in matters large and small. Well, under normal circumstances we would have gone our separate ways, but as always the practicalities brought us together again, we had one car and two buggies, so you just had to act as if what had been said had not been said after all, push the stained, rickety buggies over the bridge and back to the posh yacht club, pack them into the car, strap in the children and drive to the nearest McDonald's, which turned out to be a gas station outside Gothenburg city center, where I sat on a bench eating a sausage while Vanja and Linda ate theirs in the car. John and Heidi were asleep. We scrapped the planned trip to Liseberg Amusement Park, it would only make things worse given how the

atmosphere was between us now; instead, a few hours later, we stopped on impulse at a cheap, shoddy, so-called Fairytale Land where everything was of the poorest quality, and took the children first to a small “circus” consisting of a dog jumping through hoops held at knee height, a stout manly-looking lady, probably from somewhere in eastern Europe, who, clad in a bikini, tossed the same hoops in the air and swung them around her hips, tricks that every single girl in my first school mastered, and a fair-haired man of my age with curly-toed shoes, a turban and several spare tires rolling over his harem trousers, who filled his mouth with gasoline and breathed fire four times in the direction of the low ceiling. John and Heidi were staring so hard their eyes were popping out. Vanja had her mind on the stall we had passed where you could win cuddly toys, and kept pinching me and asking when the performance would finish. Now and then I looked across at Linda. She was sitting with Heidi on her lap and had tears in her eyes. As we came out and started walking down towards the tiny fairground, each pushing a stroller, past a large swimming pool with a long slide, behind whose top towered an enormous troll, perhaps thirty meters high, I asked her why she was crying.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But circuses have always moved me.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s so sad, so small and so cheap. And at the same time so beautiful.”

“Even this one?”

“Yes. Didn’t you see Heidi and John? They were absolutely hypnotized.”

“But not Vanja,” I said with a smile. Linda returned the smile.

“What?” Vanja said, turning. “What did you say, Dad?”

“I just said that all you were thinking about at the circus was that cuddly toy you saw.”

Vanja smiled in the way she often did when we talked about something she had done. Happy, but also keen, ready for more.

“What did I do?” she asked.

“You pinched my arm,” I answered. “And said you wanted to play the lottery.”

“Why?” she asked.

“How should I know?” I said. “I suppose you wanted that cuddly toy.”

“Shall we do it now then?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s down there.”

I pointed down the concrete path to the fairground amusements we could make out through the trees.

“Can Heidi have one as well?” she asked.

“If she wants,” Linda said.

“She does,” Vanja said, bending down to Heidi, who was in the stroller.

“Do you want one, Heidi?”

“Yes,” Heidi said.

We had to spend ninety kronor on tickets before each of them held a little cloth mouse in their hands. The sun burnt down from the sky; the air beneath the trees was still, all sorts of shrill, plinging sounds from the amusements mixed with eighties disco music from the stalls around us. Vanja wanted cotton candy, so ten minutes later we were sitting at a table outside a kiosk with angry, persistent wasps buzzing around us in the boiling hot sun, which ensured that the sugar stuck to everything it came into contact with: the tabletop, the back of the stroller, arms and hands, to the children’s loud disgruntlement; this was not what they envisaged when they saw the container with the swirling sugar in the kiosk. My coffee tasted bitter and was almost undrinkable. A small, dirty boy pedaled towards us on his tricycle, straight into Heidi’s stroller, then looked at us expectantly. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed, possibly Romanian or Albanian or perhaps Greek. After pushing his tricycle into the stroller a few more times, he positioned himself in such a way that we couldn’t get out and he stood there with eyes downcast.

“Shall we go?” I asked.

“Heidi wanted a ride,” Linda said. “Can’t we do that first?”

A powerfully built man, also dark-skinned with protruding ears, came and lifted the boy and bike and carried him to the open space in front of the kiosk, patted him on the head a couple of times and went over to the mechanical octopus he was operating. The arms were fitted with small baskets you could

sit in, which rose and fell as they slowly rotated. The boy began to cycle across the entrance area where summer-clad visitors were constantly arriving and leaving.

“Of course,” I said, and got up, took Vanja’s and Heidi’s cotton candy and threw them in the waste bin, and pushed John, who was tossing his head from side to side to catch all the interesting things going on, across the square to the path leading up to “cowboy town.” But “cowboy town” was a pile of sand with three newly-built sheds labelled, respectively, “Mine,” “Sheriff” and “Prison,” the latter two covered with “Wanted dead or alive” posters, surrounded on one side by birch trees and a ramp where some youngsters were skateboarding and on the other by a horse-riding area, which was closed. Inside the fence, just opposite the mine, the eastern European woman sat on a rock, smoking.

“Ride!” Heidi said, looking around.

“We’ll have to go to the donkey ride near the entrance,” Linda said.

John threw his bottle of water to the ground. Vanja crawled under the fence and ran over to the mine. When Heidi saw that she scrambled out of her stroller and followed. I spotted a red and white Coke machine at the rear of the sheriff’s office, dredged up the contents of my shorts pocket and studied them: two barrettes, one hairpin with a ladybug motif, a lighter, three stones and two small white shells Vanja had found in Tjörn, a twenty krone note, two five-krone coins and nine krone coins.

“I’ll have a smoke in the meantime,” I said. “I’ll be down there.”

I motioned towards a tree trunk at the far end of the area. John raised both arms.

“Go on, then,” Linda said, lifting him up. “Are you hungry, John?” she asked. “Oh, it’s so hot. Is there no shade anywhere? So that I can sit down with him?”

“Up there,” I said, pointing to the restaurant at the top of the hill. It resembled a train, with the counter in the locomotive and the tables in the carriage. Not a soul was to be seen up there. Chairs were propped against the tables.

“That’s what I’ll do,” Linda said. “And feed him. Will you keep an eye on the girls?”

I nodded, went to the Coke machine and bought a can, sat down on the tree trunk, lit a cigarette, looked up at the hastily constructed shed where Vanja and Heidi were running in and out of the doorway.

“It’s pitch-black in here!” Vanja shouted. “Come and look!”

I raised my hand and waved, which fortunately appeared to satisfy her. She was still clutching the mouse to her chest with one hand.

Where was Heidi’s mouse, by the way?

I allowed my gaze to drift up the hill. And there it lay, right outside the sheriff’s office, with its head in the sand. At the restaurant Linda dragged a chair to the wall, sat down and began to breast-feed John, who at first kicked out, then lay quite still. The circus lady was making her way up the hill. A horsefly stung me on the calf. I smacked it with such force that it was splattered all over my skin. The cigarette tasted terrible in the heat, but I resolutely inhaled the smoke into my lungs, stared up at the tops of the spruce trees, such an intense green where the sun caught them. Another horsefly landed on my calf. I lashed out at it, got up, threw the cigarette to the ground and walked towards the girls with the half-full, still cold can of Coke in my hand.

“Daddy, you go round the back while we’re inside and see if you can see us through the cracks, OK?” Vanja said, squinting up at me.

“Alright, then,” I said, and walked round the shed. Heard them banging around and giggling inside. Bent my head to one of the cracks and peered in. But the difference between the light outside and the darkness inside was too great for me to see anything.

“Daddy, are you outside?” Vanja shouted.

“Yes,” I said.

“Can you see us?”

“No. Have you become invisible?”

“Yes!”

When they came out I pretended I couldn’t see them. Focused my eyes on Vanja and called her name.

"I'm *here*," she said, waving her arms.

"Vanja?" I shouted. "Where are you? Come out now. It's not funny any more."

"I'm here! Here!"

"Vanja . . . ?"

"Can't you see me, really? Am I really invisible?"

She sounded boundlessly happy although I sensed a touch of unease in her voice. At that moment John started screaming. I looked up. Linda got up clutching him to her breast. It was unlike John to cry like that.

"Oh, there you are!" I said. "Have you been there the whole time?"

"Ye-es," she said.

"Can you hear John crying?"

She nodded and looked up.

"We'll have to go then," I said. "Come on."

I reached out for Heidi's hand.

"Don't want to," she said. "Don't want to hold hands."

"OK," I said. "Hop into the stroller then."

"Don't want stroller," she said.

"Shall I carry you then?"

"Don't want carry."

I went down and fetched the stroller. When I returned she had clambered onto the fence. Vanja was sitting on the ground. At the top of the hill Linda had left the restaurant, she was standing in the road now looking down, waving to us with one hand. John was still screaming.

"I don't want to walk," Vanja said. "My legs are tired."

"You've hardly walked a step all day," I said. "How can your legs be tired?"

"Haven't got any legs. You'll have to carry me."

"No, Vanja, that's rubbish. I can't carry you."

"Yes, you can."

"Get in the stroller, Heidi," I said. "Then we'll go for a ride."

"Don't want stroller," she said.

"I haven't got any leegs!" Vanja said. She screamed the last word.

I felt the fury rising within me. My impulse was to lift them up and carry them, one pinned under each arm. This would not be the first time I had gone off with them kicking and screaming in my arms, oblivious of passersby, who always stared with such interest when we had our little scenes, as though I was wearing a monkey mask or something.

But this time I managed to regain my composure.

“Could you get into the stroller, Vanja?” I asked.

“If you lift me,” she said.

“No, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

“No,” she said. “I haven’t got any legs.”

If I didn’t give way we would be standing here until the next day, for though Vanja lacked patience and gave up as soon as she met any resistance, she was infinitely stubborn when it was a question of getting her own way.

“OK,” I said, lifting her up into the stroller. “You win again.”

“Win what?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Come on, Heidi. We’re going.”

I lifted her off the fence, and after a couple of halfhearted “No, don’t wants” we were on our way up the hill, Heidi on my arm, Vanja in the stroller. As we passed, I picked up Heidi’s cloth mouse, brushed off the dirt and popped it into the net shopping bag.

“I don’t know what’s up with him,” Linda said as we arrived at the top. “He suddenly started crying. Perhaps he’s been stung by a wasp or something. Look . . .”

She pulled up his sweater and showed me a small, red mark. He squirmed in her grip, his face red and his hair wet from all the screaming.

“Poor little lad,” she said.

“I’ve been bitten by a horsefly,” I said. “Perhaps that’s what happened. Put him in the stroller though and we can get going. We can’t do anything about it now anyway.”

When he was strapped in, he wriggled about and bored his head down, still screaming.

“Let’s get into the car,” I said.

“Yes,” Linda replied. “But I’ll have to change him first. There’s a diaper changing room down there.”

I nodded, and we began to walk down. Several hours had passed since we arrived, the sun was lower in the sky and something about the light it cast over the trees reminded me of summer afternoons at home when we either drove to the far side of the island with Mom and Dad to swim in the sea or walked down to the knoll in the sound beyond the estate. The memories filled my mind for a few seconds, not in the form of specific events, but more as atmospheres, smells, sensations. The way the light, which in the middle of the day was whiter and more neutral, became fuller later in the afternoon and began to make the colors darker. Oh, running on the path through the shady forest on a summer day in the seventies! Diving into the salt water and swimming across to Gjerstadholmen on the other side! The sun shining on the sea-smoothed rocks, turning them almost golden. The stiff, dry grass growing in the hollows between them. The sense of the depths beneath the surface of the water, so dark as it lay in the shadow beneath the mountainside. The fish gliding by. And then the treetops above us, their slender branches trembling in the sea breeze! The thin bark and the smooth, leg-like tree beneath. The green foliage . . .

“There it is,” Linda said, nodding towards a small octagonal wooden building. “Will you wait?”

“We’ll amble down,” I said.

In the copse inside the fence there were two gnomes carved in wood. That was how they justified their status as a Fairytale Land amusement park.

“Look, *tompen*!” Heidi shouted. *Tompen*, or in correct Swedish *tomten*, is a gnome.

She had been fixated on him for quite a time. Well into spring she had been pointing to the veranda where the gnome had appeared on Christmas Eve and said “*Tompen*’s coming,” and when she played with one of the presents he had given her she always stated first of all where it had come from. What sort of status he had for her, however, was not easy to say, because when she spotted the gnome outfit in my wardrobe after Christmas she wasn’t in

the least bit surprised or upset, we hadn't said a word, she just pointed and shouted "*Tompen*" as if that was where he changed his clothes, and when we met the old tramp with the white beard who hung around in the square outside our house she would stand up in the stroller and shout "*Tompen*" at the top of her lungs.

I leaned forward and kissed her chubby cheek.

"No kisses!" she said.

I laughed.

"Can I kiss you then, Vanja?"

"No!" Vanja said.

A meager, though regular, stream of people flowed past us, most wearing summery clothes, shorts, T-shirts and sandals, some in jogging pants and running shoes, a striking number of them fat, almost none well-dressed.

"My daddy in prison!" Heidi shouted with glee.

Vanja turned in the stroller.

"No, Daddy's not in prison!" she said.

I laughed again, and stopped.

"We'll have to wait for Mommy here," I said.

Your daddy's in prison: that was what kids in the nursery used to say to one another. Heidi had understood it as a great compliment, and often said it when she wanted to boast about me. Last time we were returning from the cabin, according to Linda, she had said it to an elderly lady sitting behind them on the bus. *My daddy's in prison*. As I hadn't been there, but was standing at the bus stop with John, the comment had been left hanging in the air, unchallenged.

I leaned forward and wiped the sweat off my forehead with my T-shirt sleeve.

"Can I have another ticket, Daddy?" Vanja said.

"Nope," I said. "You've already won a cuddly toy!"

"Nice Daddy, another one?" she said.

I turned and saw Linda walking over. John was sitting upright in the stroller and seemed content under his sun hat.

"Everything OK?" I said.