

My Work
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pp. 7–23

FIRST BEGINNING

Who wrote this book?

I did, of course.

Although I'd like to persuade you otherwise.

For the moment, let's agree that someone else wrote it. Some other woman, entirely different from me. Let's call her Anna. Let's say it's Anna who has given me all the notes that follow in this text. And let's say that Anna gave me, with these notes, the task of arranging them. And let's say that, having read all the many, many pages Anna left me, I am seized on certain nights by greed and hysteria; I don't want anyone but myself to read what Anna wrote. I don't want anyone to know her but me.

For months I tried to sort out Anna's notes, and as I worked I kept being filled with something I can only describe as an animal impulse, some deep instinct that made me leap up from my desk, driven by the single thought that they ought only to be read by pregnant people and women with small children.

And each time I had to sit back down, breathless and astonished by my own absurdity. Still, I was carried away many times by these microscopic frenzies.

Perhaps I thought such a select band of readers would protect Anna, that they would help keep her experience a secret.

These notes she has left in my charge: reading them is like possessing confidential information.

My greatest challenge in this task has been to understand Anna's concept of time. She doesn't seem to follow any chronology, and I'm under no illusion that I've grasped the temporality that shapes her writing. The papers came to me higgledy-piggledy, stacked tall. In the notebooks, events sometimes followed events at several years' remove, as though, suddenly gaining access to another level of time in the text, she was making room for it.

Meanwhile, like all new mothers, she seems to be morbidly obsessed with the passage of time when it comes to her child's development. More than once she gives the child's age, sometimes down to the number of days, at the top of an entry, even if it isn't necessarily about the child.

This approach to time, so hard for me to make sense of, was underscored the other day by a strange coincidence.

I found the diary Anna kept during her pregnancy. I can't quite explain why, but on a vague hunch I ordered it later in the sequence – instead of leaving it as the opening event, as would have been only logical.

Perhaps I wanted to reflect my own experience. That notebook was the last one I found, when – getting ready for my eldest child's fourth birthday – we tugged the black chest of drawers away from the wall and a blue notebook dropped out. It had been wedged behind the chest of drawers, where Anna's notes were kept before and while I read them. (Afterwards I sealed them into three boxes and put them downstairs in the office. Only when the final notebook turned up did I find the strength, in a sudden fit of reason, to begin sorting through them with a view to other people reading them.)

The pregnancy diary must have slipped behind it when I pulled another sheaf of paper out of the pile, so I can't tell whether Anna put it on top, or, as I suspect, in the middle of all those different dates.

Trying to place the pregnancy at a similar midpoint in the composition was my own first break with the chronology, and after that it was easy, or easier, at least.

SECOND BEGINNING

This book began when the child was six days old and I was in darkness.

I have tried to arrange the various parts in what I judge to be the order I wrote them.

I have no memory of writing any of it.

Over the past few years I have found more and more pages.

If it weren't for the fact that I recognise my own handwriting, I'd be inclined to think they were written by a stranger.

These handwritten pages, together with the long series of documents on my computer, the emails sent to me from my own address and the notes on my phone, add up to such a bulk of material (which, again, I have no memory of writing), that once I had rewritten it all out and saw the final, dizzying page count, I was flooded with an emotion I can only call dread.

The section entitled "Pregnancy Diary", a blue notebook with dog-eared corners, turned up at long last two weeks ago, when Aksel and I moved a chest of drawers away from the wall to make room for a toy fishpond for our child's birthday party.

Gathering and arranging these notes has, ultimately, been an attempt to recreate three years of my life, three years that have vanished from my memory and are only accessible to me here, on an equal footing with the reader.

Something tells me the reason I have finally been able to complete my work is that I'm pregnant again.

I'm constantly aware of having returned to the state of pregnancy, like a time-traveller; as though I could travel bolt up and down through the layers of time.

In one week, the last day of the first trimester will be behind me.

I'm afraid it's just an illusion, but I feel obscurely as though the imminent birth of my second child has given me strength: the strength to step away from and simultaneously into the psychological crisis that arose with the first.

Of all the passages in this book, the ones I find most disturbing are those in which someone (me?) describes a woman with my name. It's as though some other authority were present in those years, one that studied me ruthlessly and kept a log. One who regarded me as a female, hysterical. Sometimes, as I read, I get the creeping sense of a hand reaching around my neck and forcing my head down. That someone else has stepped out of my wardrobe in the night to write these things.

THIRD BEGINNING

Time: Second half of the 2010s / Pregnancy
Scene: Copenhagen and Stockholm / In the Feeding Dark

Cast of Characters

Anna: A pregnant woman, 28. Writer, new mother. Danish.
Aksel: A man, 30. The child's father. Playwright. Swedish.
The child: Whose name we keep secret for the child's sake. Born in 2016.

Also: A string of employees in the health sector (nurses, midwives, doctors, psychologists and counsellors, etc.)
The child's grandmothers, at a distance.
Psychiatric patients, miscellaneous people in public spaces and hospitals; and then the narrator, of course.

FOURTH BEGINNING

Now she came to think of it, all her problems could be traced back to that bitch from the antenatal class.

Around the table had sat pregnant women and their husbands. All couples, the majority a bit older than Anna and Aksel. It was the most heterosexual space she had ever been.

The midwife wore a shiny blue shirtdress; down her chest was a long gold chain. The contractions came with the anxiety.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m getting some Braxton Hicks pains,” said Anna. She was sweating.

“I can see that. Do you want to lie down here for a minute?” The midwife gestured towards a daybed underneath an informational poster about pelvic widening.

Her belly tautened. Every time she had a contraction, it went hard. Anna felt woozy and hot and sick; her neck and the small of her back were aching. She couldn’t tell what was anxiety and what was a contraction. Maybe they were the same thing?

The midwife resumed her lecture – something about breathing. Aksel remained alone at the table, paying close attention. Anna saw him taking notes.

All the couples seemed to be in their thirties, with their lives and finances sorted. They had stable jobs, and many had cars and investment pieces at home; they had an eye for design, and over the last few years they’d been more and more eager for a baby. And then Anna noticed that all the couples in the room were rubbing their faces with their banknotes; they rubbed and rubbed them around, and they bought all the unbleached 100% organic cotton nappies they could think of, and they bought baby slings and dummies made of natural rubber and lambskin rugs. They bought felt mobiles from Arket to hang above the baby’s bed, and they bought aromatic oils meant for stretch marks to soften the perineum in advance, and they bought nursing pads made of lanolin wool, and they bought the child seats that performed best in tests, and they bought big, enormous, monstrous coffin-shaped hulks: the buggies.

Suddenly, Anna understood her mother better than ever before. The midwife was saying, “Guys, don’t expect dinner to be on the table as usual when you get home from work, not after the baby is born. It’s hard work looking after an infant. How much time do you think women spend breastfeeding every day? What do you reckon?”

“An hour?” answered one of the men with an uncertain smile.

“Nope!” the midwife nearly shrieked in triumph. “What do you think?” She had turned to Aksel.

“Eight hours?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she said, evidently aggrieved that he knew the answer. “So that’s a whole working day.”

“Do you have kids of your own?” asked one of the pregnant women.

“No,” she said, clicking another PowerPoint slide into view on the wall behind her. It bore the gruesome heading *Sex after Birth*.

“Sex after birth!” she screamed. “Don’t worry if you don’t have sex until six to eight months after the delivery.” Next slide. WordArt. Anna swallowed.

A drawing of a red-bearded man in a Fred Flintstone costume on a desert island. Beside him stood a crab, its eyes on stalks and a big smile on its lips (a crab smile? Crab lips?). At the opposite end of the slide was another island. On it was a woman with a black

bob, holding in her arms a pink heart so large that she was nearly invisible behind it. She had been drawn with a sheepish, apologetic smile. Between them someone had pasted an image of the Golden Gate Bridge. The man and the woman. Two islands – connected by a bridge in San Francisco.

The midwife said, “It’s important that you ladies listen to yourselves and your bodies. You mustn’t do anything you’re not ready for. As for the men, I’ll just say that you will have to arm yourselves with patience. Often, mothers find their physical needs are satisfied by being with the baby. But of course you can always try knocking on a different door.”

There was a short silence.

“Like, at the neighbour’s?” asked a confused pregnant woman.

“No, no.” The midwife shook her head.

“Do you mean ... anal sex?” whispered a small, girlish creature, almost disappearing behind her gigantic belly, like the woman with the heart on the slide.

“The rectum is often as damaged as the front,” replied the midwife. “What I’m saying is that there are obviously many other ways you can still be together.”

There was a silence as the collective thought *blowjob* passed like an angel through the room.

“Next slide!” shrieked the midwife. “It’s okay not to love your baby! Guys, don’t worry if you don’t feel affection towards the baby right from the off. It can easily take up to six months before you finally feel something. After all, you weren’t involved in the birth or in carrying the baby in the same way.”

The best thing was when something happened during the pregnancy that was actually quite normal, but because nobody really talked about their pregnancies, if presented the right way it could seem like something utterly horrific to people who knew nothing about pregnant women.

Pelvic loosening and sciatica, brief admissions to hospital and briefly elevated blood sugar, gingivitis. It made them shudder, and lavish the pregnant Anna with extra care and attention, if only for the few minutes it took her to describe her complaint. Yes, the pain was physical, and yes, they recommended that pregnant women not take any type of painkiller, but there was nothing wrong with a bit of extra care. Anna loved care. She always wanted more solicitude, more touch. Anna was always in need of pity. Give it to me, she thought, as she told her colleagues about her dreadful aches and pains. I will drink their pity like semen, Anna's mind screamed.

Around three months into her pregnancy, Anna stopped being able to sleep. It wasn't that she had to get up to pee, or that she was uncomfortable lying down. It was that when she went to bed, she couldn't stop thinking. If you'd asked Anna what she was thinking about, she wouldn't have been able to tell you. All she knew was that the way her thoughts were moving kept her awake.

"Do you know about acupuncture?" her midwife had asked, giving her the name of another midwife who had been an acupuncturist on the maternity ward at the Rigshospital, but whose job was eventually cut.

"She has a clinic in Christianshavn."

It was Friday the thirteenth when Anna went for her acupuncture session, and she hadn't thought much of it, but the acupuncturist had. The door was locked.

"I daren't not, on a day like today," she said after she'd let Anna inside. "Mille Sille." She held out her hand. She had big, crinkly grey hair and dangling silver earrings.

"Anna," said Anna. "I'm 17+4."

Mille Sille nodded.

The consultations took place in the front room of an old half-timbered house by a grassy earthen embankment at the end of one of the canals. Outside there were tubs of wizened plants, wind chimes and a peeling garden gnome. Inside, the room was crammed with bookshelves, potted plants, statues of the Buddha and anatomical models with shiny plastic body parts. Two clumsy sofas were covered with Indian throws, and above the desk hung an enormous portrait of the Crown Prince and Crown Princess Mary. There was a peculiar smell.

"Come in here," said Mille Sille, leading Anna into a small adjoining room. Anna got up onto the examination couch.

"So. What brings you here today?"

"I can't sleep, I'm restless," said Anna. "My midwife recommended you."

"Who have you got?"

"Marianne, at the Rigshospital."

Mille Sille nodded. "She's good."

"Yeah."

"I'm going to start by just giving you a little feel. Have you had acupuncture before?"

"No," said Anna. "But I thought I should be open to anything."

Mille Sille lifted Anna's wrist between two fingers. "Hm." She frowned. "Do you have an old repetitive strain injury?"

At once, Anna was terrified.

"Um ... yeah?"

The peculiar smell from the cluttered, fussy consultation room forced its way up Anna's nose and filled her.

"You've got too much fire," said Mille Sille. "That's also why you've got those red blotches on your cheeks." The tops of Anna's cheeks burned; she put her fingertips to them involuntarily.

"It means you've got too much yang. You need water," said Mille Sille. "You've shut down the flow of yin. I'd like to start with cups."

"Can I go and use the loo first?"

"Second door on the left."

On the toilet, Anna sat staring at a curling sheet of paper tacked to the back of the door. *Nina and Martin's Birth Plan*, it read.

- *No painkillers*
- *Follow Nina's rhythm*
- *Let the delivery take as long as it takes*
- *Ideally in water*
- *Rebozo*

So she's a practising midwife, too, thought Anna.

"I'm going to start with some cups, just to get the yin going."

Anna lay on her belly, naked from the waist up, while Mille Sille placed what looked like plastic cups on her back, suctioning them firmly into place with a vacuum. It was very painful. Anna lay quiet as a church mouse.

"How long have you been like this?"

"What, pregnant?"

"Restless."

"Oh, since late childhood, I guess."

"That's awful."

Anna felt ridiculous and frightened, doll-like. Am I completely nuts? Am I insane, she thought, who is Anna? Was she really a hopeless case, beyond saving?

"Now. Try to let the water flow through you. Picture torrents of water streaming through you," said Mille Sille. She had already removed the cups, asked Anna to turn over and started applying the needles. One, in particular, was giving her trouble. She took it out of Anna's hand and replaced it again and again. Try to just go with it, thought Anna, paying close attention as the needles were positioned in her face, hands and ankles.

"Normally I'd put one here," said Mille Sille, pressing a finger behind Anna's ear. "But I can't put it there when you're pregnant."

"Okay," said Anna.

"I'm just going to put on some relaxing music with the sound of rushing water."

"Okay," said Anna, lying very still as the needles quivered.

"Then I'll go outside, and I'll put a bell here by your hand, so you can ring when you're done. It's different for everyone, how much time they need. It's a bit like going to the toilet. When you're done, you're done."

"Okay," said Anna, staring at the ceiling while the sound of crashing waves rose from Mille Sille's boombox.

At first it was lovely. Everything buzzed, and Anna felt a little drunk. She hadn't been drunk since getting pregnant. She felt as though she'd downed an ice-cold pint. One of the needles in her hand was hurting. Cautiously, Anna tilted her chin towards her stomach to look at it. A thin streak of blood was trickling from the painful needle. Then it started to become unpleasant. Anna couldn't move. She didn't dare ring the bell; she didn't know how long it was normal to stay. In the office outside, she could hear Mille Sille greeting another client. Anna had no sense of how much time had passed. The rushing from the boombox played in an endless loop. She felt like getting up and shaking off the needles and the words *repetitive strain injury*. She felt weak, as though she hadn't eaten all day. Her throat swelled with nausea. Anna wanted to scream. Now she could hear Mille Sille helping another woman off home. So she must have at least one other room where another woman had been lying with needles in her all this time. How long were you supposed to stay like this? Anna didn't dare ring the bell, afraid she might be showing a lack of respect for the process.

At long last, Mille Sille came in. "Are you still here?" she said.

"Yes," said Anna.

Mille Sille took the needles out.

"Did it go alright?" she asked.

"Yes," said Anna, smiling. She rubbed her hand. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to two." She had been lying there for an hour.

"Do you take card?"

"Yes, that's fine," said Mille Sille. "I'll just unlock the door for you. After all, you never know with Friday the thirteenth. Don't want to push my luck."

Anna was fumbling with her bag.

“I’ve just got back from New York, you know,” said Mille Sille. “Think I’m a bit jetlagged.”

Was that an apology? Did Mille Sille know the treatment hadn’t worked as intended? Could she tell just by looking at Anna? That it had been a horrendous experience for her? That she hadn’t been able to just go with it, that she had much too much fire and much too little water? Or perhaps she saw none of this, and was only making small talk? What was wrong with Anna that she couldn’t handle acupuncture?

“How many sessions do people generally need?” asked Anna, as Mille Sille held the door open.

“It’s very individual,” she said. “Let’s see how it goes, if it’s helped, or if you need more.”

“Okay,” said Anna. The door fell shut behind her in a jangle of wind chimes.

She walked along the embankment and crossed to the opposite side of the canal. She had forgotten her scarf, and her neck was rapidly getting cold where the jacket was open. She couldn’t close it any tighter because of her belly. She sat down on a bench with her back to Mille Sille’s office. She called Aksel.

“Hey, it’s me,” said Anna. “I’ve just finished.”

“How did it go?” asked Aksel.

“Um, I don’t really know.”

“I’m sure it went fine.”

“It was expensive.”

“How much did it cost?”

“Eight hundred.”

Aksel whistled.

“I feel a bit weird,” said Anna.

“You’ll be alright.”

“I’m just calling to say I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Sometimes I’m just scared of being left out, I mean left out of the family – and now you’re my family, or we’re going to make one, anyway, and what if I end up being left out of that?”

“Baby, you’re not going to be left out.”

“No, okay.”

“I’ll see you when you get back, yeah? Then you can tell me all about your thrilling adventures in acupuncture.”

“Okay,” said Anna. “See you.”

“Bye,” said Aksel.

“Bye,” said Anna.

Anna let the hand holding the phone drop into her lap. She looked up at the slumping half-timbered houses, at the cars parked on the narrow streets, on the cobbles. It was an expensive address. Anna cried.

