

An excerpt from

*THE SUCK: OR, DO YOU WASH OUR FUCKFINGERS WITH YOUR TEARS?*

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Translated from the Danish by Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg

*When the Town is so delightful, even those at the bottom of the hierarchy have to be grateful, and every protest takes, at most, the form of a chocolate-covered marshmallow on the sidewalk*

[...]

I wanted to survive the afternoon. Finally, we were all home. I tried to erase the memory of the two other mothers with their sycophantic smiles. I thought about the children's unruliness. Without knowing it, without deciding to be so, the children were anarchists, naturally resisting the boredom that I myself couldn't figure out how to fight. They resisted the order that they, on the one hand, would have to learn to follow, but on the other, needed to protest. I envied the children. I was proud of them. I was ashamed of that. I loved them. Time for that shock I just mentioned. The doorbell rang: Who wanted something from me? The children's father was still at work. Or maybe he was already home and had silently snuck a handful of kids out to catch snails in the driveway or pick wildflowers at the small pond around the corner? I looked around me: I gave up on counting child bodies. I let the door phone hang on its spiral cord. Tom's inquisitive breath streamed out of the small holes in the square apparatus. I paused to listen to the birds chipping in the yard, the crisp screams and cries of the city limits in the distance. I ran from window to window in the kitchen, looking around—I could hear X number of babbling voices from the living room as if my own heart was sitting in there too, multiplied by a thousand others, who was missing?—my brain switched off. Finally, I gave up. The kids would have to make do. The world outside wanted something from me. I splashed my face with cold water from the bathroom sink, opened the door and said *come on in* with an idiotic, almost American smile, reproduced from the latest Netflix series I had watched about the glamorous lives of normal Pilates instructors on the Lower East Side, with their cocktail bars and dog parks.

When Tom and Minty crossed the threshold time stood still for a second. They seemed suddenly inseparable. I re-activated time; it wasn't difficult. I followed Tom and Minty up the stairs and into the kitchen. As soon as I turned my back, I felt their eyes boring into my loins, sliding over my ass in my cheap jeans. I was already doubting whether Tom and Minty actually existed as individuals? Minty's friendly smile was their pact. A smile close to cracking and revealing an abyss of frustration or a more rebellious energy. I couldn't tell whether it was the one or the other?

We were standing in the kitchen, I swept some crumbs off the table with my lower arm and immediately started heating up some food in the little frying pan—*let's have a bite*, I said, attempting to mimic the jovial tone I often heard others use in conversations about normal things like food, housing, birthdays and Black Friday. Minty was standing so close to me—she was

wearing stilettos, a long flowy powder-blue dress. Her voice sounded like a sleepy yoga teacher's voice. A little squawk when she spoke. I had the impression that she was floating, and I imagined: Minty's Carmen-Curleresque, hairsprayed updo sticking winterishly up towards the ceiling, splitting into a bunch of antennae that would instantly connect to all the other Mintys of the Western hemisphere. How many are there? How many countries do Minty's clones have Green Cards in? Can all the Mintys, if they join hands, reach around the globe? I imagined Minty's sculpted eyebrows following the upward movement. I could let myself fade into the movements of those eyebrows. As if into an old folk song that sucks me under a bridge, near a cloudy river bank and down towards the water's oily sheen.

I thought: if the water rocked me, I might be able to throw off my cheerful submissiveness.

Discreetly, Tom inspected the house. I could hear his friendly, but also intimidating, footsteps on the creaking floorboards. He could twirl around in his designer shoes like a ballerina. Minty was leaning against the kitchen table: an elegant twist to make herself cohere. In one long stretch, she told me, with formidable diction, about her two little pairs of twins and their nursery school trips to the woods and their issues with sibling jealousy, envy even—you know, that paradoxical love between two children who are both identical and not at all alike. How both pairs of twins would quite often roll into each other at night without waking up. One of their heads found a spot up against the other's stomach. Maybe it was the heartbeat, recognizable from their time in the womb, that made them seek each other out in the dark kids' room? Or the smell of body fat they had sniffed on each other in the amniotic fluid and never really forgotten? Her big girls had a different kind of bond. Her oldest at fifteen and sixteen, Bernadette and Adelheid were pseudo-twins. They had a different kind of hierarchy: One of them was always thinking of herself as older than the other, even though it was almost a fiction—what does eleven months really mean—but still, the difference had created a social order between them. A strict division of make-up, sports bras, closet space, bathroom time in the morning, the right to be wild within reason. Adelheid was quicker, an early bloomer, more energetic than Bernadette, but Bernadette was more reflective, she took her time with things, she had that kind of maturity and integrity that only someone slightly subjected can continue to refine. I nodded at Minty. I thought about her use of the word subjected. The small pairs of twins were named, respectively, Band and Bond, Tic and Tac. *Double Love*, Minty said. I imagined her carrying all her twins—also dressed in powder-blue chiffon capes—in her hands, floating like small offerings to the Town's manicured front yards and car parades.

I really hoped she would like me

*You're so pretty*, she said

*Thanks*, I answered

*So you agree? You think you're pretty?* she asked

I was quiet

*Absolutely*, she said. *We women need to support each other in our fundamental accomplishments*

Minty's eyes sucked in all my attention. Almond-shaped, ornamented with beige and turquoise eyeshadow, almost naively applied: a fingerprint in the middle of her eyelid, as though she had committed a crime against herself—but the childish craftsmanship was disarming too. The look lent her a quirky approachability. With Minty, life could be so simple and exact—and then there were the light-brown eyebrows sliding up and down like gallant hotel elevators. Could Minty see out of the corner of her eye like a chameleon, without moving her head, just a little toss?

It suddenly felt like Minty was alternating between speaking to my heart and speaking to an invisible audience that was hanging on her lips, demanding a reluctant performance that was also a defense of the inner workings of the Town:

*We've had our struggles,* she said, *Tom & I*

*But now that the renovations are finally finished and Tom's family have been such a wonderful help, it's been so good for our relationship. You have to remember to have a date-night once every fourteen days—at the least—and ten minutes of closeness with each child at least once a day—and then there's the summer house and the normal comforts, which just make it so much easier to be on the same page about having more kids at some point. Yes, I do need to get back to working full time and overseeing those two new board positions I've been offered, and Tom supports me 100%. We've been reading LEAN IN out loud to each other at night. Tom's so cute, he really takes his time. And then of course we're so lucky to have Tonje, she's just moved here from Kazzonh, and she has such a nice room in the basement, and she picks up the kids four days a week and makes all the traditional dinners, yeah, I mostly stick to baking and quick fusion.*

My hand was stirring the pot; I had completely forgotten the children. I listened for their voices, but something twisted inside me. Everything felt blurry. Minty was standing close to me. She kept shifting her weight from one foot to the other, letting one stiletto pierce the floor, then the other. I could feel her body flexing. Minty's well-rehearsed speech activated a deep longing inside me. A longing for what? To belong? To be a local? I watched the sauce twirl in the middle of the pot; I stared into the eye of the sauce and fell into a dream-well. I dreamed of spending every day watching Minty's hair rise as though she were the leader of a cult in a stadium. That I could, in good conscience, submit to everything Minty represented. Oh Minty: my mentor to this elegant and vulgar middle-class life. I flirted with the thought of giving in to Minty's unpleasant and ridiculous, but also touching, authority. Slurping her chestnut-colored hairstraw like glass noodles and loving her, carrying on my life as she did hers, so I could avoid thinking about how to do anything at all, how to actually live. I imagined a daily life in the Town in which I uncritically reproduced Minty's Emma Bovaryish boredom and melancholy, which shamelessly, at any point, might tip into perfidy—like when Minty, letting her hands slide across my cabinets, digging a nail into the cracks in the white paint, had the urge to tell me what a nice dress I was wearing. That the unicorn pattern was so cute, almost like the prints on little girls' clothes—did I get it at Boutique PopShock? When you were new to the Town, it was probably tricky to figure out where to shop, besides the obvious places—I had such cute little forks in the drawer—did I have issues with dandruff? Had I considered Distant Healing for my dandruff? Should she not have said anything? Minty brushed my back with a flat hand. In the middle of a shudder, I felt

her plunge a nail into my shoulder blade to nab a speck of dust. Minty immediately, and very professionally, shattered the illusion that a privileged life makes a person more warm-hearted or gives them more energy to care for others. Minty was almost too good at making the earth's injustice appear clearly, so good that I had the feeling again that she was playing a role, both to me and to herself.

But maybe the feeling rising inside me wasn't actually my judgement, uncritically giving into the pressure of my environment.

Maybe it was a mournful homesickness?

You have to understand that I hadn't felt close to another woman in months. Not since our migration to the Town from my old home in the city that cold January afternoon. My old home, a world that sometimes seemed never to have existed. The Town had—without me understanding how—made it difficult to maintain friendships. I tried to recall the dark, narrow streets, the garbage, the intersections, the feeling of a spontaneous encounter in front of Netto, speed-talking, charged political discussions sitting outdoors at cafés in the warm night, bike rides, going out on the town in groups, going to protests in groups, sitting in a park and telling each other about a crush, crying cathartically into a puddle, reading a book and looking out on the ducks and water birds on a lake. I hadn't received a single email, chat or call since we moved, only three texts from Mischa, strangely inquisitive and distant. My menstrual cycle had become lazy and irregular because it didn't have any other women's cycles to sync up with. I thought of my old friends from the city as distant postcards, beautiful mountain crowns against an azure sky. As various vegetables, suddenly sitting on my kitchen table in special boxes, the kind of vegetables that were too ugly and misshapen to be sold in my new supermarket. My brain felt uneasy whenever I tried to recall conversations with people I had loved. I thought about Talulah, Mischa and Ramla. I watched old episodes of *Beverly Hills 90210* on the VHS that we had lugged with us from apartment to apartment for so much of our adult life, and pretended that Talulah was Kelly, that Mischa was Donna, that Ramla was Brenda, and then I turned off the VHS and fell asleep. I don't have the energy to tell you about Mischa, Ramla, Talulah, Charlie, Sakse and all my other dear bimbos and bimbots right now, but you should know that they're always inside me like fried neural pathways, like weird, unopened-smelling birthday presents. I considered whether they were ever real. Was I romanticizing my years before the Town? What was really out there? The only thing I knew was that the desire I felt for Minty, which I couldn't explain, was a desire for intimacy streaming through my whole body.

Tom opened the bathroom door. He was standing still with Gorm's yo-yo in his hand and started playing with it. There was a cold breeze from the bathroom window. All the windows in the house were open.

Minty had sat down on a kitchen chair. An indulgent smile had spread across her face. Tom lifted the corners of his short suit jacket with both hands as though it were a cape. He sat down too. I handed them each a bowl with their own food creations sloshing up the sides. The bowls looked overfull. Minty and Tom looked like children, struggling with the adults' utensils. I had stuck our least blotchy soup spoons into the spiced slop.

The floor creaked. Blue clouds of smoke floated in donut-shaped circles from the apple treetops in the front yard through the open kitchen window. The smoke obscured Minty and Tom's faces. Their spoons were suspended in the air. Minty and Tom suddenly looked like sullen Hammershøi portraits. Their mouths gaped. The garlicky steam made everything sharp. The refrigerator hummed. I could still hear Minty, but also now a few birdish female voices. I took a seat in the armchair that had appeared behind me. It was upholstered in taffeta. I leaned back. I wondered where the voices were coming from? It had to be Tonje. Tonje! Minty's au pair! She materialized as a hologram with frayed edges, holding the hands of two other women. More and more holograms of women materialized from the smoke. Cindy Lauper's "I Drove All Night" started playing as if we were at an arena, at max volume, as though multiple versions of the same track were being mashed together. As though there were a thousand Cyndi Laupers and nothing but Cyndi Lauper. Where was the sound coming from? I could still hear Minty talking about Tonje. I don't think Minty could see Tonje, but I sensed that Tonje was always watching Minty—just as *I* from now on would always be watching Minty. Tonje knew everything about Minty; did Tonje know everything about me too? I stared at Tonje's long black braided hair, her slender legs, her muscular arms. There were roughly 30 holograms in the kitchen now. Where had they come from? More than thirty womanlike figures were clustered around me. They were juggling pots and pans, carrying vacuum cleaners slung over their bodies like quivers, three plastic buckets balanced on their heads. Some of them had stores of diapers all the way up their arms like swim floaties. Others had aprons tied around their hips. I could see the things sticking out of their pockets: tupperware containers full of mashed peas, packets of baby formula.

I could still hear Minty talking. I don't think she could see the holograms. She had no reaction. Tom was still sitting there with the spoon raised in front of him; did he want to eat—there was sauce in the corners of his mouth—was he going to eat or what. Minty continued:

*but honestly i don't understand how people can have two full-time jobs without an au pair, i mean*

*how*

*i'm so grateful for my discreet contact at CoolSitters, this is just between us, right, well, all of their au pairs are illegal, they don't have Residency Cards, they're foreign, honestly they don't come from any place you'd envy them, and it's really fortunate for them to be able to work for us, i mean EVERYONE uses them*

*it's just that she's so messy in her room, i just don't have the energy to deal with it*

*what are you supposed to do*

*apple cores*

*and when she walks through the mudroom in her underwear, i've told Tom i don't want to see that, that she needs to put some clothes on, and then there's all the hair in the drain, i know it's hers, i don't shed*

*those matted knots of hair and dust*

*really, one day i'm going to film her in that synthetic underwear, i simply don't know where she bought that, you can see her hair sticking out of it, and then sitting there with the curtains open, on full display for the neighborhood, you can tell she's not from the Town*

*and you know we live in a very central location and with those bay windows*

*it was Tom's idea, he said, film her, Minty, and he was laughing, so i called my two teenage girls, and we filmed her through a crack in the door, Tonje sitting on the bed in her underwear,*

*rubbing lotion on her legs and i posted it, i posted a video of Tonje in her underwear, my 60,000 followers liked my little video, my teenage girls liked my little video, she could just have put some clothes on, we said each other, she's the one asking to be seen by the whole world  
Tom watched the video a lot of times  
yeah, Tom watched the video a lot of times  
i was afraid that she was going to report it, i could feel her eyes on me, but where's she going to go, yeah, where's she going to go  
i could feel her eyes on me, whenever she was feeding the twins, her eyes digging into my spine  
the police can't find her here  
no, the police can't find her here  
maybe i shouldn't have done that, her hair is completely black and she doesn't have any cellulite  
i looked in the mirror, i asked my little mirror if her hair is really completely black and if she really doesn't have any cellulite  
the mirror said yeah, sure  
and i've told Tom that he can't go down to the basement to get the wine anymore*

The holograms started to dance the limbo under a broomstick. One of them turned on the vacuum cleaner. I couldn't hear any more of what Minty was trying to say over the sound. Her words were also making me nauseous along with the stench of cream in the frying pan. Then Tonje, Marte and Dunjas faces flew towards me. Their mouths smeared with pink lipstick. On their shoulders, they were wearing large bags that looked completely ordinary, until they started pulling clothes out of them. They were their mistresses' clothes: leather pants, Acne jeans, floor-length gold-printed chiffon dresses, cashmere sweaters and fitted blazers. They threw the clothes around them, threw them on the floor and stepped on them, tied the sweaters around their hair, and now they looked like chambermaids from old-fashioned public bathrooms. Their mouths had expanded, gigantic and laughing. Marte and Dunja and Anika and Noor and Danu and the 28 other women unfolded a white banner that fluttered through the kitchen. They had written AU PAIR POP in poppy-red lipstick.

Tonje sang the lead, and all the other women sang the chorus:

*I live in a cellar  
I live in a cellar  
In a nice old villa  
I wipe my mistress's shit stains off the toilet bowl  
I wipe my mistress's shit stains off the toilet bowl  
In a nice old villa  
In a nice old villa  
Oh yeah  
Oh yeah*

*I put my cigarettes out in the baby food  
I put my cigarettes out in the baby food  
When my mistress and my master aren't home  
When my mistress and my master aren't home  
Oh la la*

*Oh la la*

*I live here undocumented  
I live here undocumented  
My rights are null  
My rights are null  
It's impossible to save up in this hole  
It's impossible to save up in this hole  
Oh la la  
Oh la la*

*I have access to Netflix, HBO, Spotify and Viaplay  
I have access to Netflix, HBO, Spotify and Viaplay  
Sometimes I borrow the car  
Sometimes I borrow the car  
Drive like crazy  
Drive like crazy  
Oh la la  
Oh la la*

*If I get sick I'm fucked  
If I get sick I'm fucked  
If I get raped I'm fucked  
If I get raped I'm fucked  
If my master rapes me and chokes me I'm fucked  
If my master rapes me and chokes me I'm fucked  
If my mistress films me and livestreams me while I'm masturbating I'm fucked and I was asking  
for it  
If my mistress films me and livestreams me while I'm masturbating I'm fucked and I was asking  
for it  
Oh la la  
Oh la la*

*I wipe my ass with my mistress's powder-blue chiffon dress  
I wipe my ass with my mistress's powder-blue chiffon dress  
I stick her toothbrush up my butt  
I stick her toothbrush up my butt  
I feel bad for her and I hate her  
I feel bad for her and I hate her  
I care about her kids  
I care about her kids  
Oh la la  
Oh la la*

*Someday I'll leave it all  
Someday I'll leave it all*

*Someday I'll go home to my family far away  
Someday I'll go home to my family far away  
Together with my army of au pairs  
Together with my army of au pairs  
Oh yeah  
Oh yeah*

The blue cloud of smoke shrunk temporarily into a disorienting circle of powder-blue doughnuts, which disappeared in pirouettes out the open window, fading into the spongy surface of the moon.

Tonje and Marte and Dunja and Anika and Noor and Danu left as quickly as they had come. Only small drops of soap and wet imprints of their cheap flip-flops—WAIT, I shouted

*PLEASE STAY, WHO ARE YOU ALL? HOW CAN I FIND YOU AGAIN?*

—Minty and Tom's faces reappeared, completely unaffected. They were sitting in their chairs and looked like they were flirting with each other. Tom was holding his spoon out like a musketeer. Minty with a pink stripe down one of her cheeks. Was she crying dishwashing soap without realizing?

Loneliness welled up inside me.

I was seized by a tragic desire for friendship, a desperate lust sticking out all over. I desired Tonje and all the wonderful Au Pair Pops. I desired Minty, her charisma suspiciously simmering in my brain. It was the disorienting kind of desire you feel for a lost ex, when you've met someone new, when you should be happy, when you should have everything. Or, it was like longing for someone who's hurt you. I didn't want to accept it—couldn't bear that my first encounter with another woman in the Town had become a story of exploited labor, anxiety and broken communities. What was I supposed to do? I bit my lip. Out of politeness, I had to eat some of the creamy stew—my blouse was soaked in the liquid dripping warmly from my spoon. I didn't have any other clean bowls, and stuck it right into the frying pan. My nipples hard like antennae in my threadbare turtleneck that was slowly turning warm and light yellow. There was Tom's face, suddenly circling closer, and Minty's voice

*We should be getting home to our filet mignons, but it was so nice to meet you, I can recommend CoolSitters—we couldn't do it without Tonje, and just between us, I could get you a NuvaRing Deluxe for her; it's no good if your Sitter is having thousands of kids, that's not exactly the function of that kind of girl*

She placed her white, long hand on Tom's shoulder, covering his gray sweater with her powder-blue arm drapery, smiling like a hastily costumed vampire from an old episode of *True Blood*. Her bloodlust just a little prick in the middle of her eye.

*And give John Amaral a call if you want to optimize your scalp and do something about that dandruff; he's open for new clients, if you tell him I sent you; it's unbelievable that it works, but they've figured out that observing subatomic particles actually changes their behavior*

And Tom, gullibly at ease. Eyebrows like smooth highways, completely normal and CrossFit-like. I awkwardly avoided his polite, invasive last-minute question about my plans for work.

I wanted a just world. I was alone here.