

The great escape – Sample Translation

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Chapter 5

A decision was made. It wasn't made in one recognizable and well defined moment, it was made over a period of months, stretched out, like a rubberband between the days. We have to get away. We'll let go of the house. Quit our job. Take the kids out of school.

In the principal's office: "Yeah...hmmm...I had a similar dream," he says. "But you've got to be realistic, especially for the sake of the children." It kind of feels like we're asking him for permission.

People react with disbelief. Most of them don't say anything, not much; what are they supposed to say? People divide themselves into two groups; those who think that you cannot do that—and those who think that you can. We leave the children out of it. It's a tedious and elongated process to dismantle your entire life; we leave them out of it, they stay in their rooms. When it's time, and we can look ahead, not back, then we'll call on them.

So there I am at the landfill with a bunch of big black plastic bags. I'm throwing everything out, I'm throwing me out, it's not like I care that much about myself anyway, it doesn't matter, no so much. I visualize how I wrap my lifeless body in an oriental rug , Arabic, a really expensive one. I throw the carpet over the metal edge of the container, one smooth movement, and then I dump her there, I just dump her there. She makes a vague sound. Nothing like the sound of the black plastic bags they rustle and crackle, they make noise. I look down at her. Andrea the Character is scattered all over the container along with the plastic cans turned brown, pieces of steel, cardboard boxes, old cassette tapes and broken furniture, and she is broken, Andrea the Character, into a thousand pieces.

It's a cloudy day in the districts. I'm standing on my toes looking down, into the abyss. Andrea the Character, with her idiotically sad eyes and the fake smile she developed at an early age because she wanted her wrinkles to show she'd had a happy life. She's just lying there, a flabby doll, a majority doll, a crumpled piece of caramel paper, a patinated mirror, a faded page from a women's magazine, a grocery bag, a worn mattress.

Pffth!

And now that I'm at it: the ambitions! I'm throwing them out, too! She's just lying there like a suicide burrito. Bang! Bang! Bang! Right in her face. I'm so fed up with ambitions, and how nothing is good enough, how I always ought to get more, be more, achieve more. The handbag I gave myself as a reward for sitting in a municipal room telling municipal men about innovation and communication, and I myself, I was the passionate one, my hair was on fire. The handbag was a reward, yes it was, and I stuffed it with expensive makeup, hundreds and hundreds of dollars I had spent on eyeshadow in turquoise and revolutionred; I had painted myself in war paint, as though I was at war, but in reality I was just sitting there at the municipality. On fire. The whole thing. Bang! Hitting the container floor, the edges. And the golden dress I wore at my first reception and the long green boots. Rewards. Like a sugar daddy buying presents for himself because of the bad taste. In the mouth.

You get corrupted, somehow. That's what happens. You get suffocated by the circumstances, and from there everything is a struggle, a continuous pursuit, and there is a goal, and when you reach that goal...when you reach the goal, there's just an endless, unstoppable and eternal path of more goals. Score! And you jump around like a basketball player, even if you're only five foot nine, and wide across the hips. There's something about the sports metaphors. They fit in life. As long as you live life, as though it was a sport. Something you can win. A big fat golden trophy of accomplishment, a diploma on the wall.

Those days, I was silent. I rolled up yarns and traced the red threads back through time. How had it come to this? How could it come to this point where I spent my

days driving between my house and my landfill? Our house hadn't been a landfill house, it had been nice, with trinkets in the windows, art on the walls—but as we tore this whole apart, dissected and examined the parts, all of the components were just...stuff. It was junk. None of it meant anything. I tossed and turned every little piece in my hand and wondered. It was an eternal wonderment. How had it come to this? How did my house get full of unimportant things? Why didn't any of it matter? Christ!

The value of things isn't in the things. How can it be so simple!? I felt like such a loser. I felt like a fool. I was supposed to have been better than this. He was silent, too, but it was a different kind of silence. A bitter silence, not the contemplative kind. I knew he made calculations, he spent his days calculating how much money we had consumed for. I knew he thought about what we could have done with that money, I thought about it, too. There's a sort of happiness in the consumption, there really is, it might be fleeting but it's there. There's a sense of satisfaction, wealth, beauty in the acquisition of the items, that not only define who you are, for yourself to know, but also signals it to The Others. But it evaporates. And here we are, throwing stuff out, thinking about how we tried to buy love. I stripped myself naked there at the landfill, I threw everything out. A cloudy day in the districts, but no one was there to see; everybody minded their own business, staying by their own trailers.

About the ambitions: I've got to be honest. They crawled right up from the container floor and wrapped themselves like a shawl around my cold, naked body. "I could contact the TV stations, they'd be interested in a story like this" and it would be great and I would become something! Gold trophy! Score! Like long, grey strings they slid like worms out of the flabby doll's mouth, up the slimy dumpster's walls and up to me, and then she smiled, Andrea the Character, right before I threw the last of the plastic bags right into her face. Our car becomes a pendulum, driving back and forth between our home and the landfill, our home and the charities. We gave so much to the starving children in Africa. Even our escape become a privilege. You can never win. It's the name of the game. Motherinlaw supports us. "Had I been twenty years younger, I would have come with you!" she proclaims, excited, eating cake. I tremble.

Jeppé is her only child. We're at the pottery shop, now. The back room is cluttered with various pictures of Jeppé. Jeppé as a child, young Jeppé, Jeppé as a musician among the famous.

I begin to doubt our decision. I doubt everything. It would be so easy to do this, if it wasn't for the kids. Any idiot without kids can run into the wild, start all over, it's different when you have kids. It's less ok. The voices in my head, which aren't my own, whispers: "You are such an irresponsible dreamer," "Poor children," "You can't just run and leave your troubles behind," "Immature," "Spoiled," "Wrong," "You could've become something." I listen to "Let your fingers do the walking." I'm packing things in boxes, I'm throwing things out, I juggle the black plastic bags and pretend not to care about the world around me; the world around me is inside my head, and it's relentless. "Interrail for adults," "A hopeless boyscout's project," "traitors!"

I feel like answering back, I feel like saying: "I didn't sign up for this! This is not how it was supposed to be; this isn't what I wanted!" But everybody knows there's no point in trolling yourself. Sometimes you just have to shut down. So I'm shutting down. I become a machine. A robot. A throwingstuffawayrobot.

A hundred years ago it was okay to go to the forest when you couldn't handle it, anymore. If you were a parttime drunkard, had relationship issues, suffered a depression or just needed a breather. They even had a phrase for it: "to the woods" was something you could do, something people did. You could opt out. If not forever then for a while, you could build that little hut and just sit there and fix yourself for as long as it took. No one would raise a brow. It's not like that anymore. You can't do it. Obey or die.

There's a presentation at the school. Sebastian and Victoria are sitting on the edge of the seat, they hide in the back. One by one the students are to stand up in front of all the others, the parents, teachers and then they're going to display their intelligence for the whole world to see and examine. Their voices are shaking, their hands as well. Some of the boys are playing tough wearing their caps backwards, shrugging their shoulders like they don't care; some of the girls are showing music videos; the

music videos describe exactly what they think and feel. A girl presents her topic: depression. She names all of the symptoms in bullet points, clearly she's going to college. As we drive home on the small roads alongside the fields, it's really quiet in the car, Sebastian says: "I think I'm suffering from depression. I think I have been for many years. I've got all the symptoms."

"What?!"

"At home I'm just a bunch of lifeless bones, but when we were in the forest I would chop the wood all by myself and fetch the water without anybody asking me to." So I pack our pots and pans; I pack all of our wool blankets and lanterns. I pack the peace angel I got from my grandmother and our big boxes of flour, beans, rice, pasta, fruit rolls, tuna, canned goods. I pack our garden tools and woollen underwear, hammer, nails, hooks, waders, grills, books, games, markers. I pack the basics; I want to find out what the basics are. Then it's time for that damned drawer. The last thing to attend to. It's blue and sits at the bottom of the cupboard; this is where the papers are, this is where I store them. Pension papers, insurance papers, banknotes, loans, the stuff I should keep in binders but never did, my failure, my mess. Thrown in a box, most of the envelopes has never been opened. At the very bottom: the divorce papers and the attorney's notes. Receipts. IOUs, signatures in blood, statements from former employers. Report cards. Birth certificates and passports. I put the birth certificates and the passports aside, the rest of it I throw into one of the black plastic bags; this is now the most important bag, so I tie a red bow on it and on the next trip to the landfill, I'll throw that one right in the face of Andrea the Character.

My mom pays us a visit to say goodbye. My dad's there, as well, plus their respective partners. My dad stays on the edge of things, observing, smiling, paineyes. My mom in the middle. It's not a secret that she's opposed to "that Carl Larssonidyll" - "I just don't believe in it!" she says, my mom. My dad says nothing. Then all of us begin to talk about my mother's new, exciting job. She's become the boss. I could have been a boss, too. A boss lady. We silently agree on a ceasefire so we talk about the government and people on welfare. Suddenly I exclaim, "I've thrown away all of our legal documents at the landfill." In the following silence we agree on the ceasefire

again. I'm forgiven for this little slip of the tongue. Once when my mom got a tax rebate, she spent all of the money on royal porcelain. "I already told you, it's because I used to be poor," she snapped late one night in her architectdesigned house, red wine in hand. "Once all of my bookshelves were made of beer crates, there were tiedyed rugs on the walls and you kids were running around in rags! And now I have a little money. And so what! I've always wanted proper dinner service!" When it comes to parting, it gets akward. My dad tries to hug me without really touching me, whispering, "look out for wolves and bears."

"Yeah"

He says: "I think it's a good thing you're trying to do something about your own situation, but the welfare state was actually invented so that people wouldn't have to live like that, anymore."

"Yeah."

He just sighs and shakes his head, as if I'm leaving for America and he'll never see me again. My mom gives me a kiss on the cheek and looks me in the eye for a long time, trying to find me in there. I smile. "I love you," we say, we hug and it's done. "Take good care of yourselves, now!" she yells to her grandchildren, and then she waves as she drives off in a shiny black car.

We're in the forest.

The gravel road is muddy and the car sinks deep into the tracks, mud reaching halfway up the side of the car. We slide. We slip. Between the mountains, off road. Too close to the edge, oh, the edge. Walls of rock. Glistening forest lakes. It's a late afternoon and cloudy. The spruce trees stand like dark green shadows against the frail light green birch leaves. Last time we were here...the landscape was different, everything is different now, almost unrecognizable. We drive slowly. Jeppe's hands white on the steering wheel, eyes fixated on the road.

"Are we there yet?"

"Shhh!" he yells. "Shhh," he softens up. "We're almost there."

The atmosphere in the car is uneasy. We've been driving all day, the kids are tired, they're hungry, they need to pee. Here's the smaller forest road taking a left turn down the mountain into the valley. He stops the car and lets it sit idle for a while. He won't drive the car down there, the road is too muddy, the car's too heavily loaded, it's too dangerous, that's what he says. It wasn't supposed to be like this. We were supposed to arrive in sunlight, sunroof open, there'd be flowers in our hair and we'd be the hippies, the hills alive with the sound of music!

"Are we there, are we there?"

"Shut up now!" he shouts. I sigh, demonstratively, open the door, slam the door, open the back door. "Come on, kids, we're walking." I place Sigurd on my hip and get them all out. I don't look at him. Down the mountain. I gloat in my muddy martyrdom which feels recognizable and safe, striding through the mud, alone with my kids, onwards, onwards. "Isn't it exciting?" I say to soothe them. I soothe them. Exclamation mark! I hear him driving behind us. As he passes by huge blobs of mud hit my clothes, my hair and my face. When we finally arrive at the small roundabout, he's standing in front of the car smoking a cigarette. I wish, that I walked toward him, kissed him and said: "Honey, we made it!" but I didn't, that's not what I did. None of us said a word. Then, like on a mutual, silent command we begin to walk down the little path, down towards the river, across the river, up the slippery slope, towards the cabin. The water under the bridge gushes, furiously, foaming, like a giant wave that never stops. The boards on the bridge are slimy, half rotten, we have to take tiny little steps and walk very slowly. Once in a while a single ray of sun breaks through the heavy cover of clouds and lights up different parts the forest, like the sky above is trying to make us notice particularly beautiful spots in the universe, pointing a finger, making a point.

The door of the cabin is still locked. Unapproachable and dark, shutters on the window, chunks of cold ice in the shadows. "Didn't the Captain say he would get the key and put it under the staircase?" It's not there.

The children are looking at us. "Shit!"

He drove up the mountain again, to visit the Captain and hear about the key. And so I stood there alone with four kids in the middle of the wilderness, looking around, bewildered, trying to find something I didn't even know what. Hazy sun shining from different directions, I was a compass needle in a haystack, desperately turning around and around and around and around. After a couple of hours I heard the sound of an engine, it came closer, I walked towards the road and that's when I saw them: Jeppe driving really fast in the car following a red quad bike. The kids followed me down to the roundabout, I saw the Captain sitting in the passenger seat next to Jeppe; they both looked happy. There was a young man on the red quad bike. He quickly jumped off and walked briskly toward me. Rasta hair, work pants, he spit out his quid and shook my hand.

"Hi, my name is Storm. Welcome to the forest!" Storm had a calming effect on me, like the Captain who was slowly walking toward me, smiling.

"Good to see you again," he said. "This is Storm. I knew his parents back when I lived in the forest. Good people." I nodded. I didn't ask about the key; none of us would ever again mention the thing with the key. Storm simply unscrewed the shutters' brackets, then climbed in through the window, head first, legs dangling out the window. He jumped to the floor; I could hear how his work boots stomped across the floor. Then he opened the door from within, laughing proudly. "No problems!" said the Captain and patted Storm on his shoulders. I made a fire in the open fireplace. Next to the fireplace was an old, black kettle. We had forgotten to bring buckets for carrying water, so I took the kettle and went down to the bridge, kneeled on the wet boards and filled the kettle with water. Then I walked back to the cabin, where I hung the kettle on hook hanging from the chimney. Victoria had begun to place things in the only cupboard of the house, the kitchen cabinet below the counter. Silas jumped around with his axe. Jeppe, Storm and the Captain began to fell a tree; the biggest tree on the entire campsite – they were loud and cheerful. Jeppe had exchanged his moped for a chainsaw, Storm thought it was too small, the captain felled the tree, Sebastian stood by watching. Sigurd crawled around on the

floor inside the cabin. It was filthy, like the floor at the Captain's place, but I was prepared for it and had packed his cover pants at the top of our bag. When the coffee was ready, we sat down at the old table and bench in front of the cabin. Last time I saw it, it was covered in snow. I couldn't visualize that amount of snow, I examined my memory but for the death of me I couldn't remember. All around us was scattered the branches from the fallen tree. A heavy scent of resin surrounded us, and I noticed the sound of the gushing river for the first time. And all the birds. They cackled, as though they had been frightened, wanted to warn us, welcomed us or sang to us. One or the other.

"We should have a party," I said. "In a couple of days, when we've settled a little bit better. You want to come?" I asked Storm.

"Sure!" he answered.

It wasn't long before he got up and asked the Captain if he wanted to head back.

"See you tomorrow!" said the Captain, lifting his hat.

"No problems!" he shouted, as he disappeared down the slope.

I made up a bed on the floor inside the cabin; plenty of mattresses and sleeping bags and pillows. We could all sleep in the same bed for one night, I thought. In the morning we would organize. It wasn't dark at eight o'clock, but I sent the kids to bed, anyway. They didn't complain; it had been a long journey. The fire roared in the fireplace, the pillows were cosy, they each had a head lamp. No problems! Sigurd was already sleeping. He had fallen asleep in my arms, his cheeks so red from all of the fresh air. I placed him on the thickest mattress in the middle and went outside to Jeppe. He sat on the fallen tree, smoking a cigarette. Black boots, he had left the grey fleece back home, his green Che Guevara Tshirt, a blue kansas jacket. The large spruce trees down by the river formed a row as if they were guarding us. Palisades on a viking fortress. A light breeze. The resin. Solitary bright stars in the sky. The gush of the river and the stillness of the forest. It has a stillness, you know, the forest. I sat down besides him on the tree and leaned my head on his shoulders. We had

been so busy, ever since we arrived. We hadn't really had a single moment to ourselves.

"We are really here now," I whispered.

"Yes. We really are."

No hard feelings. He kissed me on the hair, then got up to fetch a few beers. While he was gone, I breathed deeply a couple of times; I breathed in the forest, the stillness, I was happy. There was a moment of happiness there. A sense of complete freedom. He sat down next to me. We drank the beer. "How are you?" I asked. His eyes were black, heavy breathing.

"I feel like I've finally come home," he answered.