

## The 20th Century Chronicles

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*To N.*

### **Nature vs. nurture**

Once, at home in the kitchen with my grandpa and grandma who lived at no 25, it must have been in the late 90s, my mother asked how come grandpa had taken her to ride the ghost train that time. She had been seven. Did he not realize how terrified she would be? He laughed it off, could hardly remember it, and returned to the Sunday crossword puzzle in the paper. His second lung, and only one remaining, had started acting up; a tube attached to a funnel in his throat connected him to a machine in the office that took care of his breathing for him. We called it the office. There were oxygen tubes for short walks. I asked my mother; how come you let me watch *Twin Peaks* when it was first aired? Surely you must have known it would mess me up? I had been nine and couldn't look myself in the mirror for six months afterwards without silently chanting: "Bob mustn't get into me, Bob mustn't get into me, Bob mustn't get into me..." She replied; "Whatever one chooses to do there is always someone complaining. You all are just never satisfied and one can never get it right; had I told you no - I would have compromised your free will, had I let you - I would have given you scars for life." However one chooses to look at this I guess that it's true somehow. We will all be scarred for life, regardless.

Grandpa had been a liberal; mother had been a wild teenager. As time went by, I became an anarchic syndicalist. We could afford this since grandpa had managed to save up some money in capital funds for his children and grandchildren. Through a correspondence school that he completed during his stay at a sanitarium where he had been sent to die, he graduated with a high school diploma in engineering. He lost one of his lungs, but he survived and continued on his journey together with grandma. Starting out as a simple farmer way up north, he went on to become an engineer for the energy company Vattenfall. Then they adopted mother. In her teenage years she was very high strung and grandpa, the liberal, had always been quick to dismiss whoever raised their voice in a discussion: "You don't know how to debate."

When I was about twelve, grandpa had taken it upon himself to talk to me about sexuality. He took my brother and I by the hand and led us to the bedroom where he explained all about desire and protection, - quietly asking how much we already knew about this. From the bookshelf he picked out Agnar Mykles "The song of the red ruby" and told us to read it. I still haven't.

Evolution is a story about the transporting of genes. Adoption, a story of the transporting of children. Mother, the adoptive daughter, who always emphasizes nature before nurture. And grandpa who says evolution has reached its final destination. I go through the chronicles to find something to help me interpret the signals.

## Time and Action

One night in December before we went our separate ways, N described just how “every minute was unbearable”. One way of avoiding a final solution had been to execute every action systematically, but randomly. A sort of mechanical grammar; every single action leads into the next one. “You are at the top of the stairs and you have calculated the first hit, you throw yourself out, hit the first step of the stairs hard, then the next one, and hurt yourself at the calculated spots”. See, it doesn’t hurt, and it almost leaves you disappointed had you miscalculated somewhere. But then what? After the landing? This is what an afternoon might look like; N. writes the dialogue for a scene, 5th scene of the 1st act, in a play that questions the use of being a boy when you are inevitably going to grow up to be a man. Never finishes. Makes a telephone call that all of a sudden becomes very important. No one answers. Feels hungry, goes grocery shopping. Comes home, checks the mail. “I know I am postponing things. As long as I keep postponing that phone call it’s ahead of me and enables me to motivate my actions with what might happen. As soon as I make the call, it will indefinitely be over and then there is no longer any reason to go on.”

I tell this story because I can relate to N, despite the exaggerations:

“In 2008 I had a calendar that suggested week to week planning. In the fall I was asked to write about my artistry. I was eager to get on stage, so I started writing a solo performance piece and tried to describe the process. My latest collaborations had gone sour so I wanted to do this one by myself. Still, I didn’t want to be completely alone. In order to grow as a human being you need other people. So, I wanted to find some people to collaborate with, as soon as I was done with the writing. Weeks went by and I didn’t get anything done. I guess I have always, and I’m starting to realize this now, perceived my life as chronologically linear. It might not have started out very successfully but it got better and better. Finally it became, how should I say... –wonderful. You won’t ever be able to understand. I felt completely... whole. Then it was brutally taken from me. I couldn’t comprehend what was happening. That it happened at all. All I could do was cry. I became a twelve-year-old version of myself again. It was just like the weather; I could not see my part in it even though I was right in the middle of it. What should I do. Come up with a different attitude. Just like that. It’s impossible. Nothing is possible. Days and weeks pass. Nothing happens. First to experience complete happiness. Then an end to it all; energy and actions. It was almost like taking part in the end of time, although twice, one right after the other. The end of time; two versions.”

## The 20th century chronicles

1987. My grandma was in daycare and I was one of her daycare kids, but at night other rules applied. From the kitchen we could hear the clattering of china getting washed up in the sink, and from the living room we could hear an astounded disappointment when Mats Wilander was about to lose against Ivan Lendl. And the rustling from the crossword puzzle in the daily newspaper. For a long time this puzzle constituted the entire world; the mysteries, the weaving of words into each other. That is how tiny infinity was. This was of course before the Internet days.

There were several books on the bookshelf that I was too short to reach, and one who didn't fit amongst the others because of its size: it was being kept on the desk in the office instead. The book of chronicles. I learned to read fairly late, and I started out with this one. "The 20th century chronicles". I was sitting with it for days on end. All through the night, secretly. At first, my reading is characterized by total presence: the reading is direct and part of the present; it is taking place while I am reading. Letting my fingers sweep across the comprehension. The chronicles were almost eight inches thick and too heavy for me to carry around. The cover was a collage of scientists, presidents, celebrities, emigrants, wars and athletes. It was rather easy to grasp, well arranged with two months worth of time for every page spread: history begun in January of 1900 and ended, abruptly, in December of 1987.

The first promise; The Paris Exposition of 1900. When president McKinley was shot by an anarchist, we can read in the newspaper; "lowlifes who claim there is no God, that mankind descend from apes should be put out of their misery". In Sweden in 1909 tuberculoses is the leading cause of death amongst people between 15 and 20. This is especially difficult in the north of Sweden. Last thing in this chapter, in December of 1987, Ronald Reagan and Michail Gorbatjov both sign a historical nuclear forces treaty to ban all ground-launched missiles; the Nobel prize is awarded 300 years after the first edition of Newtons "Principia"; Black Monday causes an international crash in the stock market; tree-huggers roam around the European capitals. Then it ends,

history

perceived as a linear, coherent, evolutionary process ends right there. Lesser events take place, minor conflicts and wars arise, opposite groups of people will continue to fight for justice and dignity in their own interests, but history as such has ended. At least that is what grandpa says, and the pile of newspapers that keeps growing nods agreeingly.

## The 90s

When the chronicles has ended in the spring of -88, Francis Fukuyama, a relatively unknown political scientist at the time, gives a series of lectures at a couple of US universities, and the year thereafter he writes an article on the same subject, which constitute the foundation for his book "The End of History and the Last Man". Fukuyama claims that those who live their lives in liberal western democracies lives in a post-historical society. The human ability to take action has, according to Fukuyama, succeeded in creating such a well balanced order of things, a final form of human government and now the only thing remaining is for the western world to rub off on other countries who hasn't quite gotten there yet. The book has an enormous breakthrough; it is as if the 90s will never happen. No grunge or hardcore, no taco-dinners, no raves, no irony. History celebrates there and then, well before all this inventiveness reaches my neck of the woods, its absolute peak.

One thing my grandpa taught me was that every man can, and should, do his utmost to take part in writing his own story. "Instead of posing as prophets we should become masters of our own fate. We should learn to do the best we can, and be aware of our own mistakes." It had taken me a few months to put two and two together, but once I had it figured out I got started. In August of 1989 I begun re-establishing the form of the book of chronicles, and fill it with my own story. If no one else would document these (although perhaps post-historical) days and events that took place, then I would myself. From the very beginning I made sure to prepare enough pages to last me to the end of the century.

I had been looking for a code, and a way to interpret it, all those nights I had been sitting there turning the pages of the book: and eventually I felt as if I had figured it out. History had been written according to a structure where earlier events sort of gave a clue of what was going to happen in the future. There was an order. I used this code to figure out what was about to happen. Sometimes my estimations were correct, and when they weren't I corrected the information as I went along.

## The End of History

The atomic age transited into my teenage years. And a slower turning of the pages. Page 916... 974... 977. I feel shivers down my spine throughout the entire sixties. The landing on the moon, Martin Luther King and JFK. "To grow up and become a human is about taking responsibility". Change regulated by law or change due to the enforcement of laws. "A security officer rush in... Jumps up on the hood of the car... Heads immediately for the hospital..." The code wasn't really working that well at this point. Grandpa: "But last time you were here you told me..." Me: "But I didn't mean it like that, I meant like this..." I blame myself for having expressed myself too vaguely. There is a need of more precisely formulated laws. I keep writing although less convinced of my method. Still grandpa encourages me to keep going. But why this constant discomfort? At the middle of the nineties I start to form an opinion, and there are many "discussions" being held. All that has happened during the last few years; Shell in Nigeria... Operation Desert storm... The Laser man... The right wing taking power and Elin Ö in my high school who carves racist slurs into wooden furniture with a knife. What about all this? He tells me these are barely vague nuances, a pendulum slowing down, and the reflection of past history, there is no longer such a thing as change:

"Experience tells us if people can't fight for a good cause, just because earlier generations have fought for it, they will turn around and fight against it instead."

In June of 2001 I graduated from high school, and a few days later I got rid of my chronicle. Not because school ended but because grandpa passed away. It felt right to bury the documents together with him, but since he was cremated I decided to burn them all instead. I also burned the code that I had formulated and added as an attachment at the end of the book. I spread the ashes in the river. I wouldn't say that this was just a childish thing to do. Prophetic and unscientific perhaps, but not childish. Graphically my chronicles was just as well executed as the original book, and from the point of view of content it was filled with stories, conflicts and developments of the very same dignity. There were also notes of a more private nature, no less important.

Since the chronicles, I haven't done any more conceptual art. Instead I have been writing, mainly for the stage, and performed with my own productions as well as with others. Having this in common, is how I first got to meet N.

## Time and action

N. once again: "I am still convinced that my life ended there, six months ago. These are just the leftovers. A final coming together of details in order to understand what happened: not what has happened since. Nothing can be undone. All has already happened. Our story has ended. Whatever has happened since hasn't been my choosing. I haven't chosen this."

- But, I interrupt, it's not like you have been infected with Aids, or been raped or had your hometown ravaged in a bombing attack.
- Yes, it is exactly like that. It's exactly like all those things happened to me.
- People who actually had those things happen are still forced to take action. To do something. Demand justice. Demand justice, why don't you, or you will perish.
- I have already perished. This is not who I am.
- Sure it is.
- It's a case of mistaken identity, it reminds you of me but it is not.
- But it is. To me you are still the same loving, resourceful and slightly tragic person. Perhaps unusually tragic at the moment but still: the same. I know you. That is all I'm trying to say.
- There is no comfort in that statement.
- Is comfort what you are after? Why can't you just say that?
- There is nothing I could have said or done differently. I'm not the one who chose this.
- Perhaps this was unavoidable. I understand why you keep dwelling on it, but still.
- If I look back, I see all the signs. I just couldn't read them.
- No one ever can. Read the signs I mean. Don't blame yourself.
- I don't. It just happened. None of us are to blame.
- Is there really nothing I can do for you?
- I need... Something... Something more.
- Let me know what that something is. I worry about you.
- No, I need to do this by myself.

You find an explanation. Then all of a sudden; it's not valid anymore. What is an episode of your life and how can it end all of a sudden. An absolute state – then the heavens come crashing down, and we are out of breath. And history resumes once again? Around summertime 2001, something like that. Time until then, from 1988 and on, unwritten: as if it was - nothing. A complete mess of things. And to grandpa: a whole entire life – in between two collapses. First the sanatorium, in his youth. Then this second one. To him it was as if nothing had happened since. As if he was back there in Sunderbyn, - after having taken a short walk with his oxygen tubes. Just waiting for this; this postponing The absolute. Then the world starts moving once again. Then his body starts getting cold. The book of chronicles is put away. "We are born into this world... in order to look in to and transcend into others.." A liberal understanding. No, longing. His world ended then and there. All thereafter, - this tired tubercular age, - he wouldn't have been able to explain. And without an explanation, what is one to do.

### **Nature vs. nurture**

One of the first days of January 2009 I accompanied N, who had just failed to commit suicide, to the psychiatric ward. It was a clear day – a mild but harsh light – and minus 20 degrees Celsius. Outside the entrance of the hospital we stopped for a while next to the mountain ash trees. A couple of dozen grosbeaks had taken their refuge there to eat of the frozen berries. Around the trees stood a couple of bird watchers with binoculars, hospital staff and patients smoking. N stood under the tree to let seeds and splinters from the tree fall down on his coat while the birds ate. I looked up towards the windows of the seventh floor where grandpa spent his last days.

It hits you: he passed away right after Bush had taken office, - and in a few days his governing was to end. Grandma had said: “You could never understand how empty it is”. N. no longer wanted to go inside the hospital: “What am I so afraid of. Does it never end. I fucking hate being like this. Maybe it’s hereditary.” I want to be able to assure that N. will only get stronger from this experience, but I can’t. About the grosbeaks Jägerskiöld and Kolthoff writes: “In our opinion the grosbeak is not at all an unintelligent bird. But he does spend most of his days in the wilderness, where he hasn’t gotten to know humans, and hasn’t been taught to fear them and therefore often gets close to them.” Human nature as an analogy of poultry, not the other way around. N. is committed. Is considered to be self-destructive.

A short while thereafter when we were in town running errands N. bought a 2009 calendar. It was sectioned day by day instead of week by week, with two days per spread. “I saw a documentary about Mats Wilander the other day”, says N, “and he still has not moved forward with his life.” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Well, he still hasn’t figured out what do after his tennis career, which ended forever ago. What he does now is what he has been doing for the past 20 years and he still claims it’s just for the time being, until he figures out what to really do with his life.” It is the first leave from the hospital. “Everything you are afraid will happen, already has.”

## End of History

I get a phone call one night at my parent's house. Kurt Cobain has killed himself. "Something terrible has happened to someone we both love dearly," N. tells me.

No, that's not how it happened, someone else said this. It was someone else's conversation. My memories are mixed with other people's memories. Not because of a lack of my own memories, but because of lack of structure.

In 1997 the term "crust punk" replaces an earlier term in the Swedish language. In Umeå trucks transporting meat are being set on fire. The year there after protectionist French farmers decide to boycott McDonalds, which leads to a severe conflict between the US and France. In 1999 the Swedish band "Arsedestroyer" (whose music is difficult to put in a specific genre) plays at the yearly Punk fest. In between one of their very short songs the singer gives a speech where he in a very precise calculation accounts for exactly how many slaughtered pigs you can fit on a pallet in a meat transportation truck. Earlier that day "someone" is rumored to have spotted the band eating their lunch at McDonalds downtown. After the show a violent fistfight breaks loose between the female singer of a mediocre French skate punk band who played the night before; all due to an unlucky confusion of languages. The one thing that the French band understood from the translation of the speech was the terms "pigs" and "slaughter", as well as the rumor. In a sweaty Earth Crisis t-shirt I'm standing right next to the moshpit watching the ideologies come to blows. They pull each other's mohawk's and dreadlock's. She hits him in the head with a bottle of Vichy. Shortly thereafter my friend J and I put together the band xdisanimalx. The lyrics to one of our songs deserve to be depicted here: "There's a ghost moshing around Europe... Karl Marx, motherfuckers! Karl Marx, motherfuckers!" We never get a chance to play live before we go our separate ways after having realized that we are completely unmusical. This was the first and last time I ever played in a band. However, another band later covers "Karl Marx Motherfuckers!" and for a short while it becomes very popular on the local punk scene. Later it hits me that the singer of Arsedestroyer probably tried to express a simple but basic truth about man as well as animal: "you can't count on us".

2009. Shortly after the taking of power a man downtown with a megaphone shouts: "Obama - murderer!" and is met with angry reactions from a crowd of people. The very same night I go to see grandma. I had asked to see the chronicles, if she still knows where they are. She does. They are sitting on the lower shelf in the bookcase. She sits at the dining room table, in the same spot I last saw her. I get a cup of coffee and sit down. "So you are still sitting right here", I say. "Yes, I guess we are".

N. and I talk about what the writing should accomplish and N. gets to read what I have been writing in order to approve the exposing. N. is an upset reader who feels the writing is suggesting that everything has already happened: "This is not enough. It takes more than prophecies and rationalizations. Someone needs to act. We need space in order to act. You have to leave us some space." Not quite clear in what way. N. has ever since his hospitalization promised himself (and kept his promise) to quit writing, but lets me read one last draft of the play that never happened. Most of it is crossed out. All that is left is an unfinished synopsis:

## The masculine mystery

### Scene 1.

[En man som är så vacker som en man är när han gör sig redo att ge sig ut i krig.]

### Scene 2.

A man who is as beautiful as beautiful can be while getting ready to defend his country.

### Scene 3.

A young man sitting on his grandfathers lap in front of the open fire:

The grandfather: When I was young my grandfather always gave me Werthers original.

The young man: May I have some grandpa, may I?

The grandfather: (Chuckles): Ha ha ha, be my guest.

### Scene 4.

A man with many ideas. A man who is prepared to defend what he believes in. A thinking man in a thinking body. A man who is as beautiful as someone who is thinking about something beautiful. A man who dreams about the future, a thinking man in action. A man who breathes heavily, uncomfortably. A man of action who is contemplating how to act.

### Scene 5.

A man and another man escaping from the law, justice and society. They kiss each other in the moonlight, underneath a bridge on which police cars with sirens are passing, on the prowl for the kiss. Unanimously; "This is where we have to go our separate ways".

### Scene 6.

(A man who is attempting to reconstruct history is looking for signs that are signs for something other than that which has happened:)

"I can hear in your voice that you are naked. You are in the shower" I asked tentatively. "I'm not saying anything about it. But would you like me to reveal something else?" No wait, that was wrong. This is what it was like: "I can hear in your voice that you are naked. Are you in the shower?" That was how I said it. "No I'm not. But I can reveal something else..."

I am still looking for signs. I want to find some evidence that the 90s actually happened. A news item at the end of January:

*“DDR-apartment found – untouched. The finding is considered sensational. – When we opened the door we felt just like Howard Carter when he found Tutankhamen’s’ tomb, says Mark Aretz, who was there. What was it that they found? Well, an apartment in Leipzig in former East Germany that no one had set foot upon since before the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Nothing had been touched. And it was all DDR products. The one foreign object – a West German deodorant. There was a calendar of the month of August 1988 on the wall. That is when the 24 year old who resided the apartment is believed to have taken off in a hurry. “*

Translated to English by Ylva Mazetti