**Anne Bitsch**

*If you leave now, you are no longer my daughter /*

*Går du nå, er du ikke lenger min datter*

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In 1988, I began year 5 at school. Mondays were my favourites. We had swimming classes with the pupils in year 6, and as there were only eighteen of us, we drove there in a small bus. The admission to the pool was 10 kroner. Afterwards, Laura and I would go to the teachers’ canteen, where we would eat delicious meatballs with slices of Danish rye bread and drink a glass of cold milk before Gro drove us to riding classes. The smells of chlorine and horses were equal parts the essence of the smell of Mondays, and in my ten-year-old world, that smell meant pure bliss. I felt as if flying on the horseback. My favourite horse was a grey roan mare named Primula. It was magical how this huge animal obeyed my tiny little body, we were a good team, and established an intimate sense of trust. I even won prizes in dressage competitions.

It was nice to spend time with animals. Among humans, I often felt invisible, so much that I was thrilled whenever adults included me in *their* conversations, or asked about my opinion on different political matters, then I was almost like one of them, an equal.

I cannot recall that Mum and Helge, or any other adults for that matter, ever asked me how I *was*, and I do not think I ever really told them either. Mum probably could not muster the energy for anything other than keeping herself afloat. And Helge, whilst he certainly loved his kids, once openly admitted in a letter to Mum how bored he was with small children. ”A pain in the ass.” He found it amusing when he could *do* stuff with kids, talking to them about proper issues, or reading stories aloud that he enjoyed himself. Caring for them, lulling them to sleep, comforting them, and being tender – not so much. Mum did this. She was the wide embrace and radiant laughter that drew me in when I ran towards her, and the knowing voice that taught me about different flowers and butterflies. ”Look, Agnes, the black, red and white one is a Red Admiral. The red, blue and brown one is called a Peacock. And the pretty orange flower there is a Poppy. They prefer to live outdoors and their leaves will fall off if you pick them, so you are not allowed to do that, but we can take these ones instead. Yarrow, Cornflower and Tansy.”

In the summer time, I loved hanging out in the garden while Mum weeded and watered the flower beds. I would often haul the blue, chequered, foam rubber mattress out onto the lawn and stay there for hours under the apple tree, reading horse novels and Tintin. She would explain the mysteries of life to me, how everything fitted together. One afternoon, I lay there peering at the fallen apples scattered around the tree. I pondered it for a long while, but could not make sense of the idiom.

* Mummmmmyyy?
* Yes?
* What does it mean when you say that an apple doesn’t fall far from the tree?
* Ha-ha, that means that children often seem like their parents, just like how the apples and the tree seem pretty close to one another.
* Hm.

It made sense, I thought. It was so nice to be “Mummy’s little girl”. She said she would always look after me. Whenever she said it, I would take hold of her face and give her a big, wet kiss on the mouth. ”I loooooove you, Mummy!” And then she would reply: ”And I love you, darling!”

However, with time, Mum became more and more distant as a friend. Apparently, I was always the last one to be picked up in after-school at the end of the day. Mum frequently asked Johanne to pick me up, often at short notice. Once, I was left sitting alone on a bench in the changing rooms when she finally arrived. The staff had already left for the day and only the cleaning ladies were still there. In response to Mum’s absentmindedness I tried to form bonds with other adults, although I was deeply emotionally dependent and preferred her. In addition to Johanne, I connected with my grandparents, especially with Grandad. Whenever I visited we would do fun things together and I felt like he had time for me. He would always let me have more than one soft drink, or an extra spoon of sugar on my oatmeal. And when I terrorized him by constantly unbuttoning his braces so his trousers almost fell off, all the while I was howling with laughter, he never got angry, even after asking me to cut it out at least five times. His lap felt safe and I relished his rather acrid smell. He shaved in the old-fashioned way, with a shaving brush and soap, so his face turned all foamy white, but he never showered, except perhaps for Christmas. On normal days he would only wash himself in the sink with a little bit of soap. It took years before I realized that the sweat of old men is actually rather revolting – in my, at the time, unprejudiced mind, his odour represented nothing but sheer human kindness.

All the food served at Grandma and Grandad’s was home-cooked. Grandma’s hands were often shiny, she must have used a lot of butter when she baked buns. We only visited three or four times a year, but in retrospect, these were some of the sweetest moments in life. When we were not seeing one another, we would call frequently, mostly at my behest. I have not dialled the number for years but it is still reflexively at my fingertips: 8­–6–8–1–4–9–2–1. Grandad was my best friend, after Mum.

It was during these years that Helge and I developed a closer relationship. I started calling him Dad, just like the other kids did with their fathers. I was so sick of being different. He would tease me for it, Mum too, they thought it was lame to call your parents ”Mum” and ”Dad”. They said it was authoritarian and patriarchal. In our house we were supposed to refer to each other by first names, we were first and foremost *individuals*, mind you. I kept at though, even if I felt humiliated when they laughed.

Even if I did not always think that Dad treated Mum well, I still liked doing things with him. He taught me to ride a bike. I remember him running alongside my red bicycle and hanging on to the broom he had fastened onto the back of the bike. He let go too early and I crashed and got grazes on my knees and gravel in the palms of my hands. He brushed it off - up you get, we will not give up, you can swear but you cannot sulk, he would say. And so I pulled myself together and got back up on the bike. Eventually I got the hang of it. He beamed proudly, I think he thought I had begun to develop a kind of resilience that he admired, he did not want a sissy little girl. Dad also showed me how to fix a flat, by wiggling the tire off the wheel, filling a bucket with water and submerging the tube, before applying repair patches with superglue.

We did other stuff too. In the evenings, he had read aloud to me, all of Bjarne Reuter’s books. I particularly enjoyed *Buster’s World*. Buster, who could sing and always looked out for his limping little sister Ingeborg when the big boy Lars, who drove a scooter and wore a leather jacket, bullied her. I would have loved to have a brother who could beat up the boys at school. My school also had few of these big nasty morons, who were just like Lars. I was not limping, but I was the only ginger girl in school, I was shy, and that was clearly enough.

Once, during break, one of these big boys yelled nasty things at me and hurled wet paper towels at me down the corridor. I was terrified and knew right away that he was completely deranged. He killed himself with a shotgun before turning 16. Another boy always groped me and the other girls’ tits and crotches, and told us things like ”I’m gonna fuck you really hard.”

Dad and I collected sticks and built secrets hollows in the garden. He taught me how to use a hammer and nails, I did not always do it quite right, and hit my finger instead. ”Bloody hell, girl, you’re holding the hammer like a nun holds a sailor’s dick,” he said, ”come on,” and I bit my lip and hit harder with the hammer until we finished.

I think this expectation about being independent, trying harder and not crying like a baby, resulted in me, eventually, more often daring to enter the schoolyard during breaks, even if I did not actually want to. The oldest boys were scary and in my fragile pre-pubescent body, I was absolutely certain that they were fully capable of carrying out their threats of beating me up or raping me. With a pounding heart, an aching stomach and sweaty palms I leaned against the playground’s red brick wall and submitted myself to their horrible insults. My lower lip quivered, close to tears, but I did not let them see it. This went on for a couple of weeks, until they found someone else to bully.

As Mum became less and less interested in spending time with me, and never managed to stick to appointments, it was good to retain Dad. One summer we were supposed to go on a cycling holiday, but after waiting hours for her to get ready, we decided to just leave. She turned up much later with broken glasses dirty clothes, cuts on her face and scrapes on her hands, jabbering incoherently and looking sorry. She had fallen off her bike. Again. I cannot remember anything else from that vacation, but I am sure that I stayed silent about that part when our teacher asked us how our holidays had been.