

The Forst family, sitting around the dinner table, a completely ordinary dinner table.

Father at the head of the table. As the central figure around which everything else revolves, he would never sit anywhere else. Even seated, his head remains higher than the rest; even silent he emits, commands. It's impossible to say exactly why everyone defers to Father with a respect tinged with fear, even strangers. It's as if even a furious bull or a bolting horse would stop in its tracks at the sound of Father's deep, measured voice of icy will.

Across from him there's Lillan, the darling six-year-old. Malin never ceases to be amazed at the psychological insight a six-year-old can muster in order to wind her way around the shoals and skerries of the family.

Beside Malin on the long side of the table, Mother shrunken in eternal bustle and eternal servitude.

Along the other side of the table, the two brothers finding it hard not to tattle and bicker with each other. Sometimes this elicits a glare from Father. A single glare is always enough.

The Mora grandfather clock ticks loudly, spitefully. It enjoys the privilege of being a blameless object, while dread embraces the living as they are judged. It amuses itself, blatantly, unabashedly while the living sit in silence. The air is charged and tense as always these days.

These days? Was it really just these days? It's conceivable, probable even, that things had always been this charged, since time immemorial. At times it's accepted as inevitable, other times it's insufferable. The boys are probably still young enough to accept fear as part of the air they breathe. The time

will come though, when they rise up — whether to be bent or broken or wrest themselves loose.

Certainly, the tension had been there before, and the more she thought about it the surer she became. The strained atmosphere couldn't be attributed to any particular cause, instead, tones of voice dictated its form: when Father spoke it was like coins tossed disdainfully at those who weren't worth anything more — when Mother spoke it was as if she was slipping by in nervous fright, quickly as she could so as not to draw attention to herself. Things never erupted. There were never scenes. Though perhaps not fundamentally a happy one, her parents' marriage nevertheless remained an exemplary one, in which never a harsh word was spoken, for the sake of the children.

Recently the center of tension had shifted from mother to Malin. In that it no longer revolved around Gustav Forst's personal disappointments, but rather a matter of pedagogy, there was no need for him to mince words. However calmly a meal might begin, something inevitably came up before it ended.

But it wasn't just Father who carried an electric charge — or else the atmosphere wouldn't have felt so oppressively stormy. If Father's positive charge filled him with a desire to attack, then Malin was his negatively charged opposite: sitting there, constantly ready to be assailed, her movements timid, her gaze hesitant. Nothing provoked Gustav Forst so wildly — as if he were some horrifying monster!

This double charge generated lightning.

'There's a kid in our class who stole something,' Sölve blurted out of the blue. He couldn't hold his tongue about the day's big event.

'Usch, how sad,' said mother. 'It's terrible when they start so young.'

Sölve's eyes glittered with the sensation of it:

'We had to promise not to mention anyone by name, but he has a very rich dad — a rich pappa, and he gets as much allowance as he likes, but he stole something anyway.'

‘Surely he must be ill in some way?’ Malin remarked, trembling.

The jolt wasn’t in the utterance per se. It was in the wavering of her voice! An all too intimate wavering, as when people speak of their own concern, and moreover, one they hold dear. It was as immodest as a naked body. Anything intimate enough to make your voice waver was not to be mentioned at the dinner table, and not in front of the whole family. And someone who found everything this intimate must remain silent.

He looked up from his plate, his gaze resting on Malin. The tension grew.

‘Is that the case? So this is what our future educators are learning at that college. If that’s the case then I say, no, thank you very much, we’re better off without such schooling. When a poor boy steals he’s a thief – but when a rich boy steals then he’s sick! If it were up to me I’d call a spade a spade. That boy’s a scoundrel and a shame to his family. And to imagine that people could see it any other way!’

‘I didn’t mean it like that...’ stammered Malin.

Her father looked at her for a long time and then said, in a low, deliberate voice that was emphatic with contempt:

‘Then why did you say it?’

Even if she had been able to explain everything – if she could take everything from deep inside her and spread it across the table to show she meant something else entirely – that she had no intention of championing the wealthy at the expense of the poor – how could he have forgotten lashing out at her the other day when she defended the fact that non-property owners had a majority in local government – then he had shamed her for standing with the selfish and poor against the selfless and cultured – and now she was supposed be shamed for supporting dishonorable wealthy people at the expense of the poor but honorable...? No matter which way you looked at it, Father was always right. You could be convinced to your core that you were right – but simply hearing the derision in his voice made all self-certainty vanish. No one could ever be in the right but Father.

Still, there was much she would have said in her defense — — — had the deluge of tears not overwhelmed her, that perpetual, unwelcome culmination of every situation. No matter how she clenched her fists and resisted, she could never do more than smother the sobbing while the tears streamed, unhindered down her cheeks.

The boys exchanged a knowing glance that said: 'Girls!'

'So, it's this again, what a surprise!' said Father. 'Is it absolutely impossible even to utter a single word, any word, in my own house, without causing these scenes and dramatic outbursts?! Why even bring up such idiotic ideas if you can't tolerate discussing them! *Women!*'

Mother said nothing, but she suffered, and this time she had no choice but to take Father's side. She had long since learned to keep quiet and put up with it — and hadn't cried for a long time. One adapts when one has to. Malin surely ought to have known her father well enough to realize that this modern talk of defending bad behavior would have no effect. It took time to get to the bottom of Father's strict character, she had learned that much from experience, but Malin should have had ample time for that undertaking; she was an adult now.

Is it only the bread that mother is slicing through? Malin watches her mother's movements as if through a haze. Who or what is she actually cutting when she throws all her weight behind that knife? Not a person, no. But something that she dislikes about a person, something that needs to be cut away.

Malin frightens each of her parents without comprehending how. The hostility always about to explode is largely from anxiety, at least in her mother, but Malin remains oblivious to that. She only ever hears the accusation, never the fear underlying it.

After coffee, when the parents are alone, Fru Forst, her eyes downcast, remarks:

'Gustav, don't you think it would be best to take Malin to the doctor?'

'Perhaps,' the man replied.

She could hear his disapproval in the cold, terse tone of his response. His narrowed, sealed lips conveyed his unspoken disdain: Coddling! Nonsense! Hysterical women!

Perplexed, she sat quietly for a long while, wondering whether to believe his tone or his words, in that they contradicted each other.

‘Well, if you don’t think it’s necessary...’ she said diffidently at last, as if in retreat.

But something resembling pity had stirred in his grey eyes. He threw his wife a kindly glance as if she were a poor little animal at his feet — a timid, but in its own way touching, little animal without a will of its own. It was an uplifting and supportive gaze. Whatever his faults, his strength of spirit was more than enough for the both of them. She looked up at him in gratitude: she had waited so long to see that expression on his face! Oh, Gustav!

‘You should be a bit more convinced of what *you* yourself think, at the very least. As far as *I* am concerned you’re more than welcome to try taking her to the doctor,’ he answered.

‘Malin asked to go, too.’

‘Ahhh! —All the more reason! Well, I’d be very surprised if a doctor could do anything about the matter. It’s a question of upbringing, not of medication.’

‘But you do still think that we could at least try?’

‘By all means. Just go.’

After this brief loving moment, he turned away in disdain from his wife and the whole of her sex that allowed itself be so cowed.