

Malin had been summoned to the Principal's office.

How can anyone know how often they've sinned? She could be guilty of anything. There were countless opportunities for grave offenses: at home, in school, at the teachers' college — wrongs of which you remained oblivious until you received your punishment. Malin wracked her brain trying to think of any clear sins of commission or omission, but found none. There was no point to it anyway — you could feel anxious about a thing, but it was almost always something else. Regardless of whether she could recall any particular wrongdoing, her conscience couldn't be considered clear by any stretch of the imagination — and this affected everything, even tangible, everyday matters like whether her daily work met the minimum requirements. Or it might be nothing to do with her work. The college was not exclusively, and perhaps not even primarily, an institution for vocational training; moral education was equally important. Morality was central to the vocation, it went along with the job, you could say. Malin was deeply conscious of the fact that her present state of mind left much to be desired — her facial expressions and tone of voice inevitably conveyed this when she least wished it or was aware of it. There was no corner of the soul that remained entirely private, nowhere she had the right to say: this concerns only me and no one else. At least not if you're a teacher, or going to be one. Sooner or later all things are made manifest by the light, *liber scriptus proferetur*.

If only she could stay calm, and *not start crying*. That only made things worse. She clenched her fists vigorously as she plodded down the wide, bright hallway.

The Principal sat at her desk, absorbed in a ledger. She had the remarkable capacity to focus all of the intense energy her seemingly delicate little person could muster on whatever matter lay at hand. That's why she was a prodigious worker and a great organizational talent. The Principal's sharp brown eyes hovered in fascination over the columns of the ledger, giving Malin the impression that she and the Principal were in two different rooms. After a couple of minutes, the ledger was slammed shut and pushed to a desk corner where it no longer existed. The Principal was utterly present with Malin and nowhere else. The overpowering strength of her will filled the room like an electric current.

'Would you please take a seat!'

In other words, this would take a while. Well, what else did she expect, with such a ceremonious summons to report to the Principal's office at a precise time.

'What do you plan to do after your studies here?'

An explosion! It was the last thing she had anticipated. She sat paralyzed with dismay at such an ordinary, natural question.

She ought to have given the only possible, only imaginable response:

'I'm going to be an elementary school teacher.' Instead, she sat completely silent, aghast as if at some scandalous revelation.

Her path had seemed so clear to her. Naturally, she had wanted to be an elementary school teacher, that's why she was here! It simply hadn't occurred to her that there might be another path besides becoming a teacher. The children were living material, growing souls to be guided along the same paths where she herself had found peace and strength. She had several reasons for wanting to work in an elementary school. One was simply that it afforded greater possibility to influence students in a profound way. Teaching a single subject in a private high school, going from class to class, would mean that the children would always see her as one of a dozen constantly changing, more or less unfamiliar, figures — but an elementary school teacher teaching all subjects to the

same class, and following them over the years, would become an exceptional figure to the children, with an influence rivaled only by their parents. Another reason was that she wanted to work with the people — yes, the people without quotation marks, because they *were* the people, they were the actual, ordinary people, with whom she had to feel at home, because all she desired was to be real and ordinary, a simple person among simple people, one of millions — this had always been her ambition, from as far back as her schooldays, when out of disgust for the snobbish aesthetes around her she had confessed: ‘Sure, I’m a philistine, but that’s all I ever want to be!’ — She wanted to be a stone in the foundation, a person not weighed down by any superior demand to be exceptional, but rather one who fulfilled her small duties faithfully and well. The future appeared before her in the enticing image of a rainy street in a large city, at daybreak in the autumn — a path made up of work and celebrating the everyday. In other words: the life-adventure of an elementary school teacher.

She ought to have responded quickly and confidently. That’s what was expected of her. But she remained silent, paralyzed and exposed.

She imagined herself standing before a class teaching the eternal truths. Laying the foundations upon which the children’s first religious and ethical concepts would be built...

Malin’s silence took the Principal by surprise. What had come over the girl? Hadn’t she given any thought at all to the future? Only students could be such strangers to the way the world worked. Or perhaps her dreams were much loftier? Or was she secretly engaged? — so many of the most gifted ones had been plucked that way, just as they were blossoming! In one sense it was lamentable, in another, completely natural, and there was nothing much to be done about it.

‘Do you not know what you want to be, Fröken Forst?’ She asked, with a hint of sarcasm.

‘Well yes — a teacher.’

I hope that’s the truth, the Principal thought to herself, knowing full well that she was the last one they told when they got engaged, not before it was made public. But there

were always telltale signs that those who knew what to look for could see. It took half a second for the Principal's quick brown eyes to assess Malin's appearance and come to the reassuring conclusion: not engaged, positively not.

Institutions were Principal Melling's creative medium without a doubt, and she fervently devoted her organizational talents to rejuvenating them. Had she been a man she might have chosen a career in politics and become a great, successful politician, that is, unless her strong ethical principles had propelled her toward education anyway. As it was, she was as much the teachers' college's politician as its Principal. At once diminutive, tough, and nimble as quicksilver, she had finally worked her way up to a position of power where she had the space to put her unique character to use. Her more contemplative work at the college, such as morning prayers and scripture lessons constituted, in a sense, the tender heart within her otherwise largely extroverted life: this was the seed from which life springs — just as her unsentimental and level-headed piety dictated the ultimate goals of her numerous other endeavors. Principal Melling oriented herself to an inner map that was as different from Malin's as a minister's is from a hermit's.

Of the graduating class at the college, Malin Forst was the student who interested her most, not in terms of personality, but talent. Her personality was altogether too malleable, altogether too feminine — too feminine for Principal Melling to be entirely content with it. Her own bitter experience had taught her that a woman not only had to be two or even three times superior to her male competitors for any of her own ideas to make it to the starting line, but her skin had to be much thicker than a man's need be. There was nothing to be done about it; you had to be content with what you were given and hope for mercy in life — anyway, a few would be spared; 'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' as the saying went. Talent, on the other hand, was paramount, and should be taken seriously. For the common good, something more must be made out of Malin than a little elementary school teacher sent to the back of beyond.

And so, she continued:

‘Have you ever thought about continuing your studies?’

An expression of indecision crossed Malin’s face. Had that occurred to her? It had crossed her mind at some point, although hardly as a definite plan or intention. Having an advanced degree would save her from having to teach Christianity in elementary school. But it was more than that. She longed for knowledge. Not the knowledge acquired in school, but another kind. Did she want to study philosophy? Or psychology? Yes, more than anything else, psychology. It was strange to think of graduating with facts pounded into one’s memory: the year that Fredrik I died or the height of Mont Blanc, while not learning anything at all about the forces that transform one’s interior into chaos or cosmos.

‘Haven’t you ever thought about studying theology?’

‘No – not theology.’

How was it possible for someone to be so unaware either of her potential or of her proper place? Principal Melling had an excellent memory and kept track of each and every one of her many students. She knew, therefore, that Malin had chosen to write her graduation exam in high school on a biblical subject and that it had been decidedly above average. Throughout her entire career at the teachers’ college Malin had almost exclusively chosen subjects that were either explicitly religious or which at the very least dealt in some way with what it meant to lead a pious life. The deciding factor, of course, was the high quality of the work. Malin’s performance on her exam a few days earlier, on which she wrote a more than satisfactory pedagogical analysis of the prophet Jeremiah, had prompted the Principal to initiate this conversation.

On the other hand, Malin’s talent for practical tasks was less than zero. As the home economics teacher once put it:

‘I can’t understand it, Malin Forst doesn’t otherwise strike you as unintelligent, but she seems to destroy anything you put in her hands.’

The sewing teacher had expressed the same idea even less tactfully.

At least there would be no risk of such fields luring her away. And even if she were eventually to marry she would be all the more inclined to hire domestic help so as to devote herself entirely to intellectual pursuits.

It could also be the case that Malin Forst had never encountered any real opportunity to develop in any serious way the interests that lay closest to her heart, and consequently never let her thoughts soar as high as studying theology at the university. Her imagination and reason had yet to be set in motion.

So the Principal set about explaining the need for female theologians and teachers of religious pedagogy at women's colleges. There was currently a shortage, which meant that even women's teaching colleges had been forced to hire male instructors in scripture. This practice had significant downsides, the most important being that male instructors could never cultivate the deeper relationships with their students that their female counterparts could. Women thought and reacted differently from men, that's just the way things were.

Naturally, Malin understood that that must be the case?

'I believe that you would be extremely well suited both for theological studies and for a position instructing at a teachers' college,' said the Principal.

Study theology and then teach at a college! The connection was becoming clearer to her. That's why she had been called in!

An immense fury began to boil inside her. Because she had supposedly shown herself to be intelligent? That was what they cared about! But the one truly essential thing? What was more important than talent or intelligence? No one ever asked about that! Everyone simply assumed that she was sufficient on that account! For an instant Malin shook with the rage of a naïve person when she realizes for the first time that a price can be put on honor and integrity. This mundane system of measurement was so infinitely inadequate that people asked whether you had good grades or the ability to write when actually, the wellbeing of people's souls hung in the balance!

In the next instant, her rage lashed back at her. Small wonder that they saw her as a pious Christian, considering the hypocrisy she committed every single day here! Whose fault was it actually that no one had thought to inquire about her spirituality? Her own! She went around spouting nonsense exactly as she always had, writing her essays, and teaching her lessons, the whole time slipping from belief to doubt. No one noticed and she hadn't said a word about it. How she despised that cowardly hypocrite, Malin Forst! It was high time that she made her confession!

Quickly and concisely — yes — but how?

'I don't think I'm good enough for that!' she said in a dark tone.

Principal Melling locked eyes with her, at once teasing and amiable.

'And just why wouldn't you be good enough, when there are so many stupid men who are?'

'That's not what I meant. I'm not good enough — in another sense. Everything has changed recently. I've begun to doubt everything.'

The Principal shook her head dismissively.

'We all go through such phases, Fröken Forst. They are to be taken with a grain of salt. We simply get through them and become even more certain afterward.'

The secure warmth of conviction in her voice didn't reach Malin. Getting through it, after all, was what Principal Melling had experienced. But that's not *always* how it went, you didn't always come out on the other side. And even if you did — how long would it take? Surely it made no sense for her to embark on theology studies in abhorrence and agitation, merely hoping it would all pass?

The silence between them lingered. The Principal expected Malin to speak, to raise her inner concerns, or perhaps start to discuss the practical question of continuing her studies. In the meantime, the Principal gripped a letter opener in her hand and pressed its pliant blade firmly against the tabletop, as if the lassitude of the moment were tormenting her and she could hasten an end to it. Malin saw this motion

and misinterpreted it. She too found the silence acute and oppressive, imagining that the Principal had wanted a decisive answer from her. One — two — and forward march! To her it felt as if she had to set her own plan alongside this one and then defend it against the superior will.

'I want to study — psychology!' she blurted out. 'And pedagogy too!' she quickly added, in the hopes that at least *that* would be amenable to the Principal of a teachers' college.

'You do realize that psychology is not a subject worthy of study,' the Principal replied dryly. 'I know, I've done it myself.'

Principal Melling looked back on her time at the university with a certain contempt. The morning lectures on a pedagogy handbook that was objectively inaccurate. And the psychology! Even at the time she had known substantially more about psychology than any of her professors, the only difference being that her knowledge was unsystematic but useful, while theirs was systematic but useless. The psychology experiments brought happiness to no human being; they were exclusively for future researchers experimenting with the psychology of the mind. Supposedly they learned the scientific method... Sure, that was true — but broadly speaking, the ones who could think had already learned to do so before they arrived, and those who couldn't weren't likely to learn to do so in a psychology seminar. The child sitting in front of her expected great things from those wise professors! It was nonsense, pure and simple.

Malin knew nothing about the university other than that it was the highest educational institution and ought to be where the latest scientific findings could be found. It was possible that science hadn't advanced very far in the field of psychology. She harbored no illusions, in fact, about the depth of knowledge it could offer. She had taken psychology classes in high school which dealt with thinking, feeling, and the will; as well as visual, auditory, and tactile-kinesthetic modes of cognition, thank-you very much. But even if all the university did was provide access to bibliographies and methodologies — wouldn't that perhaps be enough to uncover some single, little thread to lead you forward? A bit closer to knowledge

that might shield us from a living death? Knowledge that might ward off the surging attacks of chaos?

'Do you really believe that you would do more good in psychology?' the Principal asked. Her voice revealing how abominably stupid she thought it would be to answer yes.

Malin didn't exactly answer in the affirmative:

'Maybe because I'm interested in pursuing it — it could be my true calling —'

The Principal's face darkened into a severe expression. How could it be that a human being could position herself in the great battle on such vague grounds? Was she so utterly devoid of a sense of responsibility for her gifts or for the greater good?

'My dear Fröken Forst,' she said, 'that kind of reasoning is what I call childish and egotistical. We find our *calling* where we are needed, not where we're "interested" in pursuing it!'

Judgment! Scathing judgment! Childish and egotistical! Malin was flooded with shame and guilt, but she couldn't submit and didn't want to! Though the loathsome, hateful tears again began to fall.

The Principal was fairly accustomed to hysterical outbursts. Girls at that age were predisposed to them. They were a direct consequence of families who still treated them as children who, when it came to it, could still get their way by resorting to such tactics. They hadn't yet adapted to the hard reality, the truth that awaited them beyond those protective walls. They didn't necessarily have to be of bad character or especially oversensitive to resort to blubbering — it was simply a residue of childhood. As soon as they realized that tears would get them nowhere, they quickly disappeared.

Partly to distract Malin, Principal Melling inquired, calmly and patiently:

'Well then, Fröken Forst, you never said what you'd like to do with your psychology and pedagogy.'

Her soothing voice didn't stem Malin's flood of tears, quite the opposite, though now she was moved to tears out of gratitude. The Principal was her ally after all, an ally, whom, given her own impudent defiance, she didn't rightly deserve.

Her resistance abated, her obstinate, selfish pride abated in an impulse of capitulation to submit just as she was. She looked up with a faint smile, swallowing her tears:

‘Sometimes I wish there were — a new kind of school — an experimental school — with new methods — — —’

The Principal sat speechless for a moment, struck by the naïveté of the statement. Did the twenty-year-old child sitting before her actually believe that whatever she reached for would land in her lap, simply because she had ‘wished for it’? Could she really be that out of touch with the day-to-day struggle for bread, with the fact that most people had to be content with an occupation that met their basic needs and so few ever attained anything beyond that?

Speaking in a quiet, cold voice she awakened the sleeping girl to the realities of the world:

‘Fröken Forst, do you perhaps have some private fortune with which to fund such plans?’

A well-placed thrust of the sword into one who had already capitulated! Malin’s weeping intensified. It was neither the uncertainty of her future prospects nor the difficulties an impoverished reformer in education would certainly face that overwhelmed her. It was the piercing stab of irony, and the contempt that accompanied it, along with the feeling of being profoundly disadvantaged in her struggle with the Principal, who not only knew her own goals, but in all certainty those of others as well — and herself, who still knew nothing, not the least little thing. All she knew was that she was fumbling along alone, and had to feel her own way as she went.

The Principal nodded, a sign that their conversation had concluded, and Malin slunk away into a far corner of the empty corridor. There she sat down, sobbing.

The small, mundane feeling of shame she felt at behaving thoughtlessly and responding in such a silly, infantile way was almost entirely engulfed by pangs of remorse. We find our *calling* where we are needed, not in what we are ‘interested’ in pursuing! — childish and egotistical — and then all the Principal’s bitter irony, which she more than deserved after reciprocating such kindness, such undeserved friendliness,

with clumsy, blind, unkindness... Your calling awaits you... There it was again, the demand that she didn't want to follow, because she was too egoistical, too I-centered, an apostate, in other words, of the Only True Will.

But deep within her, as if deep in the cellar, a sleepwalker began to stir, someone who no longer concerned herself with how much crying she heard far above, not anymore — it was someone who had begun to feel confident because there was no longer any option not to. Even had she been commanded a hundred times to obey, a hundred times she would have had to turn away. Right or wrong — there's something called necessity. My necessity. My will!

The tears slowly ceased flowing, and the sleepwalker expanded to dwell in the entirety of her being.

The calm of accepting the unavoidable. The calm of inner fate.

Had she at last whole-heartedly embraced the side of the eternal dissenters, in the face of duty and commandment and law and morals? Possibly. A meager light flickered through the darkness, whether a star or a will-o'-the-wisp was uncertain. Consciousness: this is me; this is mine.

You severe and alien force, I am just as you are. I, too, am sword and will.