

MY WORK

OLGA RAVN



TRANSLATED BY SOPHIA HERSI SMITH AND JENNIFER RUSSELL

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First Beginning

Who wrote this book?

I did, of course.

Although I'd like to convince you otherwise.

Let's agree right now that someone else has written it. Another woman, entirely unlike me. Let's call her Anna. Let's say Anna has given me all the pages that follow this preface. And let's say that with these pages, Anna has given me the task of arranging them. Let's say that some nights, after reading these many, many pages Anna has left me, I'm gripped by greed and hysteria. I don't want anyone but me to read Anna's texts. I don't want anyone but me to know her.

For many months I tried to come to grips with Anna's papers, and during this work I was again and again overcome by something I cannot describe as anything but an animal impulse, a deep instinct that made me jump up from my desk, propelled by a single thought: Anna's papers should be read only by pregnant people and parents with small children.

And each time, I had to sit back down at the desk, breathless and baffled by my own foolishness. But I admit I was seized by this microscopic rapture often.

Perhaps I thought that such a select readership would protect Anna by keeping her experience a secret. These pages she left in my custody—reading them has felt like carrying confidential informa-

tion. My biggest challenge has been to understand Anna's relationship with time. She doesn't seem to adhere to any chronology, and I cannot pretend to grasp the timelines of her writing. The pages were piled haphazardly when she gave them to me. In the notebooks, one event might follow another that took place years before, as if she suddenly gained access to a different layer of time in the text and carved out space for it.

Meanwhile, like all new mothers, she seems obsessed with the passage of time relative to the child's development. She often notes the age of the child, sometimes down to the number of days, at the top of a text, even if what follows is not about the child.

Her seemingly inscrutable approach to time was recently underlined by a strange coincidence.

I found a journal from Anna's pregnancy. I can't quite explain why, but some vague impulse prompted me to insert the notebook later on in the sequence rather than placing it as the opening act, which would have been logical.

Perhaps it was a way of mimicking my own experience. This notebook was the last part I found when, preparing for the eldest child's fourth birthday, we moved the black dresser away from the wall and a blue notebook fell down. It had been pinched between the wall and the dresser on top of which Anna's papers lay piled before and while I read them. (Later, I sealed up the papers in three boxes and stored them at the office. Only when the last notebook turned up did I, in a sudden fit of common sense, find the strength to begin organizing the pages with the hope that others might read them.)

The pregnancy journal must have fallen behind the dresser one of the times I retrieved pages from the stack, and I therefore cannot say whether Anna left this notebook on top or, as I suspect, in the middle of all these points in time.

Placing the pregnancy at the midpoint of the composition was my own first breach of chronology, and the rest followed easily. Or more easily, at any rate.

Second Beginning

This book began when the child was six days old and I found myself in a darkness.

I have tried to arrange the various parts based on what I surmise to be the order in which I wrote them.

I have no recollection of having written any of it.

Over the past few years, I have found more and more pages of writing.

If it weren't for my handwriting, I might have assumed it was all written by a stranger.

These handwritten pages, as well as a large number of documents on my computer, emails sent to me from my own email address, and notes on my phone, together constitute such a vast amount of material (which, again, I have no recollection of writing) that I, after typing it all up and seeing the staggering total number of pages, was filled with a feeling I can only call horror.

The section titled "The Pregnancy Journal," a blue notebook with tattered corners, was the last to appear — two weeks ago when Aksel and I moved a chest of drawers to make room for a game of musical chairs at the child's birthday party.

Collecting and arranging these papers and documents has ultimately been an attempt to recreate the three years of my life that

have disappeared from my memory, and which, just as the reader, I can only access here.

Something tells me that the reason I have now finally been able to complete my work with these pages is that I am pregnant again.

I feel I have returned, like a time traveller, to the state of pregnancy, as though I could travel up and down through the layers of time.

In one week, I will reach the last day of the first trimester.

I fear it's merely an illusion, but it appears to me that the impending birth of my second child has given me the strength to both step away from and step into the psychological crisis that accompanied the arrival of the first.

Of all the parts in this book, however, it is those in which someone (myself?) writes about a woman with my own name that disturb me the most. As though there were in those years another power at work, mercilessly scrutinizing me and keeping record of my every move. Someone who considered me a she, hysterical. And when I read it, I sometimes get the feeling that a hand is gripping my neck and forcing my head down. That someone else stepped out of my closet at night to write these texts.

Third Beginning

Time: Last half of the 2010s/The time of pregnancy
Location: Copenhagen and Stockholm/The darkness of breastfeeding

The characters

Anna: A pregnant woman, twenty-eight years of age.
Author, since mother. Danish.

Aksel: A man, thirty years of age. Father of the child.
Playwright. Swedish.

The child: Whose name we keep secret for the child's sake.
Born 2016.

Furthermore: A large number of health care workers (nurses, midwives, doctors, psychologists, and therapists, etc.).
The child's grandmothers in the distance.
Psychiatric patients, people in general in public spaces and in hospitals, and, of course, the narrator.

Fourth Beginning

When she thought about it, all her problems could be traced back to that bitch at the childbirth class.

All around the table sat pregnant women with their husbands. There were only couples, most of them a little older than Anna and Aksel. It was the most heterosexual space she had ever been in.

The midwife wore a bright blue shirt dress and a long gold chain around her neck. Contractions accompanied the anxiety.

"Are you okay?" the midwife asked.

"It's just Braxton Hicks," said Anna, sweating.

"I could tell. Would you like to lie down for a bit?" The midwife gestured toward a bench under a chart illustrating pelvic expansion.

The muscles of Anna's stomach tightened. With each contraction, it hardened. She felt dizzy and hot and nauseous, her lower back and neck hurt. She didn't know where the Braxton Hicks ended and the anxiety began. Maybe they were the same thing?

The midwife continued her lecture, something about breathing. Aksel sat on his own at the table and paid close attention. Anna saw that he was taking notes.

All the couples appeared to be in their thirties and have their lives and finances in order; they had steady jobs and many had cars and investment pieces in their homes, they bought the latest design and had spent several years prepping for Project Baby, and then Anna noticed that all the couples in the room were rubbing their faces with

their banknotes, they rubbed and rubbed them all over, and they bought all the plant-dyed 100 per cent organic cotton cloth diapers their hearts desired, and they bought slings and natural rubber pacifiers and lambskin rugs. And they bought handmade mobiles with felt clouds to hang over the child's crib, and they bought aromatic oils to prevent stretch marks and to soften the perineum for childbirth, and they bought merino wool nursing pads, and they bought the highest-rated car seats, and they bought big, enormous, atrocious, coffin-shaped monstrosities: baby carriages.

Suddenly, Anna understood her mother better than ever before. The midwife said: "You men shouldn't expect to have food on the table as usual when you come home from work once the baby is born. It's hard work taking care of a newborn. How much time do you think women spend breastfeeding per day? Take a guess!"

"An hour?" ventured one of the men, with an unsure smile.

"No!" the midwife practically shrieked in triumph. "What do *you* think?" She had turned toward Aksel.

"Eight hours?"

"Yes, that's correct," she said, disappointed he knew the answer. "That's a whole workday."

"Do you have children yourself?" asked one of the pregnant women.

"No," the midwife replied, with a click conjuring a PowerPoint slide on the wall behind her with the alarming title *Sex after birth*. "Sex after birth!" she screamed. "Don't worry if you don't have sex again until six to eight months after giving birth."

Next slide, WordArt. Anna gulped.

A drawing of a red-bearded man in a Fred Flintstone costume on a desert island. Next to him, a crab with eyes on stalks and a big smile on its face (a crabby smile? a crabby face?). On the opposite side of the slide, another island, on which stood a woman with a black bob and a pink heart in her arms, so big it nearly eclipsed her. She had been drawn with a sheepish, apologetic grin. Between them was pasted a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge. The man and the woman.

Two islands – connected by a bridge in San Francisco.

The midwife said: "It's important that you women listen to yourselves and your bodies. Don't do anything you don't feel ready for. As for the men, all I'll say is that you've got to arm yourselves with patience. The mother often has her physical needs satisfied by being with the baby. But you can always try knocking on other doors."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"The neighbour's?" asked a confused pregnant woman.

"No, no, no." The midwife shook her head.

"Do you mean...anal sex?" whispered a small, girlish woman on the verge of disappearing behind her giant belly just like the character holding the heart on the slide.

"More often than not, the rectum is just as afflicted as the front," replied the midwife. "What I'm saying is that there are many other forms of intimacy."

An awkward silence descended over them as the thought *blow job* flashed through everyone's mind.

"Next slide!" bellowed the midwife. "It's okay not to love your child! Men, don't worry if you don't love the child right from the get-go. It can easily take up to six months for you to feel anything since you haven't been part of bearing or birthing the child in the same way."