

What if, if I take your place?

Project by Lina Issa, Artist in residence at Iaspis, Stockholm, 2010.

"The third story is the most visceral, a three-day and three-night swap between a young woman who expresses a desire to step out of her life. What she wants is to simply take some time off, from her mobile, her Facebook, her blog and her boyfriend. She has left detailed and necessarily incomplete instructions on how to fit into her life including the right embrace and position to hold whilst sharing the bed. The story is told with frankness and enthusiasm but there is also the hint that perhaps they have both hold something they are able to retell. The narrative is fragile, as if in its own telling something might vanish, be lost or be manhandled."

William Easton, Tensta Konsthall

From the instructions:

"I sleep on the left side. If he lays there I find a way of moving him, maybe I ask him to get me something. We talk for a long time in bed. I have my head on my pillow (the soft one) on his chest. I make sure my feet are tucked in to the blanket and that I have the cover underneath me so that I take it with me when I turn around from his chest and turn my back at him. I ask him to scratch my back (especially the spot on my left-hand shoulder blade) and he holds me the whole night. His right arm is under my head and I hold his right hand with both my hands. I like it when he talks about when he was a kid. And I like him to say stuff to me in French. I put the alarm on my cell so that I will sleep for 7 hours. I like to wake up early."

The Diary

Friday February 12 18:20

10 minutes missing

I'm sitting on the train to Kiruna. Lina said goodbye at the Central station. We met ten minutes before my departure, and I gave her my keys, my cell and a note with the passwords to my mail, facebook and blog. We hugged and I said I was nervous.

Me too, she said. So there's no way I can reach you now?

No, I disappear completely. Don't tell anyone where I am.

I promise. Just one more thing.

Yes?

What about intimacy?

I'd told him that I wouldn't be mad if it happens. This is your chance, I said, half joking. I mean, three nights in bed with her.

It's ok, I said. If you're going to take over my life you shouldn't come across any boundaries.

She's taking over my boyfriend too, you see...

I've been assigned seat 40 in sleeping car number 12. When I get here, Åsa and Niclas are talking. They're on their way to do a job up in Riksgränsen, both blonde with blushes like tattoos painted onto their cheeks. It's like they're generating light. They've gone to the dining car for a glass of wine, but I said I needed some time alone.

21.10

3 hours missing

When I get to the dining car Niclas waves at me to join them. "Don't try the reindeer stew," he warns me. I order roast beef with boiled potatoes and half a bottle of red.

Åsa has a friend who has a friend who knows Tiger Woods' wife Elin. Åsa feels sorry for Elin.

"There's no point in feeling sorry for her. As if she would ever date him if he wasn't a rich golfer," Niclas says.

"She still has a right to be sad," Åsa says.

"It's the game's fault that things turned out the way they did for Tiger Woods," I say. "That fixation with 18 holes."

22.20

4 hours 10 minutes missing

A conversation which starts on the topic of Åsa's uncle, who is a lone virgin farmer in the country, soon turns to when Niclas was deployed in Afghanistan and witnessed shepherds having sex with their goats at night, under the belief that the darkness hid their secret. "But we had those heat sensors so we saw everything. You were like: guys! It's happening again! And then you got to see as the shepherd snuck up on the goat. They bleated but otherwise didn't seem to care much about what was going on. Maybe they felt sorry for him."

23.10

5 hours missing

Seated in the dining car is also Mehmet Celepti, a man sporting a black toothbrush moustache, and his friend Sigge Mac-Intosh, the karate king. Mehmet tells me that Sigge is the only Swede who's ever beat Dolph Lundgren in a fight. "He's a legend. You're onto something without knowing it. Did you see when Dolph Lundgren hit the ice during the Swedish Eurovision Song Contest, and he started bleeding? You mark my words: Sigge would never have done that."

Five teenage girls are giggling at a man who's fallen asleep over his table. Drunk Northerners sway past us and get caught up in coffee cups.

On our table there's eight empty wine bottles.

01.30

7 hours 20 minutes missing

I'm in bed now. After getting back from the dining car we huddled in our compartment and I shared my Jack Daniels while Niclas showed us pictures of Opium busts he'd participated in in Afghanistan. It made me recall images from when I was there in 2002, back packing at 21. I was dangerously naïve back then. Niclas told me that if I sat at the bar at Mum's Pub tomorrow and ordered a glass of white wine, the mine workers would pay for the rest. "You're going to be like a reindeer calf among wolves up there. They're going to eat you alive. Although, if you could handle the Taliban I guess you should be able to manage a bunch of mine workers from LKAB."

I might never leave Kiruna.

Saturday February 13 10.36

16 hours 26 minutes missing

Goddamn. The city'd promised that I could sleep in their artisan apartment tonight, but when I got there the keys weren't under the door mat like Lennart'd said they would be. So there I was, 770 miles from home with no cell phone. I rang the door bell of an old couple who said "You can come in, yes, but we've got the sniffles and the coughs so you've got no one but yourself to blame if you catch it." I stood in their entrance way and looked up Lennart in the phone book. No answer. "We've been watching telly all night," the old lady said, the resemblance between her and her husband uncanny. "I think it's best if you go to the library and see if they can look someone up for you." So this is where I am. The librarian is trying to find Lennart's phone number while a man with Asbergers syndrome rattles off the greater Stockholm area's zip codes to me.

11.15

17 hours 5 minutes missing

Once again there's no answer at Lennart's. I used the bathroom to splash myself with water and then left my bag at the library while I hit the market and ate souvas and drank Trocadero. They sold vacuum bags, animal hides and salami, and the sun glittered high above the mine and the mountains.

I sat on a folding chair and listened to the men gossip in their native dialect.

"That stupid old coot."

"Yup, seems she's gone and gotten herself a piece of mightier-than-thou, the old woman."

One of the old men had an animal I didn't recognize on his head and a pile of snow covered in fox fur. I bought coffee cheese for the Boyfriend. I wonder what happened last night and what they did yesterday. I wonder if he held her the way he used to hold me. I miss him, more than I thought I would. I have Jack, but he's not one to say much. When he does, it's always a bunch of nonsense spoken through my mouth.

13.00

18 hours 50 minutes missing

I tried the apartment again and this time a dark haired man, his shirt unbuttoned, answered the door. He was uncommonly attractive and spoke to me in an Italian accent. "I will leave to the airport in one hour. Mr Lantto said I should put the key under the carpet. Please come in. Do you like potatoes and cabbage?" "Yeah, I guess" I said. "I will leave potatoes and cabbage for you. Ok?"

Now I'm at the library again, waiting for the Italian to leave. The man with Asberger's has offered me a cup of coffee.

14.10

20 hours missing

The Italian's still here. He appears stressed out, his voice coming out slightly clipped when he speaks, and I feel warm all over when I hear it. His cheeks are red, as if he's been up on the mountain. He smells like fried pork and cheap cologne.

He pointed me to a seat in the kitchen while he was packing his things.

16.30

22 hours 20 minutes missing

Me and Jack have settled into the apartment. We watched the sun set over LKAB through the window. The Italian has left, but his scent lingers.

Lennart stopped by to see to it that everything was ok. I felt ashamed that he could smell the alcohol on my breath before dinner.

18.24

24 hours 14 minutes missing

My dinner consists of potatoes and cabbage left by the Italian, and a bag of hollandaise sauce scrunched up from the cupboard. I drink the wine we didn't finish on the train. Jack keeps me company.

19.38

25 hours 28 minutes missing

I've put on the little black dress, put blush on the cheeks and black on the lashes, and soon I'm heading over to Mum's Pub. The stereo is playing Monica Törnell's Vintersaga on repeat. From the mines and trough the earth, I can hear the song of the great sadness. At home, the Boyfriend's probably preparing dinner (for her).

I don't know if I'm homesick, but I know that I long for intimacy. I'm a tad bit horny, and the red wine has given me a buzz. Let the love exist between the night shift and the dream.

I wonder if they're thinking of me back home, if they're wondering where I am. I drown my sorrows in whiskey. I don't want to go out but I don't want to stay in. Is this what real loneliness is like? When the love runs on cheap wine and no one knows what you're doing or where you are. I feel fat but my face is pretty.

That's what he said: "You've gained weight, sweetheart. Your body's become real sweet." I got to fall asleep on his chest and I was able to stand him thinking of her because it was me he was holding. I couldn't even tell that I was shrinking, because I've got no fucking self esteem left. I drink. I'm starting to

feel depressed. Lapland's anxiety is like ice picks in my heart.

19.55

25 hours 45 minutes missing

The telly shows telly. The Olympics. I miss the Globe Arena and the streetlights across Nynäsvägen. Why did I want to be alone?

Maybe I should watch the Swedish Eurovision after all.

But of course you're going to be happy, honey. You don't need Kiruna for that, do you?

But mom, what am I supposed to do?

Don't worry. You don't need to keep searching so frantically. Just follow your heart where it wants to go.

20.11

26 hours 1 minute missing

I logged into my Facebook account, couldn't help myself. Clearly a mistake. My status right now reads: "Nonstop wet kisses on my nose." I started crying.

Jaris' ex Anna Maria is competing in Eurovision.

She's singing about Him and Me now.

I swear to God I'm going to learn how to swear in a Northern dialect.

It all started when I saw an ad that asked simply "What if I took your place?" I sent off a response and a week later I met up with Lina Issa in her studio on Södermalm in Stockholm. I tried to tell her as much as I could about my life. "I've got a boyfriend since three months back. He's young with a big black tuft of hair like Strindberg. I want you to treat him like a prince while I'm gone." "What are you going to do?" she asked. "I want to travel far away from here, by train. North bound, I think. I'd like to see the northern lights. And...you don't know what it is, but I'd like to experience Monica Törnell's Vintersaga; take the train to Kiruna and let the alcohol flow freely at Mum's Pub." Lina Issa didn't understand a thing but smiled anyway, stretched her arms out and showed me two wet armpits worthy of great art and certain sacrifice. I decided that she would get to take control of my life for a weekend. "No limits, ok?"

21.30

27 hours 20 minutes missing

Anna Maria came in last place. I'm heading out to the pub soon. I'm nervous.

22.00

27 hours 50 minutes missing

Alright. Vintersaga, then I've got to pee one last time.

11.12

41 hours 2 minutes missing

I awoke on the couch with Jack squashed underneath my arm.

When I arrived at the pub yesterday the bouncer said: "Sorry, but we're full", despite the fact that it was just me in the line. After a while one of the men smoking outside started to complain out loud. "But she's a woman for crying out loud. There you go. Let her in so."

"We're full up. Sorry."

"If you don't let her in right this second I'm going to go in and throw someone else out on the street."

The tension was mounting and after another second's hesitation the guard finally let me pass.

I went inside and stood by the bar, bought myself a pint and watched the start of the hunt on the televi-

sion mounted to the wall. After 10 minutes a big blond came and stood beside me. He ordered a beer and a double whiskey. We stood quietly for another 10 minutes until I realized he wouldn't say anything if I didn't. I touched his arm and raised my glass. He raised his in response, knocked it back and ordered another one straight away.

"So you live her in Kiruna?"

"Yup."

"And you work here too?"

"Yup."

"In the mines?"

"Yup."

...

"What are you here in Kiruna for then?"

"I gave a weekend of my life to an artist back home, which left me with some time to do as I wished with. So I decided to take the train to Kiruna and let the alcohol flow freely here at Mum's Pub."

"You're taking the piss now."

"No. Would you like to dance?"

"Men from Norrbotten don't dance."

His name was Janne. Like all the other men in the pub he didn't remove his jacket during the entire time we were there. The women, on the other hand, competed in who could showcase the deepest cleavage of them all.

He bought me beer and Jägermeister. Two hours later and we were really getting into it.

"You have to excuse me. I think I'm drunk, and I become real quiet then," he said.

"No worries, I can't tell the difference. And you're nice to look at."

When the pub closed he walked me home. A snow storm was raging and he let me borrow his hat.

"They're moving Kiruna, because the ground can't carry it anymore. It's because of the mine," he said when we stood outside my door.

"I know. But it doesn't really matter."

"No."

He gave me a peck before he left and I was alone in the snow with wet snot on my cheek.

Sunday February 14 18.10

48 hours missing

Why kill yourself when you can wallow in self despair? I want him to sleep with her because that's what I'm used to. Do you see how absurd that is? I've gotten so used to pain that I've managed to connect it to love. You're no longer in love when the love stops hurting.

All the trains departing from Narvik are delayed because of the snow storm in Riksgränsen. I've managed to procure a urinary tract infection while I'm sitting here. I've been affected off and on ever since he came back.

Outside the window, LKAB is lit up like a beacon at night. It's beautiful, I think, with the lights and the mine like a bottomless abyss underneath. It's beautiful when the snow chases across the streets, as if disturbed by giant snakes winding their way through Kiruna.

18.50

48 hours 40 minutes missing

I'm so cold the hair on my arm is standing on end. There's a burning, clawing feeling between my legs – just because he's got her hanging onto him like a rotten fucking appendix.
It's like I've gotten to the point where I'll board any train just to force myself to believe it's the right one. His claws are in me. Sometimes my body is floating in the clouds without a safety net, while his claws cut deep groves into my skin. I don't think he even notices when he lets me slip. I fall, he fly.
Janne walked me to the door, even let me borrow his hat. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you that no one knows where I am. For all I know, you could be a serial killer or something."
I could die now, without regret.
Bodil Malmsten says: "To think of the people worse off than you are. Ha! As if that wouldn't enhance your wish to pull the trigger. Bam!"
I'll let Kiruna's snowstorms whip away my self-destruction.
I'll let Kiruna's snowstorms whip away my self-destruction, and then I'll start lying.

19.30

49 hours 20 minutes missing

I'm cold, still. The train was three hours late, and I need to make my connection in Boden. I've got an entire compartment to myself and have strategically spread my possessions so that no one can take a seat next to me. I'm experiencing cabin fever but the other way around. A cabin awakening. One continuous stretch of self-destructive behavior on the path to self-knowledge.

20.10

50 hours missing

Bodil Malmsten has taught me words like self-pity. I'm an extremely self-pitying person. When I'm not thinking of what I'm feeling I'm thinking of what I want to feel or what I need to do to feel that way, and I either feel fine or I feel bad. I feel fine, I tell dad, just so that he won't have to worry.

I'm fine when I write, or when I travel. That is, perhaps, the only thing I want to dedicate myself to. Preferably with someone else, preferably with my own child. We could lie on the seats of the compartment and stare at the pole star; the haunting white birch trees and the reindeers and the northern lights.

If someone gave me a hundred grand, I could take time off to write. Somebody, please God, give me a hundred grand.

20.40

50 hours 30 minutes

"But what are you going to do?" everyone asked before I took off.
I'm going to go by train somewhere far away. I like riding the train. It's like a voluntary prison in motion. I like riding far away. I like realizing that I'm not even wearing a watch.

21.00

50 hours 50 minutes missing

I made blood bread and am still experiencing the aftershocks. When you boil blood bread it looks as though you're boiling shit.

22.22

52 hours 12 minutes missing

Happiness means two.
You need the other to cope with your own loneliness. You need that someone who likes you when they look at you, and it hurts inside. Someone who's capable of touch. I don't particularly like touching myself, nor do I like touching other women. The Hurricane's good. She doesn't touch indiscriminately. Last night, I dreamt of her. She put on my clothes after I went away. All the people I fell in love with fell in love with her. Riding the train gives me a sense of calm, as long as I focus on the trip and not on the destination.
In a purple Systembolaget-bag I've put a couple of apples. I forgot to rinse them. I once had a friend, Josefin, who rinsed all her fruit. Even the bananas. She was really my older neighbor. Really, I was afraid of her and tried to sneak past her house without her seeing me (when she was playing in her yard, I stayed

inside).

Josefin rinsed her apples in the puddles left over from the rain. She told me that positively EVERYTHING could contain traces of pesticides, and that I could take in cyanide and die a prolonged, painful death. This coming from her mother, who was mentally unstable. "My mom's mentally unstable and broke down," she'd brag, and I thought it was so strange to break down that you'd probably have to be mentally unstable to do so.

Once, after we'd found worms in the raspberries growing in my yard, Josefin threw up behind the gooseberries. Our Labrador Alex ate the pink porridge. Me and Josefin saved our pee in a bucket behind the playhouse. We used to force all our friends to pee in the bucket too (the stench was horrible). We used to hide in each other's closets, bring a third girl in and invite her to talk badly behind the person in the closet's back. It was almost always me who had to hide in the closet and listen to them cry that I was disgusting, ugly and pathetic. I sat there for hours, until the third girl had gone and Josefin opened the door, nearly peeing herself she was laughing so hard.

She called me Kicki. It was the 80s, and Kicki was stuck in the closet. Nightmares and suicide notes even then. I used to be so small and so tall and so thin. Hair the color of rat hanging into my eyes. I didn't want to be a girl. I wanted to be a boy, and stuffed the marble egg my brother bought in Holland down my pants, pretending that it was my dick hanging there, long and lean and heavy.

24.10

54 hours missing

Where I'm from there is no such thing as sick leave; you go into the woods and chop down some trees and that's that. I'd rather take my own life than go on sick leave. But then that fucking belt snapped and all my dreams of death was left hanging from the ceiling without me. There are still rust colored stains left in the floorboards. I can't describe the feeling of relief I experienced when the apartment filled up with fire fighters and police men, back then. Professionals with warm hands, promising that things were going to be ok. They told me it hurt to watch me lying there, lying there trying to bleed out.

Of course I'm happy that I survived. For dad's sake. For my siblings. Friends. They all looked so scared when they came to pick me up. Cried all over me, snot in my hair, vision filled with the wretched faces of loved ones and I was just a little sister with bandages around my wrists and scratches down my throat.

I was so sorry that I forgot about them. Imagine how sad you can become just by being left alone with yourself. It was too a relief when the fire fighter said that he'd sit with me, and He had to sit in the front. He was mad in the hospital. "Fuck that I have to stay here all night. I do have better things to do." And then he left, anyway. I was not given any sedatives because I was drunk, and when they closed up my wrists I was so, so scared. I felt tiny and scared like a dollhouse doll and he wasn't there, he was gone to the house. The house with the scuffed furniture and the wallpaper that swelled and curled downwards, like dandelions in lukewarm water.

Monday February 15 01.20

55 hours 10 minutes missing

If I could only grow to like touching myself, things would work themselves out. The answer was in the piles of snow outside LKAB. I know what I want now. I know what I need. I need to write.

01.40

55 hours 20 minutes

Is it supposed to be this difficult? The scar is barely visible, now; it looks like a scratch from a kitten, that's how nicely it's healed. And there's no point in talking about the roof. Don't sit there. Walk past. Leave me alone. Except for you. YOU. Come.

I am walking through the snow. Follow my tracks. Catch me when I am fall.

07.30

61 hours 20 minutes

I guess what I really want to know is if I'm exchangeable. Perhaps she's better at being me than I am. But you can only guess at the level of my self-confidence. Tall like a high rise, that's me.

The birches stand like sparkling, white skeletons in the early morning light. Being alone no longer scares me. The pole star is barely visible but the train is trying to trick me into going back to sleep. I pretend that I'm running away, for real.

08.55

62 hours 45 minutes missing

“All roads are bridges when I’m with you,” I told him so that he could understand how much I care for him. When really, bridges scare me to death. The ones with the high railings, those work. The ones with the railings that barely reach your midsection, not so much. My worst ride will always be the Ferris wheel. The last time we were on it, I had to tell him to grab hold of me so that I wouldn’t jump. Hard!, I told him angrily. He laughed and squeezed me so hard that it felt as though I would crumble to pieces, and we got to see Stockholm float like a fucking spaceship. One time, the Psychopath* pressed down just so, and cracked one of my ribs. Or, he sat on me and then just Crack. But. Bridges.

*Letter from the Psychopath: “If curious: I’ve been told that I don’t have a personality disorder (so, no psychopath ;)). However, there’s still Attention Deficit Disorder and possibly Aspergers. I’m among good company; me, Einstein and Hitler.”

Monday February 15 18.10

72 hours post-departure

I walk through my apartment, looking for traces of her.

He comes home. We sit on the sofa and I tell it to him like it is: “I invited her because I wanted to give you everything I can’t give you now that I’m feeling this way. I’m tired and I wanted to leave but I like you so much. Get him to understand that there is something special about him, I told her. Carry my love and my lust when I’m not able to.” He blushes, he’s so ashamed.

Sure it hurts. And sure I cry over their undone dishes and empty wine glasses. But life is a social experiment. You might as well decide that you’re the one in control. In the same way masochists are masochists because they actually love being in control, I let her sleep in our bed in order not to lose control. It’s his fault (my ex). Of course it’s his fault. I had to turn into this; it was the only way I could find to endure it all. “It’s only human to fall for someone else now and then,” he used to say. “Do as you wish, as long as you protect yourself.”

I wanted to smash his face in. But just care for fuck’s sake! Keep me to yourself! His inability to empathise, his absolute (pure white) jealousy. And here I am, doing the same thing.

This was all just a test? My boyfriend asks.

No.

You’d probably have been disappointed if it turned out I didn’t do anything.

Probably.

*

I want him to grow, and I suspect I’m not enough.

“I don’t want to be together with someone so tiny!” I said, furious, one night. I think he got me.

“Straighten up.”

I managed to convince myself that it was him and not me that I was talking to.

**

She’s been sleeping in my bed and he’s been close behind her, holding her like he used to hold me.

He said he was confused.

But, life is a social experiment.

He says: “Exchangeable girlfriends; the new black. You’ll never be alone again!”

His friends call it:

“A modern monogamous schizophrenic relationship, get 3 for 1!”

“Post-humanist, post-modernist, transcends people and mentalities!”

A modern love.

That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever heard.