

Translated excerpt

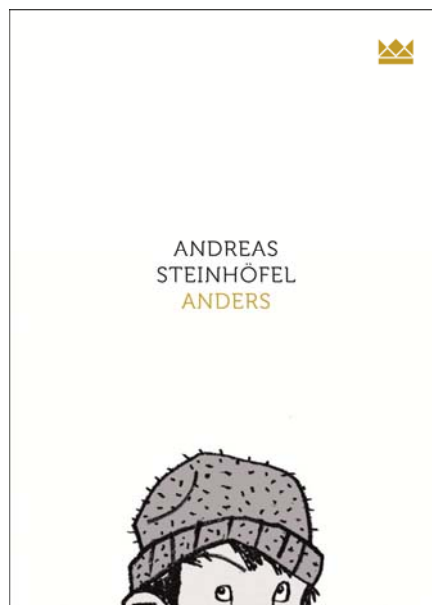
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Anders

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[...]

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Why Angels Fall

A child falls from a tree.

The mother is shocked, anxious – and then cross. She vents anger and disapproval, she scolds, and in the end she makes new rules.

Genuine concern for her child is one factor.

Another is worry that friends, neighbours, colleagues will see her as a bad mother, incapable of protecting her already damaged son from everyday risks.

It's the sort of thing that gets you ostracized, as Melanie Winter knows.

A sudden hush descends on the room when you enter.

You go to the supermarket and everyone ignores you.

On the parent-teacher committee your once privileged voice isn't heard.

When other kids have parties your family is left out.

Without a doubt, Melanie Winter knows precisely how it works. She pronounced the guilty verdict on Eckhard Stack last year.

Arson and insurance fraud.

'So how was I?' asked the boy at the door.

'At maths?'

'I mean, overall.'

'Boring. You were a nice kid, but boring. You would have been just as nice and boring in sixty years' time. Nothing interesting would have happened to you. Your accident was a stroke of luck.'

'No one else has told me that.'

'We're not supposed to say these things. What's wrong with your forehead? Mistook your nose for a brake?'

'Pretty much. Happened four days ago. Can I come in?'

Stack stepped aside, allowing Anders Winter to squeeze past. Romy seized her chance and snuck in after him, followed by a gust of cold air. Stack had put her out barely an hour ago, straight after lunch. Cunning old chook.

Anders took off his jacket without waiting to be asked and went to hang it on a hook in the hall. He had to stand on tiptoe to reach. Stack, who had been cursing the autumn chill in his bones for days, watched intently but made no move to help. He felt an unexpected warmth.

'Found your way here, then?'

'Yes,' said Anders, still struggling with his jacket and the hook.

'You remembered from before?'

'I just followed your instructions.'

'Except I didn't give you any.'

'But...'

It was like Anders had been interrupted halfway through a film or his music had been switched off in the middle of a track. He let go of the jacket, which stayed on the hook, and turned slowly towards Stack.

The boy's face resembled a mask from an ancient Greek tragedy, a stylized but powerful display of anguish. He looked distraught. A deep furrow ran down his bruised forehead as if someone had carved a vertical gouge through his flesh.

'Tell you what I think,' said Stack. 'You remembered. Deep down. You knew where your old tutor lived. You must have been here enough times with your mother.'

Sudden reversal of fortunes. At the last second tragedy had been averted and order restored. A happy ending. The boy's forehead smoothed.

Because the explanation reassured him – or gave him a suitable cover story?

'I'd say it happens a lot. You just don't realize. You say things or do things because you remember without knowing it. Am I right?'

'Maybe.'

'Have you tried to come here before? During the day or at night.'

'Who knows. Why is the chicken allowed inside?'

'You're changing the subject.'

'I already told you. I don't know. Why do you let the chicken inside?'

Stack shrugged. 'Why are dogs and cats allowed inside?'

Anders pointed to the floor. Romy had retreated to the kitchen but not before leaving a greeny-white streak in the hall. 'They don't crap all over the place?'

'Is that all?' Stack gestured dismissively. 'Romy likes to make her mark here and there. It's no big deal if you clean up straightaway.'

'It's unhygienic.'

'So what? Only the likes of your mother worry about that stuff.'

'But it *is* unhygienic.'

'You'd rather cut out the germs and have disinfectant and allergies? If you want to lecture me on how I should housekeep, you can clear off. Or you can stay and have something to drink.'

'I'll stay. How about some milk?'

'A *please* wouldn't hurt. It's in the fridge.'

Stack filled a glass and Anders emptied it in quick gulps. Romy peered out at them from under the table. Every now and then her beak sped forward to collect a tiny crumb of bread lodged between the tiles.

'Why do you call her Romy?' asked Anders. He looked much younger with a milky moustache on his upper lip.

'She was my wife's favourite actress. Romy Schneider. Sound familiar?'

Anders shook his head.

'You must have seen the films about Sissi, Empress of Austria?'

'Nope.'

'Then you should. They're the pinnacle of kitsch.'

'Black and white?'

'Colour.'

Anders nodded and looked around. 'Haven't you got any photos? Of your wife, I mean.'

'I took them down after a while. It hurt to look at them every day.'

Anders smiled and wiped away the moustache with the back of his hand. 'Please could I see one?'

Stack paused, but only briefly. 'Follow me.'

In the lounge Anders settled into a large armchair next to the coffee table where the morning paper and a TV guide were laid out. Stack went to the sideboard that still housed their best china, unused for fifteen years. Perched on top was a safe, around the same height and width as a shoebox, but big enough for documents and papers. It hadn't been built into the wall, as it should have been, nor was it locked. Stack tugged open the door and took out a photo album.

Anders looked at him, puzzled.

There's nothing else in there,' explained Stack. 'That's why I don't lock it. It's just a fire precaution. Ever since it happened – you heard about the fire?'

'I read the *Bergwälder Chronicle* from the time before my accident. Went through the online archive, thinking something would jog my memory, but it didn't. Your chicken shed burnt down last summer and everyone thought it was you. That you started the fire, I mean.'

'Not everyone, but some did and still do. Your mother, for example. That's why she stopped bringing you here for maths.' Stack pursed his lips for a moment. What story had Anders spun for his lilac-toned mother before coming here?

'I'll tell you about the fire another time. At any rate, it's why I keep the album in a safe. Nothing means more to me than these pictures.'

He opened the book. Memories leapt off the page, and he could easily have described their hue: a warm chestnut brown that promised sweetness and peace. But he knew the promise was deceptive. The colour whispered and tempted him with the sole aim of sticking to his thoughts and feelings like mildew that would take days, or probably weeks, to scrape off. He turned to a page with a single portrait photo.

'She looks friendly.'

Stack felt the warmth of the body next to him, a child's breathing, saw a small finger trace the outlines of a woman's face.

'Was she kind? I can't make out colours on photos.'

'Hmm?'

Stack had hardly been listening. His eyes followed the child's finger. The face was luminous, luminous... You had to look hard to make out Elke's faint smile. For thirty years that smile had made him wonder whether Elke was poking fun at him. Thirty years he had loved.

He could have drawn every detail of her features with his eyes closed, would have recognized her voice among millions, smelt her scent across continents. His memory of her was the heart in his heart, beating chestnut brown, chestnut brown...

'You should put away the album,' he heard Anders say next to him. 'And we should pay your wife a visit at the cemetery.'

'When?' Stack asked softly.

'Now.'

And so their friendship began.

The same day, or maybe the next, a boy in another part of town is thinking about his friend.

Sometimes the friend unnerves him.

Once, last year, they were meeting up for the town's summer festival in the market square, it was late at night, and he saw the friend step out from between two carnival floats. Black emerged from black. Then a patch of white appeared at the height of the friend's face, followed by two other light patches where hands should be.

Black jeans, black t-shirt, the boy realized, relieved. But the first image is still how he sees his friend: as part of the darkness, wreathed in shadows.

There used to be a third boy with them. He was as good as dead for almost a year. When he came back, he never really became one of the three, and the gap created by his absence is still there. Even when he is with them, he is mostly just a patch of light. His place remains empty, but things have changed. The dark friend is losing power.

At school he ordered another kid to get out of his way. To think he even had to say it. And then the kid looked him up and down, and turned away without giving any ground. And the dark friend let him. Tried to shrug it off as if it were beneath him to bring the wayward kid to justice. Walked on, not knowing where to look, his lips pale, his cheeks waxen.

And all because of the third boy. In his quiet way, he is the centre of attention. Without anyone noticing, he is watched by them all.

His aura is different: calm, like the moment before you fall asleep and slip into the first of the coming night's dreams. He exudes comfort when you're haunted by fears, filled with restlessness or shaken inside; if the world is off-kilter, he restores the equilibrium; when life is broken, his laughter takes away the jagged edges.

The watching boy knows all this – and knows that adults cannot see it. They think the third boy is strange, they stare at him, find him disconcerting. Like most of the teachers at school, they don't welcome him, they treat him with suspicion – understandably, as the third boy sometimes shines too brightly.

So brightly that looking at him makes you worry that he will vanish in a final flash of silvery-white light. So brightly you wonder what all this light might reveal, how far it might reach. Which is why adults make themselves at home in darkness and avoid the light.

Out of fear.

The dark friend is still a child, but has long been at home in the shadows. The watching boy has never found out why and he does not dare ask. He knows, though, that the friend will not stand by while the empire he has built on threats, fear and sometimes violence crumbles before his eyes. And maybe he deserves some sympathy? A king does not give up his throne without a fight.

But surely the third boy is in the right? He doesn't mean to challenge anyone's position; it's almost as if fate has chosen him for the role.

Impossible to pick sides.

So the watching boy is torn between a friend who lives in darkness and a friend surrounded by blinding light.

Both scare him.

He won't abandon either.

The warmth of early autumn turned colder, but the days stayed dry. At the sight of millions of orangey-yellow and red-brown leaves, Eckhard Stack was plunged into a state of melancholy, as he was every year. Around the site of the chicken hut the trees blazed with colour, but the earth under the wooden bench where he was sitting with Anders was black – choked and bare beneath their feet. It was a fitting stage for the story he had promised to tell the boy on his first visit, four days earlier.

'I was sitting in front of the TV. I always turn the volume right up, not because I can't hear. I just like a bit of noise. It had been a nice enough day, not too hot, and by the evening the wind had got up. Even at half eight, though, it was bright as day. What alerted me to the fire I can't say. Maybe the smell.'

Stack sucked the air noisily through his nostrils, as if picking up the scent again.

'Either way, I went outside. As soon as I left the house, I started running, and called the fire brigade on the way. They're good lads, but it takes time to get up here from town. I knew it was going to be too late. It was already too late by the time I got here. See over there? The square frame in the ground? It used to be a lean-to for chicken feed, tools, building material and the like. The front had already collapsed, the door to the chicken shed was on fire. Nothing to be done. And the poor birds were screaming. You've never heard such screams.'

Elke! Elke! He had screamed too... The scene began to blur before his eyes. Stack felt a tear run down his cheek. He breathed deeply, for a moment certain that the air was full again with the smell of burning wood and flesh.

'Any idea who it was?'

'No. In crime stories it always comes down to envy, hatred or revenge, but none of the usual motives make sense. Who would want to bother me? And why? I'd say it was someone having a bit of fun. Set light to the place for the hell of it. Out of sheer nastiness or stupidity. Youngsters most likely. Thought they'd burn off their high spirits with a fire. I'm sick to the teeth of it.'

Stack laughed dryly and spat. The globule flew through the air, hit the ground and picked up dirt, rolling a few centimetres. A dark grey, almost dainty sphere.

'But it's good to have a kid around again. I'd forgotten how bright you are. Light in the darkness of the world. You reach for the future like flames. Full of hope, still believing in change. I've lost that light. I don't believe things can get better. But some of you manage it. You keep the light with you as you get older, you protect the flame. That's why the death of a child is unbearable. A bit of the future dies.'

'Why are you so... I mean, how did you lose your light?'

'I don't know. Elke...'

Stack's chest constricted. He lifted his gaze from the burnt earth and looked at the blaze of autumn trees. 'The brightness of the stars in your sky just gets weaker. And then you can't see them. You feel a chill in your bones. Everything looks the same. Any hope you once had seems like an illusion. Instead of dreams and ideals, there's just fog, and no way through it. Life has defeated you, and you just want some peace. You want to lie down and sleep. And you know that everywhere around you there are people who feel exactly the same – lost, lonely, tired, wretched. If we took each other by the hand it wouldn't be so bad, but we don't. We never will.'

Stack fell silent. After a while he felt a small hand on his leg. He took the warm fingers in his. He thought: the hand will crack like a brittle egg if I squeeze it.

'But you chose to live out here,' said Anders. 'No one forced you.'

'Right. Because the idea of holding hands is a pipe dream. It's never going to happen. We're all too different. Just because I feel some of the same things as my neighbour doesn't make him my friend. No, most of the time I'd rather be alone.'

Anders had scraped together a pile of burnt earth with his feet. He pushed it from left to right, from right to left. 'I wish I could live alone,' he said. 'It would be quieter. Inside me.'

'Do you think? Well, maybe. But there's a price for being alone. People look at you differently. As long as you don't draw attention to yourself and play by their rules, they leave you in peace. But if something goes wrong... Then you're in trouble. They'll turn up at your house, demanding answers and blaming you for everything they don't like about their lives. It's standard human behaviour and it's always been that way. The further you live from town, the more likely you'll be blamed. Especially if you live alone.'

Stack noticed that Anders had flattened the pile of earth, shaping it to a square about fifty centimetres long and wide. With the tip of his right shoe he started to draw. Two diagonal lines, propped against each other like a roof.

'With you it's different,' said Anders, adding downward lines to the two outside corners of the roof. 'It wouldn't matter if you lived in town. You're alone on the inside, and no one can change that. On the outside you've got the chicken and now me. You're not alone.'

Stack nodded, taken aback.

'If you had sixty chickens again,' Anders went on, 'you'd be sixty times less alone.' He drew a horizontal line, starting from the bottom of the left vertical and joining it to the right. 'We should rebuild the shed. You, me and dad. Should be easy with the three of us, right?'

'It's not a bad idea,' murmured Stack. He looked at the house that Anders had drawn in the dirt. His chest constricted again, but this time for different reasons.

'But... don't you think he'll tell your mother?'

'Dad will say he's taking me out somewhere. Cycling, most likely.'

'Do you think I'll get along with him? I'm particular when it comes to getting things done.'

'He won't mind. He's used to that from mum. And you'll like him. He's kind-hearted.'

'I see.' Stack laughed. Surprised he realized that he was still holding the child's hand. It seemed to be burning, as if the boy had a fever. Stack hadn't noticed until then.

Either way, it didn't matter. A fire is still a fire: it draws strength from what it burns.

A child falls from a tree. The father is shocked, anxious – and then secretly he is pleased. He does not get angry, scold, or punish. He stays calm.

Genuine concern for the boy is one reason. Founded in the belief that you have to fall before you stand.

Friends, neighbours, colleagues will be surprised that he hasn't disciplined his son. Let them think what they like. He has confidence in the boy, and for the price of a few drops of blood, he shows him trust.

Once he tried to put a giant 11 on the roof, supposedly as a birthday surprise, but really to show everyone on the street what a great guy he is. The ultimate dad with the ultimate idea for pleasing his public. And what good did it do the boy?

So far the kid has responded with friendly disinterest to his considered and sincere attempts to pay him more attention. Only once, as a solitary sign of good will, the boy suggested that the three of them should watch TV in colour, instead of his usual insistence on black and white. A French film had just started, with Romy Schneider in the lead. Melanie watched unhappily as the actress appeared naked by a pool, but their son merely asked them about the water and how deep it might be.

So when Anders came up to his father one day and proposed a building project, André Winter did not hesitate and said yes. Then the boy explained that the project was a chicken shed for Eckhard Stack, and André stiffened slightly. Anders noticed the movement and unexpectedly took his hand, releasing a flood of memories...

A tiny bundle of life weighing almost nothing, dark grey eyes even then, a sweet smell, a delicate, almost inaudible mewling...

Anders was saying they could cycle to Stack's place – then it wouldn't be a lie to tell Melanie they'd been out together on their bikes, would it?

André Winter nodded.

Part of him had been listening. Another part had been wondering how he could keep the small hand in his big hand forever.