Malena and Beata Ernman Svante and Greta Thunberg



Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis



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Our House is on Fire

BEATA and MALENA ERNMAN GRETA and SVANTE THUNBERG



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Our House is on Fire



This could have been my story. An autobiography of sorts, had I been so inclined.

But autobiographies don't really interest me.

There are other more important things.

This story was written by Svante and me together with our daughters, and it's about the crisis that struck our family.

It's about Greta and Beata.

But above all it's about the crisis that surrounds and affects us all. The one we humans have created through our way of life: beyond sustainability, divorced from nature, to which we all belong. Some call it over-consumption, others call it a climate crisis.

The vast majority seem to think that this crisis is happening somewhere far away from here, and that it won't affect us for a very long time yet.

But that's not true.

Because it's already here and it's happening around us all the time, in so many different ways. At the breakfast table, in school corridors, along streets, in houses and apartments. In the trees outside your window, in the wind that ruffles your hair.

Perhaps some of the things that Svante and I, along with the children, decided to share here, after considerable deliberation, should have been saved for later.

Once we had more distance.

Not for our sake, but for yours.

No doubt this would have been perceived as more acceptable. A bit more agreeable.

But we don't have that kind of time. To have a fighting chance, we have to put this crisis in the spotlight right now.

A few days before this book was first published in Sweden in August 2018, our daughter Greta Thunberg sat down outside the Swedish Parliament and began a school strike for the climate – a strike that is still going on today, on Mynttorget in the Old Town in Stockholm, and in many places around the world.

Since then a lot has changed. Both for her and for us as a family.

Some days it's almost like a fairy tale. A saga.

But that's a story for another book.

This story is about the road to Greta's school strike. The road to 20 August 2018.

Malena Ernman, November 2018

P.S. Before this book was published we announced that any money we might earn from it would go to Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and other non-profit organizations, through a foundation we've set up.

And that's how it is.

Because that's what Greta and Beata have decided.

I

Behind the Curtain

Elegy

For the day wears on.
The sun will die at seven.
Speak up, experts on darkness,
who will brighten us now?
Who turns on a Western backlight,
who dreams an Eastern dream?
Someone, anyone, bring a lantern!
Preferably you.

– Werner Aspenström



Scene 1. One Last Night at the Opera

It's places, everyone.

The orchestra tune their instruments one last time and the lights go down in the hall. I'm standing next to the conductor, Jean-Christophe Spinosi, we're just about to walk through the stage door and take our positions.

Everyone is happy tonight. It's the final performance, and tomorrow we all get to go home to our loved ones. Or on to the next job. Home to France, Italy and Spain. Home to Oslo and Copenhagen. On to Berlin, London and New York.

The last few performances have felt like being in a trance.

Anyone who has ever worked on stage knows what I mean. Sometimes there is a kind of flow, an energy that builds in the interaction between stage and audience and sets off a chain reaction that unfolds from performance to performance, from night to night. It's like magic. Theatre and opera magic.

And now we're at the final performance of Handel's *Xerxes* at the Artipelag arts centre in the Stockholm archipelago. It is 2 November 2014, and on this evening I will sing my last opera in Sweden. But no one is aware of that. Including me.

This evening I will sing my last opera ever.

The atmosphere is electric, and everyone backstage is walking on air, a few centimetres above Artipelag's brand-new concrete floor.

They are filming as well. Eight cameras and a full-scale production team are recording the performance.

Through the stage door you can hear the sound of 900 silent people. The King and Queen are in attendance. Everyone is there.

I'm pacing back and forth. I'm trying to breathe, but I can't. My body seems to want to twist to the left and I'm sweating. My hands are falling asleep. The last seven weeks have been one long nightmare. Nowhere is there the slightest bit of calm. I feel sick, yet beyond nausea. Like a drawn-out panic attack.

As if I had slammed right into a glass wall and got stuck mid-air as I was falling to the ground. I'm waiting for the thud. Waiting for the pain. I'm waiting for blood, broken bones and the wail of ambulances.

But nothing happens. All I see is myself suspended in the air in front of that bloody glass wall, which just stands there without the slightest crack.

'I'm not feeling well,' I say.

'Sit down. Do you want some water?' We're speaking French, the conductor and I.

Suddenly my legs give out. Jean-Christophe catches me in his arms.

'It's fine,' he says. 'We'll delay the performance. They can wait. We'll blame it on me, I'm French. We're always late.'

Someone laughs.

I really have to hurry home after the performance. My younger daughter, Beata, is turning nine tomorrow and I have a thousand things to take care of. But now I am where I am. Unconscious, in the arms of the conductor.

Typical.

Someone caresses my forehead.

Cut to black.

Scene 2. The Ironworks

I grew up in a terrace house in the small, northern town of Sandviken, Sweden. Mum was a deacon and Dad worked as an accountant at the Sandvik ironworks. I have a sister, Vendela, three years my junior, and a brother, Karl-Johan. Mum named him after the Swedish baritone Carl-Johan 'Loa' Falkman because she thought Loa was so handsome.

This was the extent of the connection to opera and classical music I had at home.

We did like to sing though. We sang a lot. Folk music, ABBA, John Denver. All in all we were just another small-town Swedish family. The only thing that might have set us apart was my parents' involvement with vulnerable people.

In our little home on Ekostigen, on the outskirts of the Vallhov neighbourhood, humanitarianism reigned – if someone needed help it was our duty to try to offer that help to them. My mother carried on this family tradition from her father, Ebbe Arvidsson, who was a high-up official in the Church of Sweden and a pioneer in ecumenism and modern aid work. So in my younger years I often found myself living under the same roof as refugees and undocumented immigrants.

It could be a bit chaotic at times.

But it worked out fine.

Whenever we travelled somewhere it was always to visit my mother's best friend, who was a nun; we spent several summers at her convent in the north of England. This is probably why I swear so much on stage. The habit must stem from a sort of chronic childhood tendency towards rebellion, which I don't think I'll ever quite shake.

But apart from the fact that we spent our summers in the dormitories of English convents and that we had refugees living in the garage, we were just like everyone else.

As I said, we sang, and I loved to sing. I sang all the time.

I sang everything and anything – the harder the piece, the more fun it was.

Much later, when I chose to become an opera singer, it was probably for the simple fact that I love a challenge. After all, nothing was harder or more fun than singing opera.

Scene 3. Cultural Workers

Since I was six years old, I've been singing on stage for audiences. Church choirs, vocal groups, jazz bands, musicals, opera. My love for song is boundless – I would rather not stick to any one genre or be put in any fach. My work sprawls in every direction and across all boundaries. I will sing anything as long as the music is good.

In the entertainment industry it's often said that the easier you are to define as an artist the more cookbooks you'll get to write – and my cookbooks presumably shine brighter in their absence than most.

But the past fifteen years, in my view anyway, have a clear through-line, in that I've been trying to combine the height of artistry with a broad, popular repertoire. I've tried to simplify the difficult, take high culture down a notch, widen what is narrow. And vice versa.

I've gone my own way. Against the current and most often alone. Except when Svante was involved, obviously.

What was at first driven by instinct and intuition became a method over the years – akin to a responsibility, a conviction that if you have the ability to push the boundaries of your profession, you are also obliged to try.

Svante and I are among the very few who were given that opportunity.

And we tried.

We are 'cultural workers' – a term widely used in Sweden for anyone working within the arts. We are trained in opera, music and theatre, with half a career of freelance and institutional work behind us. We do what all cultural workers are ultimately programmed to do. We strive and toil to secure our future and reach our eternal goal: finding that new audience.

We come from quite different backgrounds, but have shared the same goal, right from the start.

Different, but similar.

When I was pregnant with our first child, Greta, and working in Germany, Svante was working at three different theatres in Sweden: Östgötateatern, Riksteatern and Orionteatern. Simultaneously. I had several years of binding contracts ahead of me at various opera houses all over Europe. With a thousand kilometres between us, we talked over the phone about how we could get our new reality to work.

'You're one of the best in the world at what you do,' Svante said. 'I've read that in at least ten different newspapers, and as for me, it's more like I'm a bass player in the Swedish theatre. I can very easily be replaced. Not to mention the fact you earn so damned much more than me.'

'Than I do.'

'You earn so damned much more than I do.'

I protested a little half-heartedly but the choice was made, and after Svante's last performance he flew down to join me in Berlin.

The next day Svante's phone rang. He took the call standing on a balcony overlooking Friedrichstrasse. It was late May and the summer heat was already oppressive. We hadn't even been together for six months.

'So bloody typical,' he said, laughing, after he'd hung up a few minutes later.

'Who was that?'

'It was Erik Haag and another guy. They were at the Orion and saw the performance last week.'

Svante had acted with Helena af Sandeberg in a play by Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting*; everyone was doing drugs and swaddling corpses in shrink wrap.

'Fuck me!' was a line that Helena had screamed at Svante several evenings a week since the play opened.

Helena was considered to be the best-looking actress in all of Sweden and I was terribly jealous about the whole thing.

'They're doing a comedy programme for one of the big networks and think I seem like a funny guy, so they were wondering if I wanted to be on it. This is exactly the kind of call I've been waiting for . . .'

'What did you say? You have to do it!' I fixed my eyes on him.

'I told them I'm with my very pregnant girlfriend and that she is working abroad.' He fixed his eyes on me.

'You turned it down?'

'Yes. It's the only way. We're doing this together, otherwise it'll never work.'

And so it was.

A few weeks later we were sitting at the premiere party for the *Don Giovanni* production I was singing in at the Berlin Staats-oper and Svante explained his current professional status to my colleagues, Maestro Barenboim and Cecilia Bartoli.

'So now I'm a housewife.'

Then we kept on doing that for twelve years. It was arduous and hard but also great fun. We spent two months in each city and then we moved on to the next one. Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Amsterdam, Barcelona. Round and round.

We spent the summers in Glyndebourne, Salzburg or Aix en Provence. As you do when you're good at singing opera and other classical music.

I rehearsed twenty to thirty hours a week and the rest of the time we spent together. Free. No relatives, except Grandmother Mona, who sometimes came to stay. No friends. No dinners. No parties. Just us.

Beata was born three years after Greta and we bought a Volvo V70 so we'd have room for doll's houses, teddy bears and tricycles. We carried on. Round and round and round. Those were fantastic years. In wintertime we'd sit in bright, beautiful fin-de-siècle apartments, playing with the girls on the floor, and when spring came we'd stroll out through green, leafy parks together.

Our everyday life was like no one else's. Our everyday life was absolutely marvellous.

Scene 4. Unique Opportunities

'Being involved in Melodifestivalen [the annual song competition in Sweden ahead of the Eurovision Song Contest] is a little like having a baby. You can tell others about it, you can describe it in detail. But only those who've been there can know how it feels'

Anders Hansson is a music producer and we're about to start working on my next album. At the moment we're dragging our suitcases across Stortorget in Malmö on our way to the Stockholm train and Anders is laughing as he explains the situation to Syante and me.

It's the morning after my schlager debut. A big picture of me, Petra Mede and Sarah Dawn Finer adorns the front page of *Aftonbladet*. The caption reads: 'Malmö Arena at 9.23 p.m.' In the picture I am radiating total and utter shock.

Melodifestivalen is the biggest annual TV show in all the Nordic countries. It lasts for six weeks and can only be described as a happy mix between the *X Factor* and the American Super Bowl. Almost half of the population of Sweden watch the final show, and the media surrounding it is second to none. If you enter, you must be prepared for a bumpy ride . . . especially if you do it as an opera singer, like me. But I decided, if you enter Melodifestivalen, you enter to win, and to win well. In other words, the odds should be on you coming in last. You should be alongside all the major performers in the finale – and then you should win by the smallest conceivable margin, preferably decided by the people's vote. So that's exactly what I did. It was the biggest upset in the history of the whole competition.

After that, you'd think it would just be a matter of using our new platform and getting to work. That 'new audience' had indeed been found and the groundwork could not have been laid better.

Melodifestivalen gave us a unique chance – an opportunity that would probably never come again. The audiences poured in. The Minister of Culture talked about a 'Malena effect'.

'Opera's being led away from the salons and back to the people,' was the headline in *Expressen*. And *Dagens Nyheter*'s culture editor wrote: 'It's too good to be true. But it's true.'

For a brief moment I almost believed it was possible: opera could once again be made broad public entertainment.

But when autumn arrived everything was back to normal. Swedish opera institutions weren't calling wanting to make the most of the opportunity. The audience was there for it, but no one seemed interested in reaching them.

So we decided to do everything ourselves.

Title roles in opera houses abroad and a solo artist at home, self-produced concerts, tours and performances.

All in our pursuit of the new, wider audience.

One evening two weeks before the final *Xerxes* performance, Svante and I sat slumped on our bathroom floor in Stockholm. It was late, the children were asleep. Everything was starting to fall apart around us. Our apartment walls were behaving differently. Huge cracks had started running across the floor and ceiling and it felt like the whole block would at any second give way and slide down into Lake Klara.

Greta was eleven, had just started fifth grade, and was not doing well. She cried at night when she should have been sleeping. She cried on her way to school. She cried in her classes and during her breaks, and the teachers called home almost every day. Svante had to run off and bring her home. Home to Moses, because only Moses offered any functioning help.

She sat with our Golden Retriever for hours, petting him and stroking his fur. We tried our best, but nothing helped. She was slowly disappearing into some kind of darkness and little by little, bit by bit, she seemed to stop functioning. She stopped playing the piano. She stopped laughing. She stopped talking.

And.

She stopped eating.

We sat there on the hard mosaic floor, knowing exactly what we would have to do. We would have to do everything. We would have to find the way back to Greta, no matter the cost.

But that would not be enough. The situation called for more than words and feelings. A closing of accounts. A clean break.

'How are you feeling?' Svante asked. 'Do you want to keep going?'

'No.'

'Okay. Fuck this. No more,' he said. 'You can't make opera popular when the opera institutions don't want opera to be popular. And it doesn't matter if someone else finds that *new* audience when no one seems to want it.'

'I agree. I'm done.' And I was.

'If it's not enough getting twenty thousand people to drive through the woods to an art gallery on an island, three kilometres from the nearest bus stop, all with no sponsors and not a single penny in subsidy . . . if even *that* is not enough, not a goddamn thing is going to be enough.'

Svante has a temper, which is not always to his advantage. But there wasn't much to object to in his conclusion.

'We've taken it as far as we can,' I said. 'I honestly don't think I'd survive if we continued.'

'So we'll cancel everything. Every last contract,' Svante went on. 'Madrid, Zurich, Vienna, Brussels. Everything. We'll find something to blame it on. Then we'll change tack. Concerts, musicals, theatre, TV. Sing opera. Sing the music, but no more opera performances.'

'I'll do the final show in two weeks. Then no more.'
I'd made my decision.
'Should we announce it? Or would that be stupid?'
'Yes,' I said. 'That would probably be a stupid thing to do.'

So we didn't say anything.

Scene 5.

Xerxes: King of Persia

It turns out that I was unconscious for almost ten minutes. The audience was informed that unfortunately the performance would be delayed by a few minutes.

Behind the curtain, there was a buzz of discussion about how the situation should be handled, but that was none of my concern. I knew exactly what I was going to do.

It was time to end this once and for all.

I took a sip of water and nodded at the conductor.

'Can you stand up?'

'No.' I stood up.

'Can you walk?'

'No.' I walked towards the stage door. Worried looks flitted all around me.

'But can you sing?'

'No,' I said, nodding at the stage manager, as I strode out onto the stage.

Those who were there say the applause that night was something special. People stood up and cheered in a way they don't usually do.

Everyone backstage was carried by the wings of intoxication. Like in a movie. The King and Queen gave an ovation, and it was as if everyone was speaking through laughter.

As if it were all in slow motion. At half the speed.

Pernilla, my agent, helped me off with my costume and wig. 'Don't tell Svante what happened. He'll only worry for no reason.'

She nodded.

From above came voices from the lobby: Swedish, French, German, Spanish.

They all sounded so happy. And as I was being carried out to the taxi, I saw them raise their champagne glasses in a toast. Three cheers and hip-hip-hurrah.

I lay down on the back seat and cried the whole way into the city.

Not because I was sad. Not because I was relieved. Not because everything was what it was.

I was crying because I had no memory of the performance. It was as though I hadn't been there at all.

Scene 6. Gnocchi

Breakfast: 1/3 banana. Time: 53 minutes

On a white sheet of paper fixed to the wall we note down everything Greta eats and how long it takes for her to eat it. The amounts are small. And it takes a long time. But the emergency unit at the Stockholm Centre for Eating Disorders says that this method has a good long-term success rate. You write down what you eat meal by meal, then you list everything you can eat, things you wish you could eat and things you want to be able to eat further down the line.

It's a short list.

Rice, avocados and gnocchi.

It's Tuesday II November 2014 and we find ourselves somewhere between the abyss and Kungsholms Strand in Stockholm. School starts in five minutes. But there isn't going to be any school today. There isn't going to be any school at all this week.

Yesterday Svante and I got another email from the school expressing their 'concern' about Greta's lack of attendance, despite the fact that they were in possession of several letters from both doctors and psychologists explaining her situation.

Again, I inform the school office of our situation and they reply with an email saying that they hope Greta will come to school as usual on Monday so 'this problem' can be dealt with.

But Greta won't be in school on Monday. Because Greta stopped eating two months ago and unless a sudden dramatic change occurs she's going to be admitted to Sachsska Children's Hospital next week.

We have lunch on the sofa in front of *Once Upon a Time* on DVD. There are several seasons and each season lasts approximately half a geologic age. Fitting. We need oceans of time to get us through our meals.

Svante is boiling gnocchi. It is extremely important that the consistency is perfect, otherwise it won't be eaten. All of this over gnocchi, small pasta dumplings made of potato and shaped like little rugby balls.

We set a specific number of gnocchi on her plate. It's a delicate balancing act; if we offer too many our daughter won't eat anything and if we offer too few she won't get enough. Whatever she ingests is obviously too little, but every little bite counts and we can't afford to waste a single one.

Then Greta sits there sorting the gnocchi. She turns each one over, presses on them and then does it again. And again. After twenty minutes she starts eating. She licks and sucks and chews: tiny, tiny bites. It takes forever. An episode ends. Thirty-nine minutes. We start the next one and note the time in between bites, the number of bites per episode, but we keep quiet.

'I'm full,' she says suddenly. 'I can't eat any more.'

Svante and I avoid looking at each other. We have to hold back our frustration, because we've started to realize that this is the only thing that works. We've explored all other tactics. Every other conceivable way.

We've ordered her sternly. We've screamed, laughed, threatened, begged, pleaded, cried and offered every imaginable bribe. But this seems to be what works the best.

Svante goes up to the sheet of paper on the wall and writes: Lunch: 5 gnocchi. Time: 2 hours and 10 minutes.

Scene 7. On the Art of Baking Cinnamon Buns

It's the third weekend in September 2014, and later in the afternoon I'm going to Artipelag. But now it's all about cinnamon buns.

We're going to bake buns, all four of us, the whole family, and we're determined to make this work. It has to.

If we can bake our buns as usual, in peace and quiet, Greta will be able to eat them as usual, and then everything will be resolved, fixed. It's going to be easy as pie. Baking buns is after all our favourite activity.

So we bake, dancing around in the kitchen so as to create the most positive, happiest bun-baking party in human history.

But once the buns are out of the oven the party stops in its tracks. Greta picks up a bun and sniffs it. She sits there holding it, tries to open her mouth, but . . . can't. We see that this isn't going to work.

'Please eat,' Svante and I say in chorus.

Calmly, at first.

And then more firmly.

Then with every ounce of pent-up frustration and powerlessness.

Until finally we scream, letting out all our fear and hopelessness. 'Eat! You have to eat, don't you understand? You have to eat now, otherwise you'll die!'

Then Greta has her first panic attack. She makes a sound we've never heard before, ever. She lets out an abysmal howl that lasts for over forty minutes. We haven't heard her scream since she was an infant.

I cradle her in my arms, and Moses lies alongside her, his moist nose pressed to her head.

The buns are in a heap on the kitchen floor.

After an hour she is calm, and we assure her that we aren't going to eat any more buns, not to worry.

'Everything will work out, everything will be fine.'

Then it's time for me to go to the performance. It's a matinée. The family accompanies me to Artipelag and in the car Greta asks, 'Am I going to get well again?'

'Of course you are,' I reply.

'When am I going to get well?'

'I don't know. Soon.'

The car stops outside the spectacular building.

I go backstage and start warming up my voice.